



Light in Darkness

An Existential Christmas

Nick Wright

Light in Darkness (2020)

‘To the existentialist, life is like a small child, lost and alone in a deep, dark forest. And the child means nothing to the forest.’ (Peter Hicks)

Hicks’ bleak depiction of the human condition, of an unresolvable existential angst that we face and experience as we find ourselves thrown into this world, is a despairing vision of life without hope. It reflects vividly Jürgen Moltmann’s view that ‘hell is hopelessness’.

Yannick Jacob comments that, ‘there is a way to live without this anxiety, at least temporarily, by deceiving ourselves, by closing our eyes to some of the realities of our existence.’ It’s as if we can numb the pain, make ourselves feel better for a time, by distracting ourselves, or drugging ourselves, to feel safer and more alive.

This is, perhaps, a deep root cause of addictive behaviours, of aligning ourselves with extreme positions, of engaging in some forms of extreme sports or of taking drugs that seek to dampen our too-painful-to-handle thoughts and feelings.

Instead of being willing to pause, pray and peel back the curtains to reveal what may lay behind our personal and cultural actions and routines, we grip and hold them tightly shut. Over a lifetime, we glue them, stitch them and tape them together. We build barricades to support them, reinforce them and hide them, even to ourselves.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Light in Darkness

At least for a while. Sooner or later, we may inadvertently catch a glimpse, experience an unnerving feeling, find ourselves fighting, falling or failing as the walls creak, crack and start to crumble down. It could be sparked by an accident, a break-up, a failed promotion, an illness, a mid-life crisis, a war.

Our defences are weakened, no longer able to withstand the swirling, turbulent pressures that have built up behind them. It's as if suddenly, as if by a flash of lightning, everything is revealed. Our self-assured confidence collapses and, perhaps for the first time, we experience terrifying vulnerability.

This is the existential backdrop to the Christmas story: an intensely dark crisis that can't be resolved with a quick-fix solution. For followers of Jesus, it's a piercing and dazzling hope-filled account of a profoundly transformational encounter between God and humanity, where God takes the first step and enters our reality.

When the Bible says 'Light shines in darkness', we catch a glimpse of radiant light, life and love now made possible. Whatever your experience as a coach, whatever the experience of your clients in 2021 – let's face truth gently, with courage and humility – and make hope real.

Gift (2019)

We walked past this little girl each day. She had the most beautiful smile. She worked at the front of a shop in the Philippines in a poor area, hoping that someone might stop and buy. She was very poor but never asked anything.

She simply...smiled.

Light in Darkness

I asked the Filipina I was walking with if we could buy this girl something special for Christmas. We did, and then returned to hand it to her. 'This is a gift from Jesus, to thank you for the gift of your smile!' She looked stunned, bemused and amazed.

Her Mum, dressed in rags, teased us playfully. 'Haven't you brought me a gift too? Or are you saying my smile isn't cute enough?!' We all laughed. It was a moment of joy. We returned the next day and the little girl now ran up to us, brimming with excitement.

She told us she had shared the chocolates with her younger brothers, but asked if it would be OK to save the baseball cap until Christmas. 'I've never had a gift before, and I'd love to be able to unwrap a gift on Christmas Day!' I almost cried.

Whatever Christmas means for you this year: Light shines in darkness. Remember the poor.

Unexpected (2018)

I think I saw an angel this week. I was walking into town the day after Christmas when I noticed a young man walking ahead of me, beer can in hand, dressed like a skinhead and looking decidedly rough. He stopped momentarily and stooped to the ground. I imagined he was going to drop his can at the roadside and I thought, cynically and silently, 'Typical'.

Instead, to my complete surprise, he picked up another empty can and continued walking. As we progressed, he picked up can after can, bottle after bottle, all discarded by revellers the night before. I was surprised, puzzled and intrigued.

Light in Darkness

As we entered the town, I found myself continuing to follow him. He came to a rubbish bin and carefully dropped the cans and bottles inside it. Now I was really amazed. Instinctively, I felt in my pocket and pulled out some coins.

Walking across the road, I smiled, held out the cash towards him and said, 'Here - buy yourself a drink. I was so impressed to see you doing that.' Now he looked surprised, puzzled and intrigued. 'You don't need to do that,' he said shyly, 'I'm just trying to look after my neighbourhood.' I noticed wet blood across his knuckles, as if from a fight. A real paradox.

