

Day 18: In the Bleak Midwinter

Dec. 15

*1 In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.*

*2 Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.*

*3 Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.*

*4 What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. (Revelation 21:1)

In the Bleak Midwinter was written in 1872 by Christina Georgina Rossetti, an English poet. Rossetti's father was a political exile from Italy, who eventually succumbed to illness and depression. His death plunged the family into poverty. When she writes in the fourth verse of this hymn, "What can I give him, poor as I am?" it was no figure of speech. She knew poverty for much of her life. Also like her father, Christina suffered bouts of severe depression from time to time, yet these only led her to a deeper experience of faith. Interesting fact: Christina Rossetti posed as an artist's model for her brother Dante Rossetti, an esteemed painter in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. For more than one painting, she posed as the Virgin Mary, foreshadowing her hymns.

The first stanza of *In the Bleak Midwinter* is all wrong in its picture of Jesus' birth in a bitterly cold wintertime with its "snow on snow, snow on snow." Israel (as opposed to Rossetti's native England) is infrequently cold in winter. Bethlehem (where Jesus was actually born) seldom dips below 37F (3°C). Snow accumulation, if it occurs at all, could never reasonably be described as "snow on snow." And yet the depiction here is spot-on in a poetic sense. Jesus did indeed face a harsh, often bleak existence in this world, culminating in the cross.

Verse 2 pulls back the curtain, however, on Jesus' true identity. He is "our God" and "heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain." Indeed, his purposes are greater than anyone could imagine at his birth. "Heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign" reflects the vision of Revelation 21 and 22. At his second advent, Jesus will bring a new heaven and a new earth. But for now, he endures the "bleak midwinter." A stable there suffices as the place to lay "the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ."

Verse 3 depicts the angelic announcement to the shepherds in Luke 2 of Messiah's birth. Perhaps a bit too sentimental, only Mary recognizes Jesus as worthy of worship and thus offers him a kiss.

The hymn concludes with verse 4, quite properly and profoundly calling for our response to the newborn Savior. "What can I give him, poor as I am?" Shepherds and wise men each give according to what they have. "Yet what I can I give him: give my heart." But that is in fact the only thing we have to offer, and the only thing our God really wants from us. We are to love him enough to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him for he is the Leader and Lord of our lives.

Questions

1. How does the December weather you've experienced influence your picture of Jesus' birth?
2. Thinking upon the irony of "the Lord God Almighty" being born in a stable, what does that say of Christ's humility contrasted with our insatiable desire for *more*?
3. In what ways do you show that your heart truly belongs to Christ Jesus?

Prayer

Jesus, oftentimes my own picture of your birth is more influenced by this present age than by Scripture. Help me to see beyond today to the reality of your coming. More importantly, help me to grasp just what your coming means to me and indeed to the entire world. You left the grandeur of heaven for the humility of a stable. And all that because we needed you to come up close and personal to our world. Today, I want to give you the only thing I have any real say over – my own heart. Jesus, I humbly ask that you make your home now, in part, in me. Amen.