

A Christmas Abecedary

David R. Weiss – December 20, 2019

An “abecedary” is often a primer that uses key words arranged in alphabetic order. My Christmas abecedary follows the alphabet and uses a series of words—some familiar, some unexpected—to remind us (or reveal to us) that *before anything else ...*

Merry Christmas means May the Revolution Begin!

Editor’s note: A couple quick words in advance.

I could have picked multiple words for each letter, but I forced myself to select just one to keep it as brief and focused as possible. I occasionally cross-reference to a word elsewhere in the abecedary, but although many of the words reappear in other entries, I only cross-reference where the meaning I offer is significant in another entry as well.

Some readers will worry about whether I believe the stories happened as Matthew and Luke relate them. (And some readers will worry that I DO believe. While others will worry that I DON’T.) I say, it doesn’t matter. The Christmas accounts carry weight as tales offering windows of meaning in the life of Jesus. Finally, where fact and fable start or stop doesn’t have one whit to do with the power of these tales. The meanings I explore here are truthful either way.

Lastly, the ironic “spark” for this piece was a concert of Christmas music by Billy McLaughlin and Simple Gifts. The music was ethereal in its beauty and certainly genuine in its good will. But I couldn’t help but wonder, as we enjoyed the songs whether that first Christmas had meant—and still means—to offer something more unsettling and more needful to our world. I pulled out my notebook and began jotting down words for different letters of the alphabet even as the carols played ... and this is what grew from those scribbles. ~ David

A **is for Annunciation.** When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary (Luke 1:26-35) to tell her that she will become pregnant and bear a child who will change the future, it is the announcement of an illicit impossibility ... suddenly declared *desired and possible*. The fact that Mary has not yet slept with a man is the least of the difficulties. The far greater difficulty is that Rome occupies the people’s land and that fear and limitation occupy their minds and hearts. But annunciation declares that everything is about to change ... because God is like that: *revolutionary*.

B **is for Blessed.** Specifically, “blessed are you among women,” which is how Elizabeth greets her cousin Mary (Luke 1:42). The phrase sounds innocent enough. *To us*. But in oral Jewish culture this phrase was dangerously evocative. Just twice in Hebrew Scriptures are women addressed this way, but the moments are memorable—and bloody. Jael earned the words (Judges 5:24) by driving a tent peg through the head of a general who was oppressing the early Israelites. Later, Judith received them (Judith 13:18) after beheading a general whose troops had besieged an Israelite town. These words hail heroines whose bravery helped overthrow oppressive power. Now Elizabeth’s greeting becomes unsettling yet clear: somehow Mary—not via a tent peg or sword, *but by the child in her womb*—would join in breaking through oppression. Far from simple congratulation, Elizabeth’s words affirm Mary’s role in the *revolution*. (Think I’m overstating things? Wait until we get to **Q** ...)

C **is for Christ.** We sometimes think “Christ” is Jesus’ last name. It’s not. More title than name, Christ means “chosen one” (if you want to be neat about it). Christ identifies Jesus as a person chosen by God for a special purpose. Although we think of Jesus as *the* Christ, other persons in Hebrew Scripture were also called Christ, including Cyrus, a Persian king. Which just shows that when the moment is right, God will use *anyone*. But I said, “if you want to be neat about it.” Christ *really* means “anointed one,” which, going back to the Hebrew *really means* “one

smear with oil.” It hearkens to the Hebraic practice of the priest anointing someone chosen by God by pouring a flask of oil over their head. So to say that Jesus is Christ is to say that Jesus—having been smeared (figuratively, at least) with oil, is God’s chosen one. But also: any of us who’ve been baptized were likely also “sealed” with a bit of oil on our foreheads at the same time. *That was our own anointing*—marked as chosen by God. For many of us it will be years, decades even (Jesus, after all, was about thirty when he began to preach) before we begin to understand what being chosen means *for us*. But here’s the *unruly thing* about Christ: Jesus doesn’t keep it to himself. If Christmas means revolution, *all of us are Christ*.