He held out his hand and asked my name. I told him, asked his and he replied. We shook hands and parted ways. I felt nervous about the blood on my hands and, discretely, rushed off to find a place to wash. At the same time, I felt humbled, confused and inspired by this curious character.

How quickly and easily I had judged him. How he was the one that had picked up litter, not I. How he did what was needed without seeking recognition or reward. How he modelled good citizenship without saying a word. I think I saw an angel this week. A true spirit of Christmas and a vision for a new year.

Image of the Invisible (2017)

Image of the invisible God. [God in the Flesh: Lyrics by Late Late Service, Glasgow, 1994]

In the beginning was the Word, the early word, the first word, mysterious voice talking behind the back of the universe, back before its beginning. The I am who I am word, the with-God word, the was-God word. A voice that called us into being across the reaches of infinity. The without-whom-nothing word, an unheard-of word behind words. World-making word. Speaking the language behind language.

Light in Darkness

Body of the untouchable God.

When babies try to tell us what they want by pointing, babbling, playing, copying, making us feel good by learning our names, playing out endless games of things appearing and disappearing, they hide behind their hands. Then take their hands away and, there they are. Bit by bit they show themselves. But were these also God's desires? To recognise, to name and know. To communicate. To play some cosmic language game with us. God's word play. To show and tell and communicate, to communicate.

Weakness of the all-powerful God.

The word became flesh. And the word became, wordless, flesh. A baby with no words. And the voice of the Maker became a hungry voice, a cry for food, a cry for milk. The voice that made gravity cried out for fear of falling. The voice that made women, cries for a woman's breast, and screams with disappointment when it is denied.

Crying of the invulnerable God.

There are no words yet, only the cry of flesh. No way of telling, only the depth of need. If only this is God, this word-made-flesh, made flesh that looks, and feels, and acts like flesh, then now God is a small thing, is a baby, is a baby that can be dropped or hurt or left unfed left unchanged, left wet and smelly or be child abused. If this is God with no words, and if this wordless God is God, then God is flesh like our flesh, bones like our bones, needs to be taught...to speak.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Taking a Stance for Hope (2015)

Gone are the days when we could think of ourselves, our teams and our organisations in splendid isolation. We now discover, abruptly at times, that everything is interconnected, everything is interdependent.

We see impacts of global markets on domestic markets and vice versa. We see impacts of national and international policy on local people. We see sudden, unexpected changes that come out of nowhere, traceable only in retrospect, that dramatically shape our lives and work.

In the third sector where I've spent most of my professional life, we used to think of, say, human rights, international development and environmental issues as completely separate. We now see them as integrally-linked.

Make a change in one area and it impacts on people and communities in another area - or in another part of the world. We can't always see the connections but we can certainly feel them. This makes the world more complex, less predictable, less certain.

A pervasive atmosphere of complexity and uncertainty can evoke personal, social, economic and political anxiety. Leaders and ideologies are emerging across the globe that offer simplistic solutions, often at the extremes, that create a comforting illusion.

They may help us sleep more peacefully, live more purposefully. Yet they ignore, dismiss or suppress aspects of reality that don't fit their simple narrative. To break free from this, we must learn to surface and live with uncomfortable truths.

Light in Darkness

So we find ourselves facing an existential crisis, created and fuelled in part by a perfect storm of influences. These include: spread of Islamic extremism, growth in right/left wing nationalism, intolerant illiberal liberalism, gross economic inequality, unprecedented global awareness via the internet, powerful social media, more failed states, huge displacement of people, alarming climate change.

It can feel perplexing, confusing, debilitating. How to take a stance in the midst of all this?

A stark example: witness the rhetoric in the UK and other Western nations this year in the face of unplanned, large-scale migration into Europe. Social media is filled with heated debate. 'They're all helpless refugees – rescue them!' vs 'They're all terrorist sympathisers – reject them!'

It poses an either-or, black-white choice. To say, 'It's complicated. It calls for a sophisticated response' sounds like a cop out, a refusal to take sides, a stance devoid of passion, a betrayal of a cause.

Adrian Spurrell, my professional mentor, has been a persistent voice of challenge and support this year. 'We can be driven by fear or by hope. Choose hope.' It reminds me of hope in the Christian gospel too – a faith I experience as real – when we affirm the birth of Jesus Christ.

It's a mysterious faith that holds onto hope, is held onto by hope, often in the midst of hopelessness. May we know peace and hope this Christmas time and the courage to stand in 2016.

