

REFLECTIONS IN THE MORNING

I imagine Christmas has given birth to more music than any other holiday in history. If you go into a store like Sam Goody's you'll find rack after rack of Christmas CDs ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. Side by side one finds recordings of Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and Alvin and the Chipmunks Christmas favorites! There are more well-known Christmas carols and songs than you can list. There are then purely sacred pieces, like the carols we're singing this morning; the purely secular selections, like "jingle Bells" and "White Christmas" and then there are a few that fall somewhere in-between. One of those is "Christmas in Killarney." I imagine you know it.

The holly green, the ivy green  
The prettiest picture you've ever seen  
Is Christmas in Killarney,  
With all the folks at home.

It goes on to talk about mistletoe and Santa Claus, as well as the parish priest coming by to offer a blessing on the household. I'm not sure it's a very accurate picture of Christmas in Killarney, or anywhere else in Ireland, but its lots of fun!

A few years ago I had the pleasure of attending a wonderful Christmas concert sung by the Moscow Boys Choir. Like so many concerts it was a blend of both sacred and secular seasonal selections. And sure enough, one of the featured numbers was "Christmas in Killarney." You couldn't help but chuckle as boys and men with sturdy Russian accents sang lyrics like "I'm handing you no blarney." It was really quite wonderful, while, at the same time, rather absurd!

If truth be told, the Christmas story itself, with its baby born in a stable, and heavenly angels singing to sleepy shepherds, is much the same. It is really quite wonderful, while at the same time rather absurd.

Think about it for a moment. The same God who is said to have created the Universe, the same God who is said to be all-knowing, all-powerful and ever present, this same God, so the story goes, chooses to come to us as a baby—and not even a very special baby. This is no crown prince born in a royal palace. No, this is a baby born to a peasant girl in a no-account country. So unimportant that he and his parents don't even rate a room at the local inn and so he is born in a barn. And his first visitors? The local dignitaries? The mayor of the town? No the lowliest men in the neighborhood—shepherds claiming to have seen angels. Oh come on now. Is this really Emmanuel? God with us? It's a cute story, but let's get real.

But despite all that, this is a story that has survived for over two thousand years. It's been told, and retold, and retold again.

Modern Ireland has seen great economic growth in recent years. But for much of its history the Emerald Isle has been wracked by poverty.

In the 1950's most children growing up in Dublin's inner city were very impoverished. It was a time of little hope for many. One teacher working in the city in those days felt that teaching children Bible stories was one way to combat the despair which hung over many of their lives. Her name was Margaret Cunningham. Once the children knew a story, she would then encourage them to retell it in their own words. The best of the retellings were then recorded.

One child retold the Nativity Story. Her version is not only charming, it also brings out the seeming absurdity of the tale: "This night," began the child, "Our Lady and St. Joseph was going to get registered and when they were walking down the road they were knocking at the doors—and—they said they had no room. And good people, if they'd known it was Our Lady and St. Joseph they would have got up and let them in but the bad people looked out and said 'Soh, they're only poor, they'd only have a few [pennies] . . . .' They were going down the road and met this man and said, 'Have you got any room?' And he said, 'No, but there's an old stable over there that I own if youse want to go into it. And they went over. And our Lord came down from heaven at 12 o'clock and loads of beautiful angels . . . [T]here was these shepherds, and shepherds are fellahs that mind bulls and cows and sheeps and little lambs an' all, and they heard this beautiful music up in the sky and they were wondering what was up and an angel disappeared top them and he said, 'Are youse wondering what's up?' and they said 'Yeh' and he said 'the Savior is born and if youse want to see him follow that star up in the sky and it was a beautiful star.'" (*Joy to the World*, 256-257)

As beautiful as the star may have been, as beautiful as the story may be, it really does make us wonder, what's up? It makes so little sense. Why would God come down to us in such a fashion?