D is for Dream. Three times God speaks to Joseph in a dream (Matt. 1:20; 2:13, 19). Each dream guides a crucial choice for Joseph as he embraces Mary despite the potential scandal of her pregnancy, leads his family to safety from the murderous pursuit of Herod, and returns with them to Nazareth after Herod’s death. Also, as Matthew tells the tale (Matt. 2:12), *all of the Magi* seemingly had the *same* dream warning them not to return to Herod after their visit to the holy family. But dreams aren’t only for nighttime or when we’re asleep. At the end of his account of Jesus’ birth and all that was part of it, Luke adds that, unlike the shepherds who told everyone they could about their experience, Mary chose to “ponder all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19). That, too, is a type of dreaming. Investing one’s imagination in the dream of God: which is always to protect the vulnerable, promote justice, and to remake the world as a place where all might flourish. Dreams are the womb of *revolution*.

E is for Emmanuel. It means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23) and this, the presence of Sacred Energy in solidarity with oppressed persons, is the dynamite—the power—that drives Christmas as revolution. Over against all the worldly systems that claim to have the first and last word over our lives, Emmanuel is the name that declares, at Jesus’ birth, “all bets are off.” Let the mighty mock or tremble. Black lives matter. Immigrants belong. Worker’s rights are human rights. LGBTQ persons are holy. Because *God* is with us. Without Emmanuel, there can be no revolution. But *with* Emmanuel revolution is destiny.

F is for the Flight to Egypt. Sure, Herod was paranoid (look him up; he *was!*). But the truth is that even the barest wisp of genuine hope for freedom and dignity and flourishing for all—which is the revolution Emmanuel seeks—will be perceived as a threat to the powerful. And they will seek to stop it. So the flight (Matt. 2:13-14) reminds us this is no simple or safe journey; even revolutions sometimes take cover. And yet, like a meandering river, they flow on sure of their way, ultimately unstoppable on their course.

G is for Glad tidings. Like “Blessed ...” these words are also loaded ... for revolution. When a new emperor was born, couriers were dispatched to carry this excited news to every corner of the Roman Empire. Entering each town or village the herald would call out in the streets, “I bring glad tidings of great joy ... that a savior is born today.” (“Savior,” by the way, means Protector, but just as easily Healer, World-Mender; it shares an etymology with our word *salve*.) The angel in Luke’s Christmas story claims the emperor’s birth announcement and offers it for a peasant baby (Luke 2:10-11). Because this revolution is about glad tidings that start at the bottom (see **U**).

H is for Heavenly Host. Right after the angel announces glad tidings “a multitude of the heavenly host” (Luke 2:13-14) appear singing “Glory to God ... and peace on Earth ...” We picture angels, but that Greek word (*angelos*) literally simply means “messenger” and says nothing about wings. It could’ve been a flash mob. Just sayin’. At any rate, those first heavenly host—holy messengers—remind us that the Christmas revolution is about us—*all of us*—

declaring God's glory and proclaiming peace for the entire Earth family. No wings required. *We* become part of the heavenly host every time we act (or march or vigil or sing or petition or strike or work) for peace.

I is for incarnation. It sounds like some heady doctrine or some mystical maneuver by God. But this is really simpler and messier than that. We're talking *enfleshment*. The claim that God's yearning for our well-being ... and most especially the well-being of the least among us—the pushed down, brushed aside, bent over or broken-hearted—that yearning led God to leap from Beyond to right here in this moment right now. And while we see that leap with astonishing clarity in Jesus, incarnation is the revolutionary leap of God into our bodies—every last one of them—again and again. Asking to be born in each of our lives. Because this revolution includes all of us.

J is for Joseph. If you think of him as a sort of shadowy figure hovering in the background, that's about right. He has *not a single word* of dialogue in either Matthew's or Luke's birth accounts. But he *listens*. We're explicitly told he listens to the holy impulses delivered to him by dreams, and we might assume he listens to Mary as well. This is a quiet revolution right here. The *man* in this story holds his tongue, and holds space for both the holy presence of angels and the human needs of his family as well. Joseph listens and then acts decisively to protect the vulnerable ones at hand. *That's revolutionary.*

K is for King. Except not. See, the only king in this story (Herod) is a villain. And, in fact, the only villain is the king (Herod). And while the baby Jesus is viewed as a future king by the angel Gabriel and the Magi, when he grows up it becomes strikingly clear he means to empty the word "King" of *any* worldly meaning. Jesus' parables, healings, and boundary-breaking table fellowship (eating with outcasts) all work *so hard* against the worldly notion of kingship that he seems bent on remaking the meaning of the word into something entirely else. *Jesus choreographs kingship AS kinship.* In God's beloved world *there are no kings, only kin.* And Christmas marks the beginning of that revolution.

