

# When the Time Was Fulfilled



## **Christmas Meditations**

Eberhard Arnold  
Christoph Blumhardt  
Alfred Delp

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Plough Publishing House

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He who would be born of God  
must be mindful of how Christ's  
birth took place.

*Eberhard Arnold*

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# Introduction

**H**ow would Christ want us to prepare for Christmas? In what way might he want us to remember his birth? This is the central concern of this book.

Obviously, Christians around the world, as they have throughout the ages, celebrate Christmas differently. Traditions, customs, rituals, and symbols are as varied as the people who engage them. As meaningful as these expressions are, the supposition within this book is that outward forms and practices, whether they are holiday preparations or religious observances, bear little importance if Christ himself is not born again in our midst. Celebration is a distraction if not accompanied by conversion; remembering is futile if we fail to experience redemption.

Christmas is indeed something to anticipate. It is a season of joy for good reason: it is the

news of a Savior being born, of light breaking into darkness, of God's peace and goodwill to all. But joy is more than merriment. For those who only want to have a good time or a feeling of togetherness, Christmas brings little more than a temporary feeling of cheer. Afterwards, life goes on as before. But for the one who feels bankrupt, without real meaning or hope—either for themselves or for the world—for the one who senses that something is terribly wrong with the way things are, Christmas can be genuinely life changing.

Sadhu Sundar Singh, a mystic in India at the turn of the last century, was once sitting along the bank of a river. He drew out of the water a beautiful, round stone and smashed it. The inside was bone dry. The water had not penetrated it, for the rock had hardened itself. "It is just like that with all the 'Christian' people of the West," he observed. "They have for centuries been surrounded by Christianity, but the Master has not penetrated them."

Far too many of us come near to the manger, but refuse to let the Christ child penetrate our lives. This is why things remain as they are. The question before us is this: Will the Child come into the dusty, dirty cavern of our lives? Or will we just

unthinkingly immerse ourselves in Christmas sights and sounds, content that all is shine?

The meditations in this collection are meant solely to prepare us to meet Christ anew. They point us to the fact that the God of the universe finds himself most at home in people who feel their need and are personally ready to come to the manger. Christmas is glad tidings indeed, but only for those who are starkly honest with themselves and recognize that life must change.

These selections are written by three men who struggled hard and long to find, in the words of Søren Kierkegaard, “the contemporary Christ.” They testify by their lives that the birth of Jesus is more than history – it is a reality.

Christoph Blumhardt, a German pastor and religious socialist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, experienced the victorious power of Christ over sickness and demons that can possess and oppress individuals and entire congregations. The reality of Christ came dramatically and sweepingly into the village of Möttlingen, where his father was pastor, and continued on in his own ministry of healing in Bad Boll. Although rejected by his peers, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of needy souls reborn and transformed through his ministry. The Christ child was “born again and again.”

Eberhard Arnold, a German theologian, publisher, and speaker, left the religious establishment and social status quo in Germany altogether and in Franciscan-style poverty formed in 1920 a community of brothers and sisters. They lived together entirely on the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. For Arnold, every disciple must become “mindful of how Christ’s birth took place.” This “how” of Christ’s birth reveals the true source of Christmas joy, and it alone points the way to God’s kingdom and makes it real.

Alfred Delp was a pastor in Munich who secretly helped Jews who were escaping Hitler’s Germany to Switzerland. Condemned as a traitor for his opposition to Hitler, Delp wrote the pieces in this collection in a Nazi prison shortly before he was hanged in 1945. The Gestapo offered Delp his freedom if he would leave the Jesuits, but he refused. Like Christ, he humbled himself and was obedient unto death.

In their own, unique fashion, each author helps us to understand what it means to prepare for Christ’s birth today. Yes, long ago in a small town called Bethlehem, God acted decisively in history. But, as the apostle Paul writes, “Now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). The joyful news of Christmas is that we too, like those

## INTRODUCTION

at the first Christmas, can experience the glory of God. The Word can become flesh and live among us. We too, as the apostle John writes, can receive “one blessing after another” (Jn. 1:16). Into the darkness of our lives and our world the light can still shine.

*Charles E. Moore*

# The Christmas Story

According to the Gospels

**B**efore the beginning of time there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has neither understood nor overcome it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all people might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every person, Christ Jesus himself, was coming into the world.

Jesus came into the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize

him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen Christ's glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Before Christ took on human flesh, and after an angel had visited Zechariah, a priest in Jerusalem, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign

over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted his wife, Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby whom she was carrying in her womb leaped, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

And Mary said:

My soul glorifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for  
me—  
holy is his name.  
His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their  
inmost thoughts.  
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.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
even as he said to our fathers.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months  
and then returned home.

Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ actually  
came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be

married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” – which means, “God with us.”

