

RANSOMED HEART

LOVE GOD. LIVE FREE.

December 2017

Dear Friends, Comrades, Fellow Pilgrims,

A very happy Christmastide to you.

December is upon us with a rush, and soon the holidays, and then, perhaps, a breath before 2018 gets underway. The swift passing of the days—and even that feeling, “*Where did 2017 go?*”—all this is reminding us that this Story is racing forward; we are being carried along towards some great moment.

Story. It is one of the greatest gifts the Jews gave the world. For before them (and in many places, long after) the world and its religions did not think of life as a Story at all. Most pagan peoples saw human experience as an endlessly repeating cycle of birth and death, headed nowhere. Through the Jewish people, and then the early Church, God gave us our bearings, gave us meaning and direction and above all a breathtaking hope by revealing to us the Great Story he is telling.

Story is, therefore, how we orient ourselves.

I was enjoying some pieces of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy the other night, just snatches here and there to remind me what it is like to live in an epic tale. I love the part where dear Sam Gamgee reminds Mr. Frodo of the critical importance of story. Frodo is about to give up, under the weight of it all: “I can’t do this, Sam.” To which Sam replies,

I know. It’s all wrong. By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something.

It is the power of the Great Story that gives us heart to carry on. Life is not, as Macbeth lamented, “A tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” It is not an endless cycle. This is headed somewhere; we are racing towards a breathtaking climax. And so Christians around the world will repeat The Story to one another this month, in pageants and liturgy, sermons and carols. We repeat the most beautiful moment thus far—the Invasion, the Incarnation. Our rescue. We *need* to repeat it, for like Mr. Frodo we bend under the weight of our own heavy burdens, and evil of this hour.

One of the ways we rehearse the Story in our family is by reading favorite passages and poems to one another. We love John Donne’s *Divine Poems*, a series of rich stanzas that are so beautiful and

compact, you have to take them slowly. I thought I'd share a few snippets here, my Sam to your Frodo. The first stanza—*La Corona*—ends with the lines, “Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high” (there’s the telling of the Story), “Salvation to all that will is nigh” (as the first Christmas approaches). Stanza two—*Annunciation*—speaks of the mystery of Christ in Mary’s womb, ending with the gorgeous line, “Immensity, cloistered in thy dear womb.”

Stanza three—*Nativity*—starts with the same line, and then carries us into and through Bethlehem:

Immensity, cloistered in thy dear womb,
Now leaves His well-beloved imprisonment.
There he hath made himself to his intent
Weak enough, now into our world to come;
But O! for thee, for Him, hath th’ inn no room?
Yet lay Him in a stall, and from th’ orient,
Stars, and wise men will travel to prevent
The effects of Herod’s jealous general doom.
See’st thou, my soul, with thy faith’s eye, how He
Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie?
Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,
That would have need to be pitied by thee?
Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,
With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe.

So much is captured in these lines. But can’t you also feel the Story moving forward with an irreversible power and thrust? Christ is born, the Magi arrive just in time to rescue him from Herod’s genocide, and the angel has Joseph whisk the family off to Egypt. Every event, great and small, has *meaning*. And *continuity*. It is so good to be reminded of that as well—this Story is moving forward with power towards its glorious climax, or at least, the great finish of this chapter.

For like Mr. Frodo we also wonder why evil has so much sway, and if it really matters how or if we carry on. But it does matter. The Kingdom of God is winning; the Invasion worked *and it is working right now*. Magnificently. And we each have our role to play.

So tell each other the Story this Christmas season. Drink it in. Believe every word. We are racing towards the finish of this chapter, and what a finish it will be.

Then...the feast. And all things made new.

Merry Christmas friends, from your friends here at Ransomed Heart.

Love,



John