



# **The Niños Christmas Book *for* 2019**

## **Can't Think of Anything**

by Joseph Bentz

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by Lynn Maudlin

# CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING

By Joseph Bentz

The 2019 Ninos Christmas Book  
Is being edited by Lynn.  
So I'd better start writing  
If I want to get in.

We have to name a Nino,  
So how about "By Joseph Bentz"?  
Nothing else I come up with  
Seems to make any sense.

I'm sure something meaningful  
Will be submitted by Tom.  
So I'd better think of something  
Because I don't want to bomb.

I could submit a nice painting  
In the style of Danielle,  
But I'm sure if I tried it  
It would turn out like—well,

I could work up a poster  
Or a meme, or a flyer,  
But would that meet the approval  
Of our host, Diana Glycer?

A haiku or limerick  
Might seem a little scant  
And it might not get the blessing  
Of Dave and Lynn Mildbrandt.

I could plagiarize from the internet,  
But cheating will not save us,  
And I don't want to get caught  
By Tim or Teresa Davis.

I could hide names in plain sight  
So readers wouldn't be aware,  
But doing something so tricky  
Is a thought I can't Bear.



Should I write a short story  
About Monica or Elena?  
Or maybe an epic poem  
Starring Susan or Kayla?

Can I somehow craft a tale  
About Lois, John, or Paul?  
There are so many Ninos  
I can't mention them all!

How can I include Melissa and Alene and Adam  
And still fit in Barbara, Laura and Liz?  
It's so hard to get them all in.  
I don't know what to do. Gee whiz!

Maybe I'll just go for the food  
And eat to my delight.  
'Cause baby, by the time Christmas gets here  
I'm just too tired to write.



# The Case of the Missing Father Christmas Pages

By Tom Allbaugh

It was that time of year again, the time when I increasingly felt uncomfortable in all the garish decorations that suddenly appeared around me, unlike the agent who'd driven me in. He seemed right at home at the agency around the candy canes, the sleigh bells ringing, and the many lights draped across the windows and the awnings outside, most of it being covered by falling snow. Walking in, I'd noticed it was fake snow coming down out of the darkness and through the street lights and the Christmas lights. But it had its effect, especially with the piped in Christmas music filling the room. The agency had made sure that snow was falling, seemed to have budgeted for it, and from where the agent had me sitting, I was getting an especially heavy dose of it. I was even feeling a chill. But I knew to keep my cool in the room where the green and red lights had the effect of making me think I was in a different country. From where I sat, I knew I had better not complain. I knew that any whining about the commercial side of Christmas would only bring further suspicion. So I nursed my Styrofoam cup of coffee, used it for warmth if not taste, before the agent who had brought me in came back out from the office with the name plate "S. Nick." He was a clean shaven, slender man in a dark suit coat, and he held a file, which he slapped down on the table in front of me.

"I'm going to cut to the chase," S. Nick—if that was his name—said. "I assume you've seen this." He removed several photocopied sheets of paper from the folder and sorted them next to each other in front of me. It was a copy of a children's book.

I looked at him. This was cutting to the chase? "Is this a joke?" I said. "Who hasn't seen *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*?"

S. Nick reached over and pointed to the second page.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Look closely."

I started to read. It was the battle scene, where they fight the White Witch. In this scene the children were to be using their weapons given to them by Father Christmas. The thing is, they weren't. They didn't have their gifts.

"Anything amiss?" he asked.

I looked up at him. "You tell me."

"They don't have weapons. They don't have them because in this version, they haven't met Father Christmas."

The agent put another sheet of paper in front of me, an email sent to a long list of names. In the subject line were the words "Ninos Final Reminders for November 12." It had stuff about food themes. This time the theme was Marching Food. It didn't sound promising.

I said, "It's a prayer group I sometimes attend."

"Sometimes?"

"Yeah. Sometimes. Usually not on Sundays."

He folded his arms. "You've heard that there is a war on Christmas."

Yes, I had heard. With these agencies springing up all over, who hadn't? I looked out at the fake snow and rubbed my face. I hadn't shaved in three days and realized I must look

desperate. I asked, "What does Father Christmas being deleted from a Narnia Chronicle have to do with this prayer group?"

He went and poured himself coffee. I could have warned him against doing that. He turned back to me and swirled it a little in his store bought mug which read, "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." "This Ninos list was useful," he said. "Helped us run in the usual suspects. At first, we started with Ninos who had skipped town. Thought they might offer us something. For example, the name Laura Simmons mean anything to you?"

Yeah, I had heard of her. "What about her?"

"We learned she wrote about Dorothy Sayers. How promising. But she assured us Sayers was not an Inkling."

What did Sayers not being an Inkling have to do with the price of Eggnog in December?

"I admit we were stumped," he said. "But as we ran through this list of the usual suspects, we learned that a C.S. Lewis scholar was in your midst. In fact—"

"So?"

"She's the founder. And she doesn't talk much about *The Chronicles of Narnia*."

My confusion must have been obvious, because S. Nick said, "So you have a war on Christmas. And suddenly Father Christmas is removed from *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*." He leaned in a little too close and I could smell his peppermint breath. "The one C.S. Lewis book that portrays a land where it is always winter but never Christmas." He raised his hand and pointed at the ceiling. "And suddenly, all old copies of the book with Father Christmas have disappeared."

He studied me. When I didn't respond, he said, "I got all day. Let me know when you start to feel like talking."

"Surely an editorial change of that magnitude could only be done by someone with a vast influence. Ninos is just a local prayer group. I mean—"

"Exactly." He sat down. "You might want to start praying now." He swirled his coffee.

I glanced at the reindeer picture on the wall, realized the music was coming from it.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. It started with the observation that this book had too much noisy stuff going on in it. Too many different mythologies."

"And that was your observation?"

I shook my head. "It was Diana Glycer's. But that doesn't mean that she would remove Father Christmas. That would take a vast network."

"These things usually start out innocently enough. Usually as scholarship. But that can lead to founding journals, manifestos, and then?" He stared at me. "Tell me. She often has you pray for her talks? In England? In different parts of this country?"

"Yeah, but she's talking about collaboration."

"Collaboration indeed. Collaboration on a global scale." He pointed to the city of publication in one of the photo copied sheets in front of me. "That one of her cities?"

I read it. I reddened.

"Would it mean anything to you if I told you that she has left the country?"

"But I saw her just last week."

He took the papers and the folder back. "Good. That helps us a lot, to know that you saw her last week. You're one lucky Nino. I've been told to let you go. She hasn't turned up anywhere. But if you should hear from her, we want you to call us