

This past summer, Netflix introduced the world to the upside-down - a world remarkably like our own, yet unsettlingly different. Not to be outdone, boutique stores like Nordstrom began carrying upside down Christmas trees, with selling features like: superior highlighting of ornaments and more room for presents; and, for all you traditional non-traditionalists, it is available in green, but featured prominently in nearly every website in dazzling white for peak decorative contrast. Yes, it seems, the free market has finally gotten Christmas right.

Because if we're honest, and we check out piety for just a minute, that's a tree that highlights what Christmas really means to us. It's simple, utilitarian and pristine all at the same time. And it's a steal at only \$699.95.

How sad is it that we've been getting Christmas wrong all these years. Year after year lighting candles to remind us that light in coming into the world, working around circles that have no beginning and no end, decorating evergreens, those ancient symbols of eternal life, that draw our eyes upward. All until someone flipped the script and showed us what this holiday could really be about.

Christmas is an upside down holiday. It's a celebration of God in all his infinity stepping into a particular place and time, immortal and unchanging wrapped in flesh and bone; the king of kings and the Lord of Lords born in a feed trough, wrapped in strips of cloth. Christmas is a story that asks us to reconsider what we know and revisit what we take for granted, because in it, we find ourselves inverted and invited to consider the world in new and unsettling ways.

To paraphrase the famous theologian, Karl Barth, we don't interpret the Christmas story. The Christmas story interprets us.

It turns our politics upside down

The way Luke tells the story, Jesus is born in the middle of a mass migration. The Roman Empire wants to count its people, and so everyone has to return to their hometown to register. Skeptics are quick to look at this story and scoff. After all, the Romans were particularly good at record keeping, and of all the census data that they kept, not once did they use the method Luke describes here. Notwithstanding that it's an incredibly inefficient way to conduct a census. And I want to grant that. But only because I think Luke would as well. Luke, who lived during the Roman Empire and who wrote to people during the Roman Empire, surely would have known how a census worked. Luke is instead trying to make a bigger point. He hears the words of Isaiah echoing through the Christmas story. And he shall be called the prince of peace, and the government will be upon his shoulders. For Luke, this is first and foremost a political story. Politics, according to the world's rules is simple: might makes right – that is, whoever has the most power, makes the rules, whether that's financial power, military power, or populous power. That's why politics is notoriously inconsistent. What was allowable for a politician once is no longer acceptable. But the politics of Jesus turn the whole conversation upside down. Born

is the king who says “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

This is a political story. Luke paints a picture where the most powerful political machine that has ever existed is reduced to a mere tool that fulfills an ancient prophecy and sets the stage for Isaiah’s Caesar of Caesars to be born. Luke makes a point of telling us who was on which throne specifically so that he can highlight the one at whose throne Quirinius and Augustus will bow.

And as we, as readers begin to feel the upending happening, Luke masterfully sidesteps and **turns our expectations upside down.**

There is no welcome for this baby, no shower, and the angels that will sing do so far outside of the city where shepherds would be tending their sheep. Some translations of this story substitute the word Guesthouse for inn, assuming Joseph would have had family in his ancestral town, Middle Eastern hospitality being what it is. How odd, how upside down that the God who steps into history does so without even waking up the neighbors.

The world kept sleeping. People, not that different from you and I kept right on sleeping through the birth of the king. If Luke wants to highlight those in power with his first upending, his second upending is aimed squarely at you and me. In the utter lack of fanfare, the unremarkable ending of the birth of God incarnate, Luke wants us to see ourselves safe and warm in our beds while the Ancient of Days breaks into our present, and ask the inevitable question: where might God be breaking through today? In Luke’s day, it was the question of including gentiles in the church, but the question still lingers: if God can show up unannounced once, and be missed by nearly everyone once, who’s to say he won’t do it again?

What might we miss while we are sleeping?

And all of this turns our religion upside down

Because all of a sudden, our celebration of Christmas becomes a little less exuberant, and a little more humbling; a little less ritualistic, and a little more mysterious; a little less normal and a little more upside down. Christmas is a subversive holiday. It breaks through in the strangest of places. Turn on the radio on your drive home tonight, and there’s a better than not chance that you’re going to hear a hymn playing on radio station that’s probably not known for playing hymns. Christmas has power to change our world, if only for a night, because in our world that’s so used to tuning out religion, Christmas tells a different story. Religions all have one thing in common: whether it is the five pillars of Islam, the eightfold path of Buddhism, the 613 mitzvot of Judaism or a hundred other examples, religion always teaches “live this way, and you

can get to God. Do these things, and you can be holy". Christianity alone says otherwise. Christianity says God became flesh and moved into our neighbourhood. The central message of Christianity is this: We don't get to God; God gets to us.

Christianity is, at its core, a religious revolution: a challenge to embrace the politics of Jesus in a world that won't and constantly be on the lookout for the unexpected ways and places that God might be breaking into our world still tonight.