

The Elvis Presley Christmas album, now available on cassette as well as 8-track, does not include what is arguably his finest Christmas carol...the 1969 Mac Davis tune "In the Ghetto."

This haunting ballad opens, like Luke's gospel, with a humble birth:

*On a cold and gray Chicago morn a poor little baby child is born in the ghetto
And his mama cries
Cause if there's one thing that she don't need it's another hungry mouth to feed
in the ghetto.*

The song traces a circle of cyclical poverty, the systemic trap in which a young man spins from birth to hunger to crime to punishment, and his mama cries.

The song moves, like Luke's gospel, from birth to early death, from cradle to cross:

*A crowd gathers round an angry young man face down in the street with a gun in his
hand in the ghetto.
And ... her young man dies.*

The way this scene plays itself out in the gospels and in the Christian tradition which they inspire, the young man Jesus, the criminal Christ, hangs among a gawking crowd on a cross, *and his mama cries.*

Luke anticipates this even now, even at birth...when Mary presents the newborn Jesus in the temple, wise old Simeon warns her that *a sword will pierce [her] own soul, too.*

Every one of the gospel writers, whether they tell directly of Jesus' birth or not, opens with the shadow of Good Friday stretching somewhere across the sunlight of Christmas.

This is why, in the early church, Christmas carried with it a kind of sadness, a hushed and melancholy wonder that a God so wonderful would be so emptied as to take on mortal humanity and with it, the cruel, fatal fate of this fickle and frightful world.

For good or ill and maybe both, we have largely lost this shadow in our day, preferring the large, open hands of Santa Claus to the tight, clutched fists of Herod and Pontius Pilate.

We easily fail to feel the harsh sting of the story...the terrified teenage mother, the questioning surrogate father, the stench and stick of the stable straw, the reputation of shepherds who sleep in the fields with their flocks, and the imperial system that bullies them all around the Christmas stage.

Things do not bode well for this marginalized infant, this poor little baby child born in the grotto. Matthew's telling of Christmas quickly turns gory, as threatened king Herod hunts for the child and slaughters all the babies of Bethlehem, looking to murder the one who is named "the king of the Jews," not only by the magi but also by the magistrate who writes the epitaph on his cross.

Why then, with such a dark and ominous shadow of death across this birth, do we sing *Joy to the World?*

Blame the angels.

It is heaven, not earth, that looks upon this scene and proclaims it *good news of great joy.*

What looks to us like a pregnant teenager giving birth in poverty and peril turns out somehow to be the world's best hope.

Heaven sings a much different song to a scared and violent world: *peace to earth.*

Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king.

Heaven identifies what we cannot, a hope we cannot see because it is hidden inside our own vulnerable skin, hidden in a stable, on the outskirts of town, in the squalor and scandal of a poor little baby child born to an unwed mama who both sings and cries.

Perhaps that is why Christians revere Mary so, queen of heaven and teenage mother of earth.

She sings, she ponders, she listens, she weeps, and finally, in a room with her son's surviving disciples, she prays and waits for the same Holy Spirit that once overshadowed her to kindle in them all a Pentecost fire that will spark the whole world.

Mary will know both the sorrow and the joy, the tragedy and the triumph of her son's life, the taste of both heaven and earth in her stomach and in her story.

She will encounter firsthand in her own experience what the author of Colossians would later recognize and celebrate: that in her son *all things hold together...and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace... through the blood of his cross.*

Among the *all things* that he will reconcile are earth and heaven themselves.

The good news of peace that heaven sings to earth on this night will be echoed back on Palm Sunday, when Jesus, all grown up, rides his donkey into the city to die.

On that morning, as heaven breathlessly watches the scary scene unfold, *the whole multitude of the disciples* on the ground sings good news to the terrified sky: *Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!*

All things are reconciled in this poor little baby child:

earth and heaven,
power and poverty,
pain and promise,
sadness and joy,
worry and wonder,
terror and hope.

Angels sing, shepherds dance, and his mama cries...and all of them have something wise to teach us, something true to tell.

Look at the nativity scene and notice the diversity: animals and angels, shepherds and kings, pricy presents and poor parents, starlight and straw, heaven and earth, *all things together.*

It is enough to stab the heart and heal it too.

Behind the shadow across Christmas is an Easter light that will not be extinguished.

This light, the gospel writer John sings, shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

It shines even in the stable, in the shadow, in the ghetto, and it will shine even at Golgotha, where a crowd gathers round a dying young man face up on the cross with the nails in his hand...and his mama cries.

This light shines even through the tears and the terrors of our tragic life, and so above the king's mournful voice of this world's truth sings the multitude of heaven's choir:

Do not be afraid.

Peace on earth.

Glory to God, and Joy to the world.