

1. Luke 2:1-7

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

2. Luke 2:8-20

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

3. *POEM FOR CHRISTMAS EVE - Godfrey Rust, 1988

This is a love story, if you can accept it,
that God the father looked down at his world
and the world was like a sleeping, fitful child
and the child was spoiled.

Its nations called each other names
and roamed earth's playground like a gang of boys
who choose sides, always brandishing
their terrifying toys.

The world thought it was fatherless and hunted
restlessly for some new sign or token
as if Christmas had come and gone, its presents
all unwrapped, already broken,

and the father God looked at his child
and counted the cost of love's freedom: but he had a plan,
to step from out of time and into history
and become a man.

With eternity to find the spot he chose
with the greatest care. One night a workman stood
in a barn with a group of animals
watching the birth of God

while out on the hills some shepherds were astonished
as a skyful of angels appeared then disappeared,
and a few astrologers saw a change in the stars
they'd studied for years

and almost everyone else knew nothing.
Caesar turned and settled in his luxurious bed
while in Bethlehem the power and the glory
bawled for milk in a shed.

It was quite an entrance. The only Son of God
homeless, illegitimate, a refugee,
owning nothing but the world that he grew up in
had made himself quite empty,

his birth itself a kind of dying where
he abdicated power, omniscience,
was needy, hated and misunderstood
and after the last violence

he was laid in the womb of a grave for the birth
which Bethlehem merely anticipated
and for which the blind, brave, barricaded
spoiled world waited—

no sage or rustic came with gifts,
only some women, hopelessly brave,
brought spices in the dark of morning
to an empty grave.

Two deaths, two births, the manger and the cross:
the first brought hope, the second brought salvation.
Out of his poverty this child has made us rich
beyond imagination,

and on a winter evening in a suburban home
a father looks down at his sleeping child.
The room is warm and brightly lit. Outside
the night is darkly wild,

and the child that sleeps knows well that she is loved,
and in her bones knows how to disobey,
and she will learn that none is innocent,
that death takes all away,

and the father looking at her peaceful face
feels his own helplessness and counts the cost
of the love between them in a spoiled world
where all must end in loss

but for Bethlehem and Calvary. These births
have brought an end to death,
and the child in the manger is the Lord
we feed on in our hearts by faith

now and forever. Child, if you would wake
on this Christmas Eve outside you'd find
a star, not a streetlamp. Listen, you can hear
the angels' message in the wind.

4. *KEEPING CHRISTMAS – Henry van Dyke (1852-1933)

It is a good thing to observe Christmas day. The mere marking of times and seasons, when men agree to stop work and make merry together, is a wise and wholesome custom. It helps one to feel the supremacy of the common life over the individual life. It reminds a man to set his own little watch, now and then, by the great clock of humanity which runs on sun time.

But there is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day, and that is, keeping Christmas.

Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people, and to remember what other people have done for you; to ignore what the world owes you, and to think what you owe the world; to put your rights in the background, and your duties in the middle distance, and your chances to do a little more than your duty in the foreground; to see that your fellow-men are just as real as you are, and try to look behind their faces to their hearts, hungry for joy; to own that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness--are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and the desires of little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; to try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you; to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you; to make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open--are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world--stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death--and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal Love? Then you can keep Christmas.

And if you keep it for a day, why not always?

But you can never keep it alone.

5. A BALLAD OF CRISTMAS EVE – Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918)

There was a gentle hostler
(And blessed be his name!)
He opened up the stable
The night Our Lady came.
Our Lady and St. Joseph,
He gave them food and bed,
And Jesus Christ has given him
A glory round his head.

*So let the gate swing open
However poor the yard,
Lest weary People visit you
And find their Passage barred.
Unlatch the door at midnight
And let your lantern's glow
Shine out to guide the traveler's feet
To you across the snow.*

There was a courteous hostler
(He is in Heaven to-night)
He held Our Lady's bridle
And helped her to alight.
He spread clean straw before her
Whereon she might lie down,
And Jesus Christ has given him
An everlasting crown.

*Unlock the door this evening
And let your gate swing wide,
Let all who ask for shelter
Come speedily inside.
What if your yard be narrow?
What if your house be small?
There is a Guest is coming
Will glorify it all.*

There was a joyous hostler
Who knelt on Christmas morn
Beside the radiant manger
Wherein his Lord was born.
His heart was full of laughter,
His soul was full of bliss

When Jesus, on His Mother's lap,
Gave him His hand to kiss.

*Unbar your heart this evening
And keep no stranger out,
Take from your soul's great portal
The barrier of doubt.
To humble folk and weary
Give hearty welcoming,
Your breast shall be to-morrow
The cradle of a King.*

6. Christmas Poem by Mary Oliver:

Says a country legend told every year:
Go to the barn on Christmas Eve and see
what the creatures do as that long night tips over.
Down on their knees they will go, the fire
of an old memory whistling through their minds!

I went. Wrapped to my eyes against the cold
I creaked back the barn door and peered in.
From town the church bells spilled their midnight music,
And the beasts listened—yet they lay in their stalls like stone.

Oh the heretics!
Not to remember Bethlehem,
or the star as bright as the sun,
or the child born on a bed of straw!
To know only of the dissolving Now!

Still they drowsed on—
Citizens of the pure, the physical world,
They loomed in the dark: powerful
of body, peaceful of mind,
innocent of history.

*Brothers! I whispered. It is Christmas!
And you are no heretics, but a miracle,
immaculate still as when you were thundered forth
on the morning of creation!*

As for Bethlehem, that blazing star
still sailed the dark, but only looked for me.
Caught in its light, listening again to its story,
I curled against some sleepy beast, who nuzzled
my hair as though I were a child, and warmed me
the best it could all night.

7. *Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem (for 3 readers)

By Dr. Maya Angelou

Reader One:

Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Flood waters await us in our avenues.

Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche
Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and grey and threatening.

We question ourselves.
What have we done to so affront nature?
We worry God.
Are you there? Are you there really?
Does the covenant you made with us still hold?

Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship.

It is the Glad Season.
Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps quietly in the corner.
Flood waters recede into memory.

Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground.

Reader Two:

Hope is born again in the faces of children
It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets.
Hope spreads around the earth. Brightening all things,
Even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.
We hear a sweetness.
The word is Peace.
It is loud now. It is louder.
Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence.
It is what we have hungered for.
Not just the absence of war. But, true Peace.
A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.
Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.
We beckon this good season to wait a while with us.
We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and Muslim, say come.
Peace.
Come and fill us and our world with your majesty.
We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian,
Implore you, to stay a while with us.
So we may learn by your shimmering light
How to look beyond complexion and see community.

Reader Three:

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.

On this platform of peace, we can create a language
To translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other.

At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ
Into the great religions of the world.
We jubilate the precious advent of trust.

We shout with glorious tongues at the coming of hope.
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices
To celebrate the promise of Peace.

We, Angels and Mortal's, Believers and Non-Believers,
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.
Peace. We look at our world and speak the word aloud.
Peace. We look at each other, then into ourselves
And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation.

Peace, My Brother.
Peace, My Sister.
Peace, My Soul.