I like what newscaster Harry Reasoner once said about it: "[The birth of Christ] is a somewhat illogical idea, and theologians like logic almost as much as they like God. It's so revolutionary a thought that it probably could only come from a God that is beyond logic . . . It has magnificent appeal. Almost nobody has seen God, and nobody has any real idea what [God] is like. And the truth is . . . that the idea of seeing God suddenly . . . standing is a very bright light is not necessarily a completely comforting and appealing idea. But everyone sees babies and most people like them . . . So [this idea of God born as a baby] comes from beyond logic. It is either falsehood or it is the truest thing in the world." (Quoted by J. Hewitt, *Illustrations Unlimited*, 76-77)

And that's what it comes down to: a choice, the Christmas choice. As we reflect in the morning on the night before, as the light of day causes us to reexamine this ancient tale, you and I must ask ourselves do we really believe God cares enough to

**come to us in this illogical, somewhat absurd way? Or do we think God doesn't really care about common folk like you and me?**

**If you think about it, that choice is met at every turn in this ancient tale.**

**"Mary, you're pregnant," says Gabriel, "But your child will be the Savior of the world."**

**Choose to be humiliated and distressed. Choose to buy into society's judgment on unwed mothers, or choose to believe, and live in hope.**

**Mary chooses to believe. She chooses to hope.**

**"Joseph, your fiancée is pregnant," says Gabriel again, but don't be upset—the child will save all people."**

**Choose to give up on the woman you love. Choose to distance yourself from the public shame she's brought on your family. Or choose to believe and live in hope.**

**Joseph chooses to believe. He chooses hope.**

**"Shepherds, wake up, a child is born in Bethlehem," sing the angels, "He may not look like much, but he's going to grow up to be the Messiah and bring peace to earth."**

**Choose to think you've had too much to drink and you're seeing things. Choose to ignore the whole episode as a bad dream. Or choose to believe and live in hope.**

**And the shepherds choose to believe. They choose hope.**

**The same choice faces you and me this very day. Do you choose to say its all poppycock? Do you dismiss the whole thing as illogical rubbish—after all, preacher, just look at this world full of hatred and war. Or do you choose to believe there is a God who loves is enough to become one of us, a God who would live and die and rise again for us? What do you choose?**

**It was 1994, and Russia was just coming out from years of communist domination. Two Americans were given the opportunity to help reintroduce Russian children to their Christian Orthodox roots.**

**At Christmas time they found themselves working with a group of orphans who had never before heard the story of Mary and Joseph and the newborn baby. As they shared the timeless tale, the orphans sat spellbound, hanging on every word. And as they also shared how the baby grew up to be a man who truly loved all people, they fairly beamed.**

**After their story, they gave the children craft materials to build a manger scene. The children set to work, busily creating stables and animals and the Holy Family.**

**As they walked around the room to see if the children needed any help, they were rather startled to see young Misha's creation. There was a Mary and a Joseph, shepherds and even kings, but in the manger itself, there was not just one baby, but two. They wondered aloud if Misha had misunderstood the story. So they got the translator to come to Misha's table, and then asked Misha to retell the story.**

**Misha did fine—but his ending was something totally unexpected. “When Maria laid the baby in the manger,” said the young Russian orphan, “Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much . . . So I asked [him] ‘If I keep you warm will that be a good enough gift?’ And Jesus told me, “that will be the best gift anybody could give me.’ So I got in the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and told me I could stay with him always.”**

**And then, little Misha just sobbed and sobbed.**

**You see, he made the Christmas choice. Upon reflection, he chose to believe this rather absurd story of shepherds and stables and a newborn king.**

**Friends, in the end, the Christmas story is as odd as Russian boys singing an Irish carol. In the end it is rather illogical. It is as bizarre as two babies in the manger.**

**And yet, it offers a ray of hope. For it speaks of Emmanuel—God with us. You can dismiss it all as nonsense, you can write it off as no more than a cute story, or, like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, like Margaret Cunningham and young Misha, you can choose to believe., You can choose to hope. Its morning, now, and there is a chance to reflect. What will you believe?**

**It is the Christmas choice.**

**And that, that is no blarney.**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**