Wishing you Peace (2014)

Religious faith has had pretty bad press this year, especially in light of such violent extremes in places like Iraq and Syria. It's hardly surprising that so many people look on with bemusement or disdain whenever issues of faith crop up in conversation.

To be honest, I often carry such feelings too. I saw one person comment on Facebook this week, "Why don't religious extremists practice extreme peace?" It's a very good question.

Yet in spite of all this, perhaps at times because of it, I for one am grateful to God for sending Jesus Christ into this world. Jesus brought a message and a lifestyle that spoke loudly of an extreme peace, an extreme love, that are well beyond any human-religious system or rational ability to comprehend.

As we watch the news this Christmas with all its reports of violence and pain, I wish you the peace and hope of God, of Jesus.

Christmas Message (2013)

It's Christmas Day and I could have better used the title Christmas mess-edge for this short piece. The story of Jesus Christ isn't just a sweet and sentimental account of a baby boy born in Bethlehem 2000+ years ago.

Light in Darkness

If it's true, it's about God entering the very real messiness of our lives and world and offering the potential to transform them into something completely new. Something beyond our wildest dreams, hopes or expectations. Something that stretches and transcends the boundaries of all human existence and experience.

I've known something about this notion of stretching boundaries over this past year, about extending the edges of my own experience. I bought a new bike in the spring, challenged myself to cycle over 1000 miles in 6 months and over 50 miles in a single ride.

I had never done anything like that before and yet I did it. I also challenged myself to swim 1 mile 3 times in the same week. And I did it. It felt like I had crossed over an important physical and psychological line, achieving things that had previously felt impossible for me.

I wrote and had published my first article with the British Association for Counselling and Psychology (BACP). I'd written lots of articles for different publications before but this felt like the next step up in a professional field that sits close to my heart. The editor of Coaching Today invited me to write on spirituality and I jumped at the chance.

To top it off, I did my first ever series of radio interviews on spirituality too. It was a great opportunity and a novel experience so sit in a recording studio and to share my beliefs openly on air.

And if that was the end of the story, there would be no need for a Jesus, at least for me. But it's far from the end. I've struggled and failed on so many fronts. Sometimes, I haven't even struggled when I have known I should.

Light in Darkness

I've known deeply and personally what Francis Spufford aptly calls the universal 'human propensity to f* things up' (Unapologetic, 2013). At times, I've failed in relationships, made mistakes at work, fallen short of my own standards, spoken when I should have kept quiet and kept quiet when I should have spoken.

What's more, one of my closest friends has fought courageously with terminal illness. I've felt hopeful and helpless, trying to offer support where I could yet knowing I can't make it OK. I've yearned to take the anxiety away but known that I can't.

I've watched Syria in the news, the damage that human beings are able to inflict on each others' lives, on whole countries and regions. I've felt impotent and confused. Not all the time, but enough to know that redeeming the world is something I can take part in yet, ultimately, lies well beyond me.

And so as I reflect on Christmas, I know what it is to be an aspiring yet fragile human being. I've felt exciting moments on the edge of success and have known what it is to screw up and need forgiveness. I have felt the amazing love of others, often undeserved yet tangible all the same.

At that first nativity, I believe God himself entered the messy complexity of our lives and world with the most profound message of love and hope possible. Not just in words but in a life well-lived and a promise of presence and eternal life. Merry Christ-mas!

Christmas at Work (2012)

Christmas time. A special time to enjoy family, friends and festivities. For many of us, it's a time off work, chance to relax, eat, drink and party. There is, however, a deeper meaning to the event, a meaning embedded in its very name: Christ-mas. For Christians, it represents a celebration of a unique and critical moment in history, the birth of Jesus Christ. This distant event has important implications for my work in leadership, OD, coaching and training.

The idea of God as a human child should shock, confuse and amaze us. After all, if God exists and if he really is everything the Bible says he is, e.g. all powerful, all knowing, an invisible being, it makes no sense to imagine all those qualities in a vulnerable, dependent, human baby. The arrival of Jesus, the transcendent become immanent, is a profoundly paradoxical event. Little wonder so many people today find it difficult to imagine, understand or believe.

I find it stimulating and humbling to reflect on this. It calls me to ask serious questions of myself, my life and my work. Whatever I'm doing, whatever role I'm playing, my work is essentially about people, developing people, releasing potential, building a better organisation, a better world. So I will share five short thoughts and meditations this Christmas Kairos evokes for me.

