

# THE JESUS I NEVER KNEW

Philip Yancey

## CHAPTER 2 - BIRTH: THE VISITED PLANET

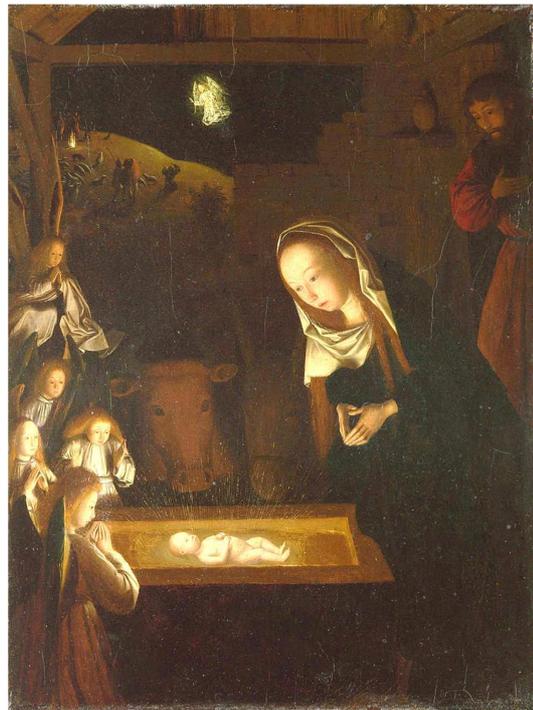
Sorting through the stack of cards that arrived at our house last Christmas, I note that all kinds of symbols have edged their way into the celebration. Overwhelmingly, the landscape scenes render New England towns buried in snow, usually with the added touch of a horse-drawn sleigh. On other cards, animals frolic: not only reindeer, but also chipmunks, raccoons, cardinals, and cute gray mice. One card shows an African lion reclining with a foreleg draped affectionately around a lamb.

Angels have made a huge comeback in recent years, and Hallmark and American Greetings now feature them prominently, though as demure, cuddly-looking creatures, not the type who would ever need to announce “Fear not!” The explicitly religious cards (a distinct minority) focus on the holy family, and you can tell at a glance these folks are different. They seem unruffled and serene. Bright gold halos, like crowns from another world, hover just above their heads.

Inside, the cards stress sunny words like love, goodwill, cheer, happiness, and warmth. It is a fine thing, I suppose, that we honor a sacred holiday with such homey sentiments. And yet when I turn to the gospel accounts of the first Christmas, I hear a very different tone and sense mainly disruption at work.

I recall watching an episode of the TV show *Thirtysomething* in which Hope, a Christian, argues with her Jewish husband, Michael, about the holidays. “Why do you even bother with Hanukkah?” she asks. “Do you really believe a handful of Jews held off a huge army by using a bunch of lamps that miraculously wouldn't run out of oil?”

Michael exploded. “Oh, and Christmas makes more sense? Do you really believe an angel appeared to some teenage girl who then got pregnant without ever having had sex and traveled on horseback to Bethlehem where she spent the night in a barn and had a baby who turned out to be the Savior of the world?”



***Nativity at Night* by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, c. 1490**

Frankly, Michael's incredulity seems close to what I read in the Gospels. Mary and Joseph must face the shame and derision of family and neighbors, who react, well, much like Michael (“ Do you really believe an angel appeared...”).

Even those who accept the supernatural version of events concede that big trouble will follow: an old uncle prays for “salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” Simeon darkly warns the virgin that “a sword will pierce your own soul too” Mary's hymn of thanksgiving mentions rulers overthrown and proud men scattered.

In contrast to what the cards would have us believe, Christmas did not sentimentally simplify life on planet earth. Perhaps this is what I sense when Christmas rolls around and I turn from the cheeriness of the cards to the starkness of the Gospels.

Christmas art depicts Jesus' family as icons stamped in gold foil, with a calm Mary receiving the tidings of the Annunciation as a kind of benediction. But that is not at all how Luke tells the story. Mary was “greatly troubled” and “afraid” at the angel's appearance, and when the angel pronounced the sublime words about the Son of the Most High whose kingdom will never end, Mary had something far more mundane on her mind: *But I'm a virgin! ...*

In the modern United States, where each year a million teenage girls get pregnant out of wedlock, Mary's predicament has undoubtedly lost some of its force, but in a closely knit Jewish community in the first century , the news an angel brought could not have been entirely welcome. The law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant as an adulteress, subject to death by stoning.

Matthew tells of Joseph magnanimously agreeing to divorce Mary in private rather than press charges, until an angel shows up to correct his perception of betrayal. Luke tells of a tremulous Mary hurrying off to the one person who could possibly understand what she was going through: her relative Elizabeth, who miraculously got pregnant in old age after another angelic annunciation. Elizabeth believes Mary and shares her joy, and yet the scene poignantly highlights the contrast between the two women: the whole countryside is talking about Elizabeth's healed womb even as Mary must hide the shame of her own miracle.

In a few months, the birth of John the Baptist took place amid great fanfare, complete with midwives, doting relatives, and the traditional village chorus celebrating the birth of a Jewish male. Six months later, Jesus was born far from home, with no midwife, extended family, or village chorus present. A male head of household would have sufficed for the Roman census; did Joseph drag his pregnant wife along to Bethlehem in order to spare her the ignominy of childbirth in her home village?

C. S. Lewis has written about God's plan ,“The whole thing narrows and narrows, until at last it comes down to a little point, small as the point of a spear— a Jewish girl at her prayers.” Today as I read the accounts of Jesus' birth I tremble to think of the fate of the world resting on the responses of two rural teenagers . How many times did Mary review the angel's words as she felt the Son of God kicking against the walls of her uterus? How many times did Joseph second-guess his own encounter with an angel— just a dream?—as he endured the hot shame of living among villagers who could plainly see the changing shape of his fiancée?

We know nothing of Jesus' grandparents. What must they have felt? Did they respond like so many parents of unmarried teenagers today, with an outburst of moral fury and then a period of sullen silence until at last the bright-eyed newborn arrives to melt the ice and arrange a fragile family truce? Or did they, like many inner-city grandparents today, graciously offer to take the child under their own roof?

Nine months of awkward explanations, the lingering scent of scandal— it seems that God arranged the most humiliating circumstances possible for his entrance, as if to avoid any charge of favoritism. I am impressed that when the Son of God became a human being he played by the rules, harsh rules: small towns do not treat kindly young boys who grow up with questionable paternity.

Malcolm Muggeridge observed that in our day, with family-planning clinics offering convenient ways to correct “mistakes” that might disgrace a family name, “It is, in point of fact, extremely improbable, under existing conditions, that Jesus would have been permitted to be born at all. Mary's pregnancy, in poor circumstances, and with the father unknown, would have been an obvious case for an abortion; and her talk of having conceived as a result of the intervention of the Holy Ghost would have pointed to the need for psychiatric treatment, and made the case for terminating her pregnancy even stronger. Thus our generation, needing a Savior more, perhaps, than any that has ever existed, would be too humane to allow one to be born.”

The virgin Mary, though, whose parenthood was unplanned, had a different response. She heard the angel out, pondered the repercussions, and replied, “I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and in that matter-of-fact response Mary embraced both. She was the first person to accept Jesus on his own terms, regardless of the personal cost.

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When the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci went to China in the sixteenth century, he brought along samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it. The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child, but when he produced paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child had grown up only to be executed, the audience reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and insisted on worshiping her rather than the crucified God. As I thumb once more through my stack of Christmas cards, I realize that we in Christian countries do much the same thing. We observe a mellow, domesticated holiday purged of any hint of scandal. Above all, we purge from it any reminder of how the story that began at Bethlehem turned out at Calvary.

In the birth stories of Luke and Matthew, only one person seems to grasp the mysterious nature of what God has set in motion: the old man Simeon, who recognized the baby as the Messiah, instinctively understood that conflict would surely follow. “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against ...” he said, and then made the prediction that a sword would pierce Mary's own soul. Somehow Simeon sensed that though on the surface little had changed— the autocrat Herod still ruled, Roman troops were still stringing up

patriots, Jerusalem still overflowed with beggars— underneath, everything had changed. A new force had arrived to undermine the world's powers.

At first , Jesus hardly seemed a threat to those powers . He was born under Caesar Augustus, at a time when hope wafted through the Roman Empire. More than any other ruler, Augustus raised the expectations of what a leader could accomplish and what a society could achieve. It was Augustus, in fact, who first borrowed the Greek word for “Gospel” or “Good News” and applied it as a label for the new world order represented by his reign. The empire declared him a god and established rites of worship. His enlightened and stable regime, many believed, would last forever, a final solution to the problem of government.

