

Walking Backwards to Christmas

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Introduction

Sometimes people ask me how I find time to write. The only sensible answer I can come up with is that we all find time for the things that really give us joy.

It has been a joy to write this book. Encouraged by the success of *The Nail*, which retold the Good Friday story through the voices of different characters involved in the drama of that day, this book retells the Christmas story. But because this story is so well known—possibly the only bit of the Christian story that is still familiar to most people—I have used the device of telling the story backwards. The idea for this came to me in a flash when I first saw Albert Herbert's painting *Nativity with Burning Bush*, which is reproduced on the front cover of this book. From left to right we see Joseph (or is it one of the shepherds?); then the infant Jesus being held up for him to see; then Mary herself; and then the bright, vivid image of the burning bush. It is a strange and evocative painting. There is (for me, at any rate) a movement across the canvas that appears to be going backwards from the person who beholds the presence of Christ, to Christ himself, and then to Mary, who so obviously has

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a central place in the story, and then behind Mary to the burning bush.

In the traditional iconography of the Orthodox Church it is not unusual for the burning bush, through which Moses heard the voice of God, to be a sign of the Virgin Mary. This is not something we are used to in Western art. But with deceptively brilliant simplicity, Herbert's primitive and deliberately childlike depictions of the biblical narrative draw together our contemporary adoration of Christ, with the nativity itself, and with God's revelation of himself and his name to Moses—that name, and that word which is made flesh in Christ. The painting does what all good paintings do. A complex web of ideas—and in this case a complex narrative—is captured in a single image. I hope my book does what good books can do, which is get underneath the skin of a story and begin to tell it in such a way as we can see ourselves in it, aiming to uncover the complex web of motive and response. I had been thinking for some time of writing a book about the Christmas story; the apparent backwards movement in this painting, and the way the painting dramatically introduces the revelation to Moses in the burning bush alongside the birth of Christ, suggested a backwards way of telling the story. From this moment the book was born. And once I remembered that Christmas hit by the Goons I had a title for the book as well. Writing it was a joyful thing.

The Nail has been used by many parishes, not just as a book to read and study in Lent, but also liturgically as a series of

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Good Friday meditations. When I started writing this book I had similar ideas about how it might be used at Christmas, even as a sort of adult nativity play, with people taking different parts and retelling the story from their perspective. I suppose this could still be done, but what I have found exciting about writing this book is the way the retelling of the story from the perspective of different people in it has led me to encounter quite directly the many uncertainties and horrors in what turns out to be quite a dark story. These bits—the intrigues of Herod, the massacre of the innocents, the uncertainties of Joseph and Zechariah—are not usually told. I have been reminded that although the Christmas story is well known, most of us have learned it from school nativity plays and carols. On the whole this version of the story is more concerned with light than darkness. The backwards approach I have taken here allows the movement to be in the opposite direction. Hence I decided to start with the presentation of Christ in the Temple as the Light of the World (and by the way, this is another scene that Albert Herbert has depicted in his paintings) and end with the prophecies of Isaiah and the revelation to Moses. I was also struck by the central place that women have in the drama, and I have enjoyed trying to inhabit their experience and find their voice. This is why I have chosen to start with Anna, rather than Simeon. And so that I could uncover the whole narrative I found it useful to hear the voice of another witness to the birth itself; since there was no one in the Scriptures I could turn to, I have used the innkeeper's wife, a character

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who appears nowhere in Matthew's or Luke's birth narratives, but is a popular fixture in nativity plays. I hope this poetic license, along with a great many others, will be forgiven. But in every other aspect of the book, it has been meditating on the biblical story that has been my chief inspiration. I simply want to tell the story—in its light and in its darkness—in a way that will enable people to encounter it as if for the first time. Consequently, it is not your usual Christmas book. But I hope it is one that will stimulate and inspire.

As I was writing I found aspects of myself in the different characters. I think you will find the same. I hope that you may be encouraged to put on some sort of adult nativity play, based around the idea of first-person narratives retelling the story, although the chapters here are probably a bit long to be used.

I think it is best to read the book alone, like a novel. But if you know of other people doing the same, then why not spend an evening, perhaps just before Christmas, responding together to what you have read—and, hopefully, to the new vistas in the story that this book has opened up. Just asking these few questions should be enough for a useful and enjoyable evening's discussion. It might even help you start some sort of book club in your church community or neighborhood.

- Which person in the story did you most relate to?
- What surprised, shocked or delighted you the most?
- How has this changed your understanding of the Christmas story?

Chapter 1



Anna

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2.36–38

Light.

I have always longed for its warmth and brightness: enjoyed the high noon of its Mediterranean intensity; seen its power to illuminate and burn. And I have wanted it inside me; there is an accumulation of darkness and regret that only the direct attention of something brighter than the sun can cleanse and penetrate, and burn away the flotsam of a lifetime.

That is why I came to the Temple, why I made it my home, why I put up with the taunts of those who thought me mad; though I suppose my daily date with the rising sun, and my dogged insistence that a greater light was coming, is a kind of madness. Most people are able to settle for less, and make amends with mediocrity. Not me. I longed for something more, for a fire that burns brightly without consuming.

My husband died after we had been married only seven years. In his death I felt cheated of the life I had expected. Weeks blurred into years as I imagined him back, or around the corner somewhere close, or thought bereavement could be healed. I bore the aching loneliness of grief like one who strikes a spade against dry ground and never makes even the smallest impression, and I was exhausted; or like one who searches every corner of every room, day after day, over and over, searching and searching, but never finding what is lost, never even really knowing what to look for: knowing it is gone, but never calling off the search. Futile, empty and

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broken, I poured out my days like cold water onto hot metal; and my life was dispersed on the air. Forgotten.

Sometimes I would wake in the night and imagine him back with me. It was even as if I could feel his arms around me and his hands upon me, his fingers searching out my flesh and his warm mouth upon my neck. And I would be exultant, charged. But the moment of waking was also the moment of knowledge, grim and sober, and I was alone. When you are alone, and when you are empty, memories are little comfort. They sting like salt on freshly opened wounds. But I cannot forget either.

But I am Anna, daughter of Phaniel, and a prophet. I know pain and isolation. I know longing. And slowly my longing changed. Not for him that was lost—though I long for him still—but for him who is the source of longing and desire; who fashioned love; who added sinew to limb, and molded flesh on bone, and poured a lifeblood in our veins; who breathed his spirit in us, and raised us out of dust; who gave us to each other, and showed us love. And though for me love has been too fleeting and too hard, I will not deride it, nor make room for scorn. I have discovered a different searching and a different longing.

And my path led to Jerusalem. To the Temple. This is where I dwell, where I have been dwelling many years. I am now an old woman—eighty-four years young—and I live in the

Temple at Jerusalem. Here in its darkness, in its comforting shadow: which I believe is the shadow of something greater than all the greatness of the world. This is the place where, one day, a greater light will dawn.

That has been the focus of my longing: a new light. Each new dawn is for me a presage of that light. I do the same each day. I find the exact place in the Temple where the first rays of the rising sun will suddenly flood its dark interior, and wait there. For when the sun has made its steady progress round the globe I know there will be a particular moment when a single beam of bright morning sunlight shafts from a high solitary window in the east wall and crafts a narrow illuminating passage of light down the center of the Temple's spaciousness. I love that moment. I wait for it each day. I plan for it. I am meticulous. I have studied the pattern of the galaxies and seen how the movement of the stars conspires to create such astonishing newness each day. And having drawn my conclusions I stand in the spot each day where I know the sun will catch me, flood me, fill me. And as it rises and its beams grow stronger, they travel the length of the Temple, and search out everything. And sometimes I stand right at the back of the Temple and watch the light moving inexorably towards me, and wait in glorious expectation for it to strike. I stretch out my hands; and though I know you cannot hold sunlight, you can feel it upon you. I close my eyes and wait simply to touch its presence—which isn't me touching at all, but being touched, held in warmth and light. I bathe

in its luminescent brightness. And if I opened my eyes and looked up, why, I could be blinded. For I know that the very brightest light comes to us as dazzling darkness.

In this light each day I have waited for another light, and learned to love it more. I have dwelt in the pitch darkness of the Temple's night and dreamed of unimaginably beautiful light. In my mind I have danced in its embrace, felt the spectrum of its color upon me, and my inner thoughts are read at last, and understood. There have been nights when I could almost feel the building itself crying out for something greater, for the something it had been made for. Over the years, I have become someone who watches and prays. Such people, I know, are irritating, especially around the religious professionals who ply their trade within these walls and too easily forget what they were built to cherish and uphold. Or else, far worse, imagine such things can be contained and controlled in buildings made by human hands.

When the greater light dawns, this will be swept away. I came to know this. Saw it in the darkness as much as in the light. Dreamed it, and felt it in the nightly shift from deep dark to bright dawning sunlight. I kept a lonely vigil on behalf of a people who had forgotten what they were waiting for; who read their Scriptures and really thought that they pointed here. I came here not because I think that is right, but because this place is an arrow pointing somewhere else, and I believed that I was more likely to see where that

somewhere else might be if I looked long enough *from* here, rather than *to* here. I seem like a fixture—that weird old woman who haunts the Temple. But I am the only one who is actually bent on leaving. I came here to find a way out, not a way in. I want the business of this place to be finished. I need a light to show me the way. I glimpse it momentarily in the first bright beams of the dawn; but I wait for it through the long, slow hours of the day. I dream it in the shadows of the night. The light of the world is not Jerusalem, as far as I can tell.

But there is one other. And of course he was in the Temple today as well. Old Simeon. He sees it as I do, though we rarely exchange many words. But I know enough to know that he knows.

Like me, he has been waiting a lifetime. Like me, he waits for that light which is beyond the light of morning: a light that the light of morning depends on and bows before; a light that is brighter and deeper than the noonday sun at its height. And he believes, like me, that the light is coming, and that his life will not be over until that light comes here to the Temple to take over its work of shining brightly.

It is a comfort to know this. For Simeon is a good man. Devout. And in this respect he is not like me. Not full of wildness and dreaming.

God's spirit seems to rest on him. He exudes an affable peacefulness. People turn to him. And he is happy to listen. There is a balm in his presence. And he has been told that he will not see death before he has seen God's blessed one, what we Jews call Messiah. That was why he came to the Temple today. He kind of knew that today was different—that it was a beginning. I didn't know that, not when I stood in the Temple this morning, like I do each day, finding the place where the light can get me. But he seemed to know. When I saw him entering the Temple, I sensed something in him that was different. He was looking around him with an additional eagerness. Old men do not have a spring in their step. The grind of time has already put paid to that. But there was an optimistic sparkle in his eye that seemed for a moment as bright as the sun that had enveloped me in the morning's first rush of light. It was as if he was shimmering with the reflected light of something wonderful.

Then it happened. A moment that changes history, but is of itself undramatic and unnoticed. No clouds parted and no great lights shone. There was no clear separation of light and darkness, like I see each morning, only two people—an older man and a tired younger woman—tramping into the courts of the Temple, looking about them anxiously to find where to go and what to do, and carrying with them something very precious.

Everyone else gets on with their business. There is lots to do, and other parents and other children, and nothing obvious

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to mark these two out as special. In a way, that is the beauty of it. I see that now in the evening of this, the first day. The light has come into the world, but the world does not know it. And the light has dimmed itself, or should I say clothed itself, in the gray ambiguity of life.

The couple have come for purification, as the Law of Moses prescribes; every firstborn male must be designated as holy to the Lord. They must offer the sacrifice that is stated in the law: that is, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. There is nothing unusual about this. I see it every day. But today, for some reason I have yet managed to fathom, it appalled me. It seemed so necessary and yet so useless. It is the business of the Temple to spill blood, to offer sacrifices to God, to do what the law requires, and then God will be with us. And there is a sacrifice each year that is greater than the rest, when the high priest takes the blood of the Passover Lamb and enters the Holy of Holies and we are all purified. But now I'm asking why? And now I'm asking how? Why this endless death and spilling of blood? What sort of a God needs this slaughter? How does it make a difference, and is there a way of doing what the Temple does that could bring it once and for all to an end?