1. God as human. The appearance of God in human form (Gestalt) reminds me of the notion of contact in Gestalt psychology, a deep sense of presence and connection with people. It's about intimacy, empathy, touch, being-with in the here and now. In my work, I sometimes become so focused on the task that I can lose touch with myself, with others, with God. Incarnation is about coming close. How can I develop and sustain a better quality of contact?

Light in Darkness

2. God as child. The Christ child reveals God at his most vulnerable, a willingness to take risks and to depend on others. It reminds me of notions of attachment in psychodynamic psychology. It sounds inconceivable to imagine God placing his life, his wellbeing, in human hands. Yet it challenges notions of arrogant, egotistical, macho leadership. It models humility, trust, a working with others to achieve a purpose. How can I become more humble and inclusive?

3. God as love. In becoming human, God enters human experience. Jesus' loving, empathetic way of relating to people reminds me of notions of relationship, positive regard and authenticity in humanistic and person-centred psychology. He balances 'grace' with 'truth' in a way that I find very difficult. He demonstrates altruistic self-sacrifice, critical friendship and tough love. How can I be better and more consistent at putting others' best interests first?

4. God as truth. The arrival of God in human history in such a dramatic, physical way challenges previous notions of God and of humanity. God challenges all presuppositions, cultural perspectives and traditions. This reminds me of addressing limiting beliefs in cognitive psychology, fixed Gestalts in Gestalt psychology and personal-social constructs in social constructionism. How can I work with others to explore and create fresh possibilities, fresh paradigms?

5. God as saviour. The Bible depicts Jesus Christ entering the world to save a humanity that is lost. This notion of lost-ness reminds me of 'angst' in existential and psychodynamic psychology, a deep feeling of alienation from oneself and others and from any sense of ultimate meaning and purpose. It's as if Jesus resolves our alienation from God and the world to bring new hope. How can I ensure my work brings fresh meaning and hope to others?

Discovering Our True Selves (2011)

I was reading Richard Rohr's *Preparing for Christmas*, a short book of advent meditations, when I came across this extract which I decided to quote in full (...with a few tweaks).

“One of the major problems in the spiritual life is our attachment to our own self-image, either positively or negatively created. We have to begin with some kind of identity but the trouble is that we confuse this idea of ourselves with who we actually are in God. Ideas about things are not the things in themselves. We all have to start by forming a self-image but the problem is our attachment to it, our need to promote it and protect it and have others like it. What a trap!

This is what the Spirit has to strip away from us so that we can find our true identity in God's image of us rather than in our image of ourselves, which is always changing anyway. Who we are in God is a much more enduring and solid foundation. As Christians, God always sees his son Jesus in us, and he cannot not love him! This new identity, an image created through God and our relationship to him, is a solid and enduring self-image, no up and down anymore.

We get stuck if our self-image is based on mere social or psychological information rather than theological truth. The gospel promises us that we are objectively and inherently children of God. This is not psychological worthiness, an attempt to feel good about ourselves. It is ontological, metaphysical and substantial and cannot be gained or lost. When this God given image becomes our self-image, the gospel becomes very good news indeed.

Which of your self-images, positive or negative, get in the way of your relationship with God?”

Hope Beyond Despair (2004)

Christmas is the story of God's most intimate encounter with humanity, revealing through a child our full weakness and potential. The tsunami that ended 2004 was a brutal reminder of human frailty, the overwhelming power of the wave matched only by the scale of international generosity and concern. Compassion in action overcomes despair. Belief, hope and love fulfil our human destiny.

God's Christmas Message (2003)

Christmas Day 2003 was dominated by 2 entertaining media events. The dramatic disappearance of Beagle 2 was matched only by World Idol, the culmination of a TV-pop phenomenon throughout the USA and Europe. Reaching for the stars was a common theme, a celebration of human achievement in the pursuit of new challenge, inspiration and life.

Celebration of the Christ child, Saviour of the World, was oddly conspicuous by its absence. Paradoxically, tragic events unfolding in Iran bore far closer resemblance to the true Christmas story. Images of people dragging loved ones from the chaos and destruction of earthquake ruins were stark reminders of the frailty of life and critical need for rescue. God's own Christmas message was enacted by those who entered the stage and endured personal sacrifice to bring hope to the lost.

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