L is for Liberation and Labor. I could come up with multiple words for most letters, but these words are entirely intertwined. In Exodus when Moses asks to have a name for the voice speaking to him out of the burning bush he's told, "I am that I am," or "I will be that which I will be" (Exodus 3:13-22). On one hand it's a declaration of freedom and surprise. No boxes can contain this God. But it's also an existential pledge: because God reveals it in the midst of commissioning Moses to lead the people out of Egypt it's as though God is saying, "I will be whoever I must be to set you free—in fact, *my very divinity rests upon setting you free.*" *Through the holy labor of liberation, God births Godself.* And Mary, when she carries Jesus in her womb for nine months and then labors to birth him, that labor is the continuation of God's pledge to Moses. At Christmas, labor is for liberation and in this world liberation means a revolution.

M is for Magi. We tend to call them "wise men," (even "kings," which they surely were not) because "magicians"—close kin to wizards!—hardly seems Christian enough. See, Magi "read" the sky, though not as astronomers seeking to understand what's *up there*, but rather as astrologers looking for portents of things to come *down here*. Whether fact or fable (most scholars say fable), Matthew's tale tells this *truth*: he sees Jesus' birth as such a moment of turning that it *must've* been echoed in the stars, where, *of course*, magi would notice. We domesticate them in flowing robes and crowns. They were closer to mad men crowing about deep changes coming our way. (Hence, Herod's reaction.) Across the safety of our years, we see their gifts as fit for a king (and they were!). But when such gifts are made to a peasant baby who will soon be hunted by royal death squads, those gifts signal the start of a revolution.

N is for Nipple. No, it's not mentioned in the text, but this is where incarnation (See **I**) gets real. It's too abstract to simply say God became human. The claim—which is less about metaphysics or theology than ethics—is that *human flesh can cradle holiness*. That, curled up and squirming, with eyes tightly shut inside Mary's womb, is the hope of heaven. That, rushing forth in blood and water, serenaded as likely by Mary's screams as by any angel chorus, is a child deemed divine. And that, wholly—and holy!—vulnerable, now held in human arms and sucking hungrily at Mary's breast, is one who will later announce (right through his death on a cross!) God's extravagant grace. And this child receives *his* first sacrament, *his* first communion, in the gift of milk from his teenage mother's nipple. When we see this fleshy messiness as the miracle of incarnation, it changes everything. If God weds Godself to humanity so intimately as this, then that love has surely leaked, like warm sweet milk, all over creation. And from now on our lives must surely reflect that.

O is for Omen. Which is, after all, exactly what the Christmas Star was. We sing about a “star of wonder, star of light ...” but in the ancient world such a “star” (likely a comet or supernova) was no cause for calm reverence. Omens were ... *ominous*. Harbingers of tumult. Magi (see **M**) were regarded with some measure of dread precisely because they treated omens as objects of curious inquiry rather than cause for panic as the populace preferred to do. Here, too, Matthew's choice to include the star is rendered almost quaint by all the carols we've sung. But in the narrative itself—in the world of his first readers—this star declares, “Anything might happen now!” If you're a king, like Herod, that type of star might precipitate a murderous tantrum. If you're part of the masses it will surely put you on edge. But if you're part of the very least of these, you just might think, maybe that strange feeling of being on edge is a prelude to hope.

P is for the Peace of God. When the heavenly host sing “Peace on earth ...” to those shepherds on the hillside, their words carry far more weight than the same words printed on many Christmas cards. Because the backdrop for the angels' song is the *Pax Romana*—the peace of Rome. Bluntly put, *that* peace was Rome's version of Donald Trump's twisted dream to “make America great again.” Rome's “peace”—like Trump's “peace”—rested on authoritarian rule that oppressed *anyone* the empire deemed “other,” and that relied on military might (displayed and deployed) to bend the world to its will. Many who lived under the *Pax Romana* knew it as the *least peaceful* aspect of their life. *That* peace was for the favored members of the empire—and neither shepherds (see **S**) nor Jews in general were included. So to hear these heavenly voices announcing *God's peace*, well, there's a word for that: *revolution*.