So the couple do what they have come to do. Even then I didn't know who they were.

That was when Simeon arrived. His eyes darting this way and that, searching the faces in the crowd. When he sees

them, even though everyone else carries on just the same, I notice a gladsome stillness in him. I see what he sees: this couple, the tiny little child they carry. The light of the world come among us.

Simeon rushes up to them, sweeps them up in the evident security of his goodness and delight. There is no demurring. He takes the child in his arms. There is only consolation. Consolation for Simeon that his wait is over; but also consolation for the parents, whose own agony of waiting and wondering I can hardly begin to imagine. At last someone else sees and knows what is happening. In his joy and exultation Simeon confirms the hard-won convictions of their journey. They all smile at each other—that kind of silly grinning that is the fruit of recognition and doesn't need words.

But when Simeon does speak, scales fall. He praises God, saying that at last he can depart in peace and, in time, leave the world behind him, for he has seen with his own eyes the salvation of God and the fulfilment of God's promises, not just to Israel, but to the whole world.

That is the truly remarkable thing about what happened today: this child is not just the light of Israel, but the light of the world; a light that burns more brightly than the sun, but a light that is come among us in such a way that we won't be burned; a light that kindles the fire in human hearts; a light that warms and consoles, illuminates and cheers.

The parents are amazed. What he says seems to go beyond even their own fearful expectations. And sensing their confusion, Simeon blesses them. At the same time he says to the mother (I didn't know her name): 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

It is these words I sit with this evening, watching the daylight fade.

It is the hour for lamps to be lit. But the light I've received today defeats all darkness and I am happy to let what is left of it surround me. It carries no fear. But these words that Simeon spoke, they caused me to cry out with anguish and joy in the Temple this morning. For this light, which we can't yet see as light, this little child that shows us God, will shine within us and reveal everything. And the path ahead will not be easy, for it is to this child that the Temple and all its ceremonies and covenants point to. And if there is any more blood to be spilled, then it will probably be his: this little boy who is God's light for the world. How could a mother not share such pain? As I looked into her face I could see it was already begun, for every mother shares the joy and anguish of every son. Why would this mother—dare I use these words?—the mother of the Lord be any different? No, surely such joy and such pain will be multiplied for such a mother holding such a son?

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So there I stood, looking for all to see like a mad woman possessed, but actually feeling more like a young woman released. I thanked God for the strange beauty of his coming among us, and the inscrutable mystery of his ways, that we could see him face-to-face, the dazzling light of his glory, and not be blinded or undone. I jabbered away. My relief. My praise. My amazement at God's provision.

A light has come among us. It has come suddenly, like the dawning of a new day. It has been prepared for from the beginning of time. The light and darkness that were separated at the beginning of creation are united again, and one has overcome the other.

People think me crazier than ever, sitting here in the gathering gloom, shouting out my praises to God, inhabiting the Temple but looking beyond it. But if they had occupied that moment today like I saw it and felt it, then they too would know the satisfaction of waiting and the faithfulness of God.

But no one else did see. That is the infuriating mystery of it. Why do some see, and not others? And where is that tiny scrap of life I saw today really leading?

But I know this, and I know it more than ever: all the busyness of the Temple and the busyness of the world cannot turn back the pages of what has happened today. All we can do is see where it came from and see where it leads us. And

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if others are to find this light then it will not necessarily be by looking, so much as by waiting and wanting. I have had to allow myself to be found, and this has changed me. My hurts and regrets are still there. But now they are known and illuminated, integrated and healed. And this will be true for others. They too will be enabled to make the offering of themselves and be irradiated. Only then will all our alms and oblations have meaning.

Now it is night again, and I am waiting for the dawn of tomorrow. But it will not be the same. The sun will rise, but it will rise on a different world, a world into which a greater light has come. And in the revelation of tomorrow's dawn I will be embraced by God. It will burst upon me, but this time it will not be a portent of the future but confirmation of today's radiance. I will be gripped by the brightness of the morning sun and my years will slip away.