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go

to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him

by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all  
people,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped

night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi, or wise men, from the East came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, and having done everything required by the law, Joseph returned with his wife Mary to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.” And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

*This is a Gospel harmony based on the New International Version of the Bible.*

# Advent



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# The Eve of Advent

*In the past God spoke... through the prophets at many times and in various ways.*

Hebrews 1:1

Advent is a time in which we share in the longing of all those who lived in the distant past. We must feel how, in their suffering and struggle, they too longed for redemption and liberation, for unity, for peace, for a golden age. They waited for a manifestation of God's love and unity, for a breaking in of his justice among the nations. We must learn to put ourselves in the place of all those in Israel who were waiting for him who was to come. This One was to free them from their need and disruption, from sin, from their lack of fellowship, from their lost condition, so that they might come to God.

This faithful, eager longing expects still more from the One who is to come. We are convinced

that there is One who will create peace and social justice for everyone. We expect him and thus long with a humble spirit that his rulership is recognized in every country. And when this happens, he will turn bloody weapons into tools for work, and we shall become true brothers and sisters. The Messiah-King of peace and justice, the world ruler of love and joy will reign! This was the expectation of old, and this is what we think of when we approach the season of Jesus' birth.

Like the prophets of old, we too need to feel the outrageous injustice that exists within society today and how heavy a burden this is. Injustice ought to stir our hearts; the lack of peace in a world bristling with weapons should haunt us. Disunity exists not only among nations, but also in the midst of every nation. There are far too many unjust governments today. A grave evil results when all our honest labor is supplanted by factories and modern technology. The workers are like living corpses who have no influence on the shaping of the economy, even though it is from their hands that all the things come which are enjoyed and distributed and sold.

Dissensions between classes, races, and ethnic groups continue to erupt, and in large cities and industrial centers violence floods the streets—a civil war, a war between brothers. Lovelessness is so great

today that on the one side people have their nice homes and secure livelihoods, while on the other side parents lay their children on the counter at the welfare center for all to see. Some live so well while millions are on the way to perpetual poverty. Let us remember what Jesus said about the end of the age: Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most people will grow cold, and then the end will come.

Advent is a time when we await God's intervention in the need of the present day, as he intervened then in Jesus' birth. We long for the highest power to rescue this unhappy, torn humanity that knows so little community. Now is the time to ask God for a radical change in all things, even if this means we must go through judgment.

*Eberhard Arnold*

## 2

# The Shaking Reality of Advent

*He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*

Luke 1:51

There is perhaps nothing we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up. Where life is firm we need to sense its firmness; and where it is unstable and uncertain and has no basis, we need to know this, too, and endure it.

We may ask why God sends whirlwinds over the earth, why the chaos where all appears hopeless and dark, and why there seems to be no end to human suffering. Perhaps it is because we have been living on earth in an utterly false and counterfeit security. And now God strikes the earth till it resounds, now he shakes and shatters: not to pound us with fear, but to teach us one thing—the spirit’s innermost longing.

Many of the things that are happening today would never have happened if we had been living in that longing, that disquiet of heart which comes when we are faced with God, and when we look clearly at things as they really are. If we had done this, God would have withheld his hand from many of the things that now shake and crush our lives. We would have come to terms with and judged the limits of our own competence.

But we have lived in a false confidence, in a delusional security; in our spiritual insanity we really believe we can bring the stars down from heaven and kindle flames of eternity in the world. We believe that with our own forces we can avert the dangers and banish night, switch off and halt the internal quaking of the universe. We believe we can harness everything and fit it into an ultimate scheme that will last.

Here is the message of Advent: faced with him who is the Last, the world will begin to shake. Only when we do not cling to false securities will our eyes be able to see this Last One and get to the bottom of things. Only then will we have the strength to overcome the terrors into which God has let the world sink. God uses these terrors to awaken us from sleep, as Paul says, and to show us that it is time to repent, time to change things. It is time to

say, “All right, it was night; but let that be over now and let us get ready for the day.” We must do this with a decision that comes out of the very horrors we experience. Because of this our decision will be unshakable even in uncertainty.

If we want Advent to transform us—our homes and hearts, and even nations—then the great question for us is whether we will come out of the convulsions of our time with this determination: Yes, arise! It is time to awaken from sleep. A waking up must begin somewhere. It is time to put things back where God intended them. It is time for each of us to go to work—certain that the Lord will come—to set our life in God’s order wherever we can. Where God’s word is heard, he will not cheat us of the truth; where our life rebels he will reprimand it.

We need people who are moved by the horrific calamities and emerge from them with the knowledge that those who look to the Lord will be preserved by him, even if they are hounded from the earth.

The Advent message comes out of our encounter with God, with the gospel. It is thus the message that shakes—so that in the end the entire world shall be shaken. The fact that the Son of man shall come again is more than a historic prophecy; it is