Meanwhile, in an obscure corner of Augustus's empire the birth of a baby named Jesus was overlooked by the chroniclers of the day. We know about him mainly through four books written years after his death, at a time when less than one-half of one percent of the Roman world had ever heard of him. Jesus' biographers would also borrow the word gospel, proclaiming a different kind of new world order altogether. They would mention Augustus only once, a passing reference to set the date of a census that ensured Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.

The earliest events in Jesus' life, though, give a menacing preview of the unlikely struggle now under way. Herod the Great, King of the Jews, enforced Roman rule at the local level, and in an irony of history we know Herod's name mainly because of the massacre of the innocents. I have never seen a Christmas card depicting that state-sponsored act of terror, but it too was a part of Christ's coming. Although secular history does not refer to the atrocity, no one acquainted with the life of Herod doubts him capable. He killed two brothers-in-law, his own wife Mariamne, and two of his own sons. Five days before his death he ordered the arrest of many citizens and decreed that they be executed on the day of his death, in order to guarantee a proper atmosphere of mourning in the country. For such a despot, a minor extermination procedure in Bethlehem posed no problem.

Scarcely a day passed, in fact, without an execution under Herod's regime. The political climate at the time of Jesus' birth resembled that of Russia in the 1930s under Stalin. Citizens could not gather in public meetings. Spies were everywhere. In Herod's mind, the command to slaughter Bethlehem's infants was probably an act of utmost rationality, a rearguard action to preserve the stability of his kingdom against a rumored invasion from another....

And so Jesus the Christ entered the world amid strife and terror, and spent his infancy hidden in Egypt as a refugee . Matthew notes that local politics even determined where Jesus would grow up. When Herod the Great died, an angel reported to Joseph it was safe for him to return to Israel, but not to the region where Herod's son Archelaus had taken command. Joseph moved his family instead to Nazareth in the north, where they lived under the domain of another of Herod's sons, Antipas, the one Jesus would call “that fox,” and also the one who would have John the Baptist beheaded.

A few years later the Romans took over direct command of the southern province that encompassed Jerusalem, and the cruelest and most notorious of these governors was a man named Pontius Pilate. Well-connected, Pilate had married the granddaughter of Augustus Caesar.

According to Luke, Herod Antipas and the Roman governor Pilate regarded each other as enemies until the day fate brought them together to determine the destiny of Jesus. On that day they collaborated, hoping to succeed where Herod the Great had failed: by disposing of the strange pretender and thus preserving the kingdom.

From beginning to end, the conflict between Rome and Jesus appeared to be entirely one-sided. The execution of Jesus would put an apparent end to any threat, or so it was assumed at the time. Tyranny would win again. It occurred to no one that his stubborn followers just might outlast the Roman empire.

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The facts of Christmas, rhymed in carols, recited by children in church plays, illustrated on cards, have become so familiar that it is easy to miss the message behind the facts. After reading the birth stories once more, I ask myself, If Jesus came to reveal God to us, then what do I learn about God from that first Christmas?

The word associations that come to mind as I ponder that question take me by surprise. Humble, approachable, underdog, courageous— these hardly seem appropriate words to apply to deity.

**Humble.** Before Jesus, almost no pagan author had used “humble” as a compliment. Yet the events of Christmas point inescapably to what seems like an oxymoron: a humble God. The God who came to earth came not in a raging whirlwind nor in a devouring fire. Unimaginably, the Maker of all things shrank down, down, down, so small as to become an ovum, a single fertilized egg barely visible to the naked eye, an egg that would divide and redivide until a fetus took shape, enlarging cell by cell inside a nervous teenager. “Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,” marveled the poet John Donne. He “made himself nothing ... he humbled himself,” said the apostle Paul more prosaically.

I remember sitting one Christmas season in a beautiful auditorium in London listening to Handel's Messiah, with a full chorus singing about the day when “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” I had spent the morning in museums viewing remnants of England's glory— the crown jewels, a solid gold ruler's mace, the Lord Mayor's gilded carriage— and it occurred to me that just such images of wealth and power must have filled the minds of Isaiah's contemporaries who first heard that promise. When the Jews read Isaiah's words, no doubt they thought back with sharp nostalgia to the glory days of Solomon, when “the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones.”

The Messiah who showed up, however, wore a different kind of glory, the glory of humility. “‘God is great,’ the cry of the Moslems, is a truth which needed no supernatural being to teach men,” writes Father Neville Figgis. “That God is little, that is the truth which Jesus taught man.” The God who roared, who could order armies and empires about like pawns on a chessboard, this God emerged in Palestine as a baby who could not speak or eat solid food or control his bladder, who depended on a teenager for shelter, food, and love.

In London, looking toward the auditorium's royal box where the queen and her family sat, I caught glimpses of the more typical way rulers stride through the world: with bodyguards, and a trumpet

fan-fare, and a flourish of bright clothes and flashing jewelry. Queen Elizabeth II had recently visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, forty pints of plasma, and white kid leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost twenty million dollars.

In meek contrast, God's visit to earth took place in an animal shelter with no attendants present and nowhere to lay the newborn king but a feed trough. Indeed, the event that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on him. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given."

For just an instant the sky grew luminous with angels, yet who saw that spectacle? Illiterate hirelings who watched the flocks of others, "nobodies" who failed to leave their names. Shepherds had such a randy reputation that proper Jews lumped them together with the "godless," restricting them to the outer courtyards of the temple. Fittingly, it was they whom God selected to help celebrate the birth of one who would be known as the friend of sinners.

**Approachable.** Those of us raised in a tradition of informal or private prayer may not appreciate the change Jesus wrought in how human beings approach deity. Hindus offer sacrifices at the temple. Kneeling Muslims bow down so low that their foreheads touch the ground. In most religious traditions, in fact, fear is the primary emotion when one approaches God.

Certainly the Jews associated fear with worship. The burning bush of Moses, the hot coals of Isaiah, the extraterrestrial visions of Ezekiel— a person "blessed" with a direct encounter with God expected to come away scorched or glowing or maybe half-crippled like Jacob. These were the fortunate ones: Jewish children also learned stories of the sacred mountain in the desert that proved fatal to everyone who touched it. Mishandle the ark of the covenant, and you died. Enter the Most Holy Place, and you'd never come out alive.

Among people who walled off a separate sanctum for God in the temple and shrank from pronouncing or spelling out the name, God made a surprise appearance as a baby in a manger. What can be less scary than a newborn with his limbs wrapped tight against his body? In Jesus, God found a way of relating to human beings that did not involve fear.

In truth, fear had never worked very well. The Old Testament includes far more low points than high ones . A new approach was needed, a New Covenant , to use the words of the Bible, one that would not emphasize the vast gulf between God and humanity but instead would span it....

I learned about incarnation when I kept a salt-water aquarium. Management of a marine aquarium, I discovered, is no easy task. I had to run a portable chemical laboratory to monitor the nitrate levels and the ammonia content. I pumped in vitamins and antibiotics and sulfa drugs and enough enzymes to make a rock grow. I filtered the water through glass fibers and charcoal, and exposed it to ultraviolet light. You would think, in view of all the energy expended on their behalf, that my fish would at least be grateful. Not so. Every time my shadow loomed above the tank they dove for cover into the nearest shell. They showed me one "emotion" only: fear. Although I opened the lid

and dropped in food on a regular schedule, three times a day, they responded to each visit as a sure sign of my designs to torture them. I could not convince them of my true concern.

To my fish I was deity. I was too large for them, my actions too incomprehensible. My acts of mercy they saw as cruelty ; my attempts at healing they viewed as destruction. To change their perceptions, I began to see, would require a form of incarnation. I would have to become a fish and “speak” to them in a language they could understand.

A human being becoming a fish is nothing compared to God becoming a baby. And yet according to the Gospels that is what happened at Bethlehem. The God who created matter took shape within it, as an artist might become a spot on a painting or a playwright a character within his own play. God wrote a story, only using real characters, on the pages of real history. The Word became flesh.

**Underdog.** I wince even as I write the word, especially in connection with Jesus. It's a crude word, probably derived from dogfighting and applied over time to predictable losers and victims of injustice. Yet as I read the birth stories about Jesus I cannot help but conclude that though the world may be tilted toward the rich and powerful, God is tilted toward the underdog. “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty,” said Mary in her *Magnificat* hymn....

