

I love to sit in the quiet of an evening as the lights on the Christmas tree give off a soft glow.

Perhaps it is so comforting because it has been a week – out there in the global market place, in the back alleys and isolated crumbling homes, in the battlefields and prisons and refugee camps around the world.

Dark places not reached by the small glow of little white lights. Places where the sentimental nostalgia of Christmas, of cookies and family feast are not known.

I have had Christmases like those.

I have spent a Christmas with a loved one dying from end stage cancer.

I have spent 2 Christmases mourning the death of my sisters who had passed just as the carol singers hit the airwaves.

I have spent a Christmas with our primary breadwinner unemployed and bills coming in, and

I have spent a Christmas with a child's life crashing down around them.

At those times, the cookies were dust, there was no glow.

I am sure you have your own litany of your own gritty reality as you try to navigate this world, times of darkness where the light cannot penetrate.

So while the culture around us is preoccupied with garland and romance and food, just papering over the realities, we know our lives are not Hallmark movies.

This, my friends, is why there is a baby.

It might be time to hand over the Christmas brand to the commerce and entertainment divisions of our shared culture and re-brand this time for followers of Jesus – those who long for the babe. Maybe we could call it the Birth of Hope, or Love is Born.

If every person everywhere had a full stomach and a place to shelter, if tyrants didn't rage and the systems of power and money didn't crush indiscriminately, we wouldn't need this babe who is to be born. We would not need a Savior and twinkling lights would do.

If life wasn't life, we wouldn't need the hope that is born in Bethlehem. But it's not, and as people of faith, we look to God ... just like Mary. Today the beauty of Mary's exuberant song could carry us away, but instead, let's get real.

Mary gave birth just like every mother and birthing is hard work. There is pain and sweat and tears. Consider Mary's exhaustion as her breasts fill with milk and the promised child demands her attention and keeps her up all night.

It's time for us to get real; we who claim to follow Jesus, because today Mary makes it clear that the birth of a very real child is about to make a very real difference in the world. No stone will be left unturned, no injustice too small to be righted, and no excuses will stop the work. The world is about to turn.

We need this God: a God who can lead us out of darkness into light; who has walked our paths

A God who heals through forgiveness and in so doing, releases us from the shackles of our own weaknesses, mistakes and wounds.

A God who is the power of love, and can transform both us and our communities from within. A God walking our streets, sitting at our tables....a God who is down here, in the grimy sweat and tears of a world laboring along with Mary to give birth to a new tomorrow.

Mary announces a future where the folks in high places will take their place in the cheap seats, and those standing in the back will be invited to the front.

Where the scales of justice will be re-balanced and **every BODY** of every shape, size, color and gender identity will be recognized as

carrying the image of the Holy One of God. No longer will the hungry ones have to rely on the overflowing trash cans of those who have too much and value it too little. No longer will one nation rule over another, stealing its resources and crushing its people.

Today Mary grasps the reality of a child growing in her womb, of a pregnancy that will relentlessly change her body and her life.

We listen as Mary commits to mother this child as long as he is hers...and we are asked to join in her celebration – not just of a coming child but a celebration of the re-creation of the world as we know it.

So I ask: Where is the seed of God planted in you? Are you nurturing it? Is it growing? Are you able to recognize the Christ child growing in a stranger? For God is coming **in. the. flesh.**

and God **in. the. flesh.** tells us that being a servant and follower of this Jesus requires a full body, body altering, life changing commitment. This journey with Jesus will not be snowflakes and sugar cookies but the exhausting, painful work of birthing God's new tomorrow.

We will be called to labor with our neighbors and alongside the Savior Child to bring into life God's future. The work is down here, in the grit of life as we know it and Jesus is working alongside us.

It's time to get real about our call as servants of the Most High who are called to bring the powerful to heel and to serve the hungry a real meal of both potatoes and justice.

Because this week, all around us, there was darkness

Somewhere a gay teenager considered suicide rather than return to school, and somewhere in the deserts of Africa a mother knew there wouldn't be food again for her children, and somewhere a man serves a life sentence for stealing a \$7 item.

This world may enjoy bright lights and mistletoe but **it needs** a Savior.

As Mary commits herself to God's crazy, upside down, unimaginable, impossible plan she invites us to join her in birthing a new world.

Let us rejoice with her. A baby is coming. Our God is coming.

This is the gift of Christmas.

Come Lord Jesus.