

PROMISE AND PARADOX

December 24, 2019

Christmas Eve

[Isaiah 9:2,6-7](#)

[Luke 2:1-20](#)

(prayer)

Last month, I was helping one of my kids sell some things online. The big ticket item was a (barely six month old) iPad and an Apple Pencil that we listed for \$400. It was a fair price and immediately garnered some interest. Some people wanted only to purchase the pencil; others began to haggle about the price.

The offer that caught my eye came by text from a phone number from the 914 area code who offered \$400 in US Dollars (\$525CAD) and was willing to pay the cost of shipping.

I looked it up and the 914 phone exchange comes from SE New York State.

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One of the things I like about Kijiji is that usually you are dealing with someone local that you arrange to meet face-to-face to complete the transaction, but I was getting such a premium with the exchange rate with this offer that I couldn't pass it up.

We would use PayPal for the exchange of money, which offered me the security of a reputable third party payment process.

I had everything securely packed up with bubble wrap ready to be shipped. I got an email from PayPal saying that \$550 USD had been sent to me and that as soon as I submitted the Canada Post tracking number for the package, it would be released into my PayPal account.

I went to a Canada Postal outlet (in Edmonton where I was that evening) and plopped down \$123 CAD to send the package to the address I was given and submitted the tracking number.

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You can guess where this is going.

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The promise turned out to be too good to be true. First, PayPal wanted a scanned copy of the postal receipt. Then, because the buyer had sent \$150 USD for the shipping and it had only cost me \$123 CAD that I needed to make up the difference. Every time I set out to do what I was asked, another wrinkle emerged.

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Long story short: I fell for a scam using realistic looking PayPal emails.

By the time it was clear to me that I'd been fooled, the post office was closed and I was pretty sure that I was going to come out of this with no iPad and no money.

The best I could hope for was to get to that post office as soon as it opened in the morning **and** hope that mail had not yet gone out **and** that the clerk would allow me to retrieve it.

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Although the clerk (the next morning) was reluctant to help me out, a head office Canada Post supervisor (that I got on the phone) understood my quandary and (after some back and forth conversations) I got the package back later that afternoon. A refund cheque for the shipping cost arrived a week later.

Phew.

But, lesson learned.

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A week later, I found another buyer (who I met with personally) and gladly took a little less than the original asking price.

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I was caught up in a bigger than life situation that I eventually learned didn't really need to be that big.

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Hope is a powerful motivator.

Humility is an effective teacher.

Paradoxically, I learned both of those lessons out of the one situation.

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Hope and Humility are foundational to our understanding of Christmas. A lesson that is both new and old every year.

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Think back a few months.

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Even while the hallowe'en merchandise was still on display in the stores, corners of Christmas fare began to appear. As soon as November arrived, those corners grew into the prominent eye-catching areas.

A barrage of green and red advertisements went out in every form of media.

On *social* media, the poignant and humorous memes began their annual trend cycles.

People argued whether [Baby, It's Cold Outside](#) was worthy of air play in 2019.

In the Edmonton area, 96.3FM began 24/7 christmas music.

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In the [third John Wick movie](#), reflecting on all of the violence that Keanu Reeve's character has caused, he is asked: "*All of this, for what? Because of a puppy?*"

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John Wick is quite a stretch as a metaphor (given Jesus' eventual predilection for non-violence) but we might similarly ask about all of the fuss made about Christmas: *All of this, for what? Because of a baby?*

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The earliest new testament authors paid no attention whatsoever to the birth of Jesus. The closest the Apostle Paul came to telling a Christmas story was a passing comment in a letter to the Galatians: *when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, **born of a woman**, born under the law.* (Gal4:4)

The fact that Jesus had a mother is hardly unique enough to warrant the fuss we make about his birth.

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Two of the four gospels in the New Testament (that report on Jesus' life and ministry) start their narratives with Jesus already about 30 years old. No Christmas, at all.

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It is an undeniable truth that the modern attention we pay to Christmas is a paradoxical, gross-over-reaction compared to the early generations of the followers of Jesus' Way.

All of this, for what?

Because of a baby?

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We are *not* here tonight because Jesus was born.

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We are here tonight because Jesus lived.

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We are here tonight because of what Jesus did and said in his living days, not just his first breaths.

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We are here tonight because of the tragic circumstances of Jesus' death.

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But most significantly, we are here tonight because (in the dark days and weeks and years after Jesus' execution) Jesus' closest followers did not let Jesus' message die.

They came to believe (not only would they carry on Jesus' work, but that) but that Jesus continued to be mysteriously and mystically with them.

They came to believe, as the gospel of John quoted Jesus as promising: *The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.* (Jn14:26)

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It was holy compassion experienced through **Jesus' life** that starts the story, not a birth (humble or otherwise).

That is the paradox of this night: we are reacting to a story that began when love was lived and known... a love that did not (could not) die, even on a cross.

Enthralled by this paradox, the early Christians reached back for older stories. Luke and Matthew recorded some of them for posterity's sake: stories of promise, and hope, and faithfulness.

These gospel authors used Christmas not as the centre of their narratives, but as a jumping off point to share the impact of all that happened years later.

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It is both promise and paradox.

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It is both hopeful and humble.

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It is an old story. But it is also brand new... because the same invitation is before us tonight.

We are invited to believe:

- that christmas is not just a *one off*, an isolated event in our life that disappears for 364 days each year.

The same invitation is:

- that the next chapters of our lives will tell the fuller story;

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- that something world changing is born anew within us;
- that the justice and compassion of Jesus is still alive and well in the world because of us.

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Let us live out the promise that emerged on the day Jesus was born.

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Let us pray:

Shine your light into our world, O God so that your love can come alive through us. Amen.

Video: [When Love Was Born](#)

offerings

#55VU "In the Break Mid-Winter"