

John, Jesus, and just you and me?

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The Jewish historian, Josephus, writing in the late first century, is our most reliable source of information about what was going on at the time of Jesus and John the Baptist and backs up what our gospels tell us. He lists Jesus and John among a number of figures who led movements for change since the Roman invasion in 63 BCE. Poverty, sometimes extreme, hunger, exploitation by Rome's appointees, Herod and his sons, and deep spiritual yearning produced a cry for change, for God's reign to replace Rome's reign. Some advocated ramping up their piety by meticulous obedience to biblical commands. Some withdrew to the Dead Sea shores to stoke up their levels of holiness and networked with outposts across Judea of the like-minded. Some took up arms, engaging in terrorist attacks on strategic posts. Most embraced the hope that God would send a messiah, a king like David, to overthrow the Romans and establish peace, often pictured as a great feast for the faithful. Pilate lumped Jesus together with them, crucifying him as a would-be liberator messiah between two militants and negotiating a swap for another, Barabbas. John's way was to call people to be plunged into the water of God's goodness and let it change them. Jesus' way was to teach his followers to pray for God's reign ("Your kingdom come!") but also to let God's goodness flow out to all in the here and now. They all cried out for change and promised the good news that it would come. That's the context of the Christmas story.

But John and Sarah Citizen don't think they need that good news. "Blessed are you poor" – they're not poor. "Bless are you who hunger" – they're not hungry. "Come to the feast" – their daily meals are much richer, their wine better. So all they can do is take Christmas as an occasion to party, a bit of Santa'ed up fun. Yet there are millions of poor and hungry in our world. Can't we embrace the good news for them? And our failure to do so exposes a deep inner poverty of spirit, desperately needing the change which the good news brings. So plunge with John into the water of God's goodness, feed on the bread and wine of God's generosity in Jesus, and let yourself become good news, part of the Christmas gift, to our world. If we're not good news for the poor, we're not good news.