Perhaps the best way to perceive the “underdog” nature of the incarnation is to transpose it into terms we can relate to today. An unwed mother, homeless, was forced to look for shelter while traveling to meet the heavy taxation demands of a colonial government. She lived in a land recovering from violent civil wars and still in turmoil— a situation much like that in modern Bosnia, Rwanda, or Somalia. Like half of all mothers who deliver today, she gave birth in Asia, in its far western corner, the part of the world that would prove least receptive to the son she bore. That son became a refugee in Africa, the continent where most refugees can still be found. I wonder what Mary thought about her militant *Magnificat* hymn during her harrowing years in Egypt. For a Jew, Egypt evoked bright memories of a powerful God who had flattened a pharaoh's army and brought liberation; now Mary fled there, desperate, a stranger in a strange land hiding from her own government . Could her baby, hunted, helpless, on the run, possibly fulfill the lavish hopes of his people?

Even the family's mother-tongue summoned up memories of their underdog status: Jesus spoke Aramaic, a trade language closely related to Arabic, a stinging reminder of the Jews' subjection to foreign empires.

Some foreign astrologers (probably from the region that is now Iraq) had dropped by to visit Jesus, but these men were considered “unclean” by Jews of the day. Naturally, like all dignitaries they had checked first with the ruling king in Jerusalem, who knew nothing about a baby in Bethlehem. After they saw the child and realized who he was, these visitors engaged in an act of civil disobedience : they deceived Herod and went home another way, to protect the child. They had chosen Jesus' side, against the powerful.

Growing up, Jesus' sensibilities were affected most deeply by the poor, the powerless, the oppressed— in short, the underdogs. Today theologians debate the aptness of the phrase “God's

preferential option for the poor” as a way of describing God's concern for the underdog. Since God arranged the circumstances in which to be born on planet earth— without power or wealth, without rights, without justice— his preferential options speak for themselves.

**Courageous.** In 1993 I read a news report about a “Messiah sighting” in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. Twenty thousand Lubavitcher Hasidic Jews live in Crown Heights, and in 1993 many of them believed the Messiah was dwelling among them in the person of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Word of the Rabbi's public appearance spread like a flash fire through the streets of Crown Heights, and Lubavitchers in their black coats and curly sideburns were soon dashing down the sidewalks toward the synagogue where the Rabbi customarily prayed. Those lucky enough to be connected to a network of beepers got a head start, sprinting toward the synagogue the instant they felt a slight vibration. They jammed by the hundreds into a main hall, elbowing each other and even climbing the pillars to create more room. The hall filled with an air of anticipation and frenzy normally found at a championship sporting event, not a religious service.

The Rabbi was ninety-one years old. He had suffered a stroke the year before and had not been able to speak since. When the curtain finally pulled back, those who had crowded into the synagogue saw a frail old man in a long beard who could do little but wave, tilt his head, and move his eyebrows. No one in the audience seemed to mind, though. “Long live our master, our teacher, and our rabbi, King, Messiah, forever and ever!” they sang in unison, over and over, building in volume until the Rabbi made a small, delphic gesture with his hand, and the curtain closed. They departed slowly, savoring the moment, in a state of ecstasy.

When I first read the news account I nearly laughed out loud. Who are these people trying to kid—a nonagenarian mute Messiah in Brooklyn? And then it struck me: I was reacting to Rabbi Schneerson exactly as people in the first century had reacted to Jesus. *A Messiah from Galilee? A carpenter's kid, no less?*

The scorn I felt as I read about the Rabbi and his fanatical followers gave me a clue to the responses Jesus faced throughout his life. His neighbors asked, “Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” Other countrymen scoffed, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” His own family tried to put him away, believing he was out of his mind. The religious experts sought to kill him. As for the whipsaw commoners, one moment they judged him “demon-possessed and raving mad,” the next they forcibly tried to crown him king.

It took courage, I believe, for God to lay aside power and glory and to take a place among human beings who would greet him with the same mixture of haughtiness and skepticism that I felt when I first heard about Rabbi Schneerson of Brooklyn. It took courage to risk descent to a planet known for its clumsy violence, among a race known for rejecting its prophets. What more foolhardy thing could God have done?

The first night in Bethlehem required courage as well. How did God the Father feel that night, helpless as any human father, watching his Son emerge smeared with blood to face a harsh, cold

world? Lines from two different Christmas carols play in my mind. One, "The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes," seems to me a sanitized version of what took place in Bethlehem. I imagine Jesus cried like any other baby the night he entered the world, a world that would give him much reason to cry as an adult. The second, a line from "O Little Town of Bethlehem," seems as profoundly true today as it did two thousand years ago: "The hopes and fears of all the world do rest on thee tonight."

"Alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator," said G. K. Chesterton. The need for such courage began with Jesus' first night on earth and did not end until his last.

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There is one more view of Christmas I have never seen on a Christmas card, probably because no artist, not even William Blake, could do it justice. Revelation 12 pulls back the curtain to give us a glimpse of Christmas as it must have looked from somewhere far beyond Andromeda: *Christmas from the angels' viewpoint*.

The account differs radically from the birth stories in the Gospels. Revelation does not mention shepherds and an infanticidal king; rather, it pictures a dragon leading a ferocious struggle in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun and wearing a crown of twelve stars cries out in pain as she is about to give birth. Suddenly the enormous red dragon enters the picture, his tail sweeping a third of the stars out of the sky and flinging them to the earth. He crouches hungrily before the woman, anxious to devour her child the moment it is born. At the last second the infant is snatched away to safety, the woman flees into the desert, and all-out cosmic war begins.

Revelation is a strange book by any measure, and readers must understand its style to make sense of this extraordinary spectacle. In daily life two parallel histories occur simultaneously, one on earth and one in heaven. Revelation, however, views them together, allowing a quick look behind the scenes. On earth a baby was born, a king got wind of it, a chase ensued. In heaven the Great Invasion had begun, a daring raid by the ruler of the forces of good into the universe's seat of evil.

John Milton expressed this point of view majestically in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, poems which make heaven and hell the central focus and earth a mere battleground for their clashes. The modern author J.B. Phillips also attempted such a point of view, on a much less epic scale, and last Christmas I turned to Phillips's fantasy to try to escape my earthbound viewpoint.

In Phillips's version, a senior angel is showing a very young angel around the splendors of the universe. They view whirling galaxies and blazing suns, and then flit across the infinite distances of space until at last they enter one particular galaxy of 500 billion stars.

As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis-ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen. "I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger. "Well, it looks

very small and rather dirty to me,” said the little angel. “What’s special about that one?”

When I read Phillips’s fantasy, I thought of the pictures beamed back to earth from the Apollo astronauts, who described our planet as “whole and round and beautiful and small,” a blue-green-and-tan globe suspended in space. Jim Lovell, reflecting on the scene later, said, “It was just another body, really, about four times bigger than the moon. But it held all the hope and all the life and all the things that the crew of Apollo 8 knew and loved. It was the most beautiful thing there was to see in all the heavens.” That was the viewpoint of a human being.

To the little angel, though, earth did not seem so impressive. He listened in stunned disbelief as the senior angel told him that this planet, small and insignificant and not overly clean, was the renowned Visited Planet.

“Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince ... went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?” ... The little angel’s face wrinkled in disgust. “Do you mean to tell me,” he said, “that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?” “I do, and I don’t think He would like you to call them ‘creeping, crawling creatures’ in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him.” The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.

It is almost beyond my comprehension too, and yet I accept that this notion is the key to understanding Christmas and is, in fact, the touchstone of my faith. As a Christian I believe that we live in parallel worlds. One world consists of hills and lakes and barns and politicians and shepherds watching their flocks by night. The other consists of angels and sinister forces and somewhere out there places called heaven and hell. One night in the cold, in the dark, among the wrinkled hills of Bethlehem, those two worlds came together at a dramatic point of intersection. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. God, who knows no boundaries took on the shocking confines of a baby’s skin, the ominous restraints of mortality.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation,” an apostle would later write; “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” But the few eyewitnesses on Christmas night saw none of that. They saw an infant struggling to work never-before-used lungs.

Could it be true, this Bethlehem story of a Creator descending to be born on one small planet? If so, it is a story like no other. Never again need we wonder whether what happens on this dirty little tennis ball of a planet matters to the rest of the universe. Little wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song, disturbing not only a few shepherds but the entire universe.

**Yancey, Philip. *The Jesus I Never Knew; Chapter 2: Birth-The Visited Planet.*  
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***Merry Christmas to you all, St. Nick \* 2014***