Q is for Queen ... and then some. Mary isn't conferred the title until several centuries later, but she receives it on account of being Jesus' mother, so it begins here at Christmas. As a non-Catholic, seeing Mary as Queen of Heaven wasn't part of my upbringing. But if the tradition quibbles over just how “much” Joseph was Jesus' father, it's unequivocal in declaring Mary as the person who carried Jesus in her womb, bore him between her legs, and suckled him at her breast. So I suppose that counts as a sort of reverse royal pedigree. But it's her *platform* that persuades me she merits the title. Have you actually read the *Magnificat*? *This queen is Queer*. The heavenly vision she sings of features radical reversal, overturned privilege, uplift of the needy, and impeachment of those who pretend to rule. This is the revolution that makes a new world possible. And that alone makes Mary queer enough and queen enough for me.

R is for Room—of which there is none at “the inn.” Interestingly the Greek word translated as “inn” usually referred to the “spare room” in most simple homes where guests were put up. Since Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem *because it's where his family came from*, he likely had relatives there. In that case, it's also likely there was “no room in the ‘spare room’”

because it'd already been filled by other relatives who'd *also* come to Bethlehem for the census. So Mary and Joseph were crowded into the family's common living area, which would've had a manger at the very front where it met up with the adjoining stable. A whole different picture. Unproven, but probably more plausible—and no less compelling. This baby is still born on occupied land, in a house crowded because of an emperor's edict, and still sleeps with the heavy breathing of animals nearby. The deeper question about 'Room' is whether *we* have room to set aside old inaccurate ideas despite their familiar comfort. Because revolution requires that.

S is for Shepherds. Granted, shepherds *do* get some positive biblical press. David was a shepherd-king; indeed he credits his time in the fields with shaping his young character. And in John's gospel Jesus even calls himself the "Good Shepherd." But in the grit of daily life shepherds didn't fare so well. They were mostly at the edge—or just past the edge—of poverty in an already poor society. Many had lost their ancestral lands—think displaced farmers reduced to being hired hands on someone else's estate. In a society where most everyone was scraping to get by, shepherds scraped lower, dirtier, and for longer hours than most. So to have angels deliver their "glad tidings" (see **G**) to shepherds is no mere hint that things are changing. It is the declaration that with this birth the revolution has begun.

T is for Toddlers. Undoubtedly the most tragic entry of these twenty-six. Matthew reports that when Herod realized the Magi weren't coming back to help him pinpoint the child whose birth posed dread to his lust for power he flew into a rage. Sent death squads to kill every Jewish boy two years or less living in or near Bethlehem. Who knows—were Herod alive today perhaps he'd have dispatched those troops by tweet. Perhaps he'd cage them under the pretense of sorting out who's a threat and who's not. Whatever. In this story he simply slaughters them all. Determined to erase any threat to the world as it was (he had hundreds, including members of his own family, executed satisfy his own paranoia)—even if it meant killing toddlers. Make no mistake. Christmas is a dangerous time. It challenges the way life has (not!) been working so entirely that the powerful *will* lash out. Keep your children close in this season of revolution.

U is for Under. Which is where Christmas begins. *Under* the Emperor's order for census—that is, under the thumb of Rome. *Under* the king's radar (until the magi arrive). *Under* the notice of Bethlehem (until the angels sing). But more than this, Christmas begins *from below*. God's name and liberating activity (see **L**) are indelibly linked to concern for the least of these. Those who are *under* are always—and I mean *at all times and in all ways*—God's first concern. Emmanuel (see **E**) is *not* trickle-down theology. It is theology—audacious good news, glad tidings (see **G**)—that begins *under*. Where revolution always starts.

V is for Vigil. It's what the shepherds were doing in the fields that night: keeping watch ... against the dangers of the night. It's also, no doubt what Joseph did on the journey to Bethlehem and on the much more perilous flight to Egypt. It's what the Magi did on their wandering route across the desert to find the baby Jesus. But no less, vigil is what Elizabeth did *for decades* before her baby John (later, the Baptist) erupted in her life (and ours). And vigil is what Mary did every day of her life from Gabriel's annunciation to her *Magnificat* to the labor (see **L**) that brought Jesus into this world ... all the way to the crucifixion that tried (unsuccessfully) to push him out and nail the door shut behind him. Vigil is remaining tenaciously present to both threats and opportunities. Because revolution will bring both in abundance.

W is for the World. As in "Joy to World," the carol whose 300th anniversary is this Christmas. It refers to the earth, on which the angels have pronounced God's peace (see **P**), on multiple levels. It's the *inhabited* world, the world where people dwell. This is the world

most hungry for peace as the vast majority of unjust suffering happens in *this* world, at the hands of other people and the systems they've put in place. But it also means the *wild* world. The untamed edges where the wild asses roam, the eagles soar, and where Leviathan swims. *That* world, increasingly, is also marked by unjust suffering as the impact of humanity reaches far beyond the ground where our feet touch. And it means the world as *universe* (in Greek the word for "universe" is literally "the all-things"). From this fragile green and blue orb to the galaxies spinning across the distant realms ... and the elements that comprise all-things. If Christmas is joy to these worlds, it is *only so* because it heralds *a new way of being* with the inhabited world, the wild world, and the universe itself. Justice and awe are equally revolutionary—equally essential in this moment.

X is for Xmas. Only a tiny stretch here—and quite legitimate. We regularly see Christmas shortened to Xmas. Some people worry this shorthand crosses "Christ" right out of Christmas. But no need to fret. The X comes from the Greek letter Chi (written χ), the first letter of the word Christ. So the X actually puts Christ at the heart of Christmas. And it reminds us that this season drips with oil (see **C**), smeared by God as it were with restless hope and joyful longing for revolution.

Y is for Yes! The exclamation mark is optional, though I think it's implied, even when offered in a whisper. When Mary says to Gabriel, "Then let it be according to your word" (Luke 1:38) she's saying, *with all her being*, "I'm in this, too." Meanwhile, Joseph never says anything that we hear (see **J**), but from his quiet accompaniment of Mary to his fretful flight to Egypt, he, too, says Yes to everything the divine dreams and his wife and child ask of him. As do the Magi and the shepherds. Each according to their own vocation says, Yes! Revolutions will always encounter plenty of No!s, whether from those trying to preserve their power and privilege or those simply scared at the prospect of change and tumult. But revolutions happen because of those willing to say Yes! And, for Christians, Christmas is the season of Yes!

Z is for zeal. I suppose, like "Yes!," zeal is present in most of the Christmas story. This isn't a tale for the timid. But zeal is also *the arc toward which this tale leads*. If all the characters here need zeal to help launch Jesus' life, as an adult that zeal *becomes* his life. His public ministry *embodies* Mary's *Magnificat*, shredding the boundaries that kept oppression in place and announcing unconditional grace from the Author of all to the very least among us. When Jesus drives the money-changers out of the temple for thinking to sell access to God (and make a tidy profit on the side) John's Gospel explains it by quoting Psalm 69:9 "Zeal for your house shall consume me." True. But don't mistake "house" as the building. House is the family of God. You. Me. Everyone else. All creatures and all creation. The-all-things (see **W**). That's where our zeal belongs. And that zeal is what makes Christmas a revolution.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in public theology. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait

David Weiss is the author of *When God Was a Little Girl*, a playfully profound and slyly subversive children's picture book (2013, www.WhenGodWasALittleGirl.com) as well as *To the Tune of a Welcoming God: Lyrical reflections on sexuality, spirituality and the wideness of God's welcome* (2008, www.tothetune.com). A theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, David is committed to doing "public theology" around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. He speaks on college campuses and at church and community events. He and his wife, Margaret, make their home in St. Paul, Minnesota. Their blended family includes six children and nine grandchildren. They like keeping close company with creation and their household has included dogs, cats, birds, fish, guinea pigs, hamsters, and even worms. Their home, like their life, is fairly cluttered with joy. You can reach out to him at drw59mn@gmail.com and read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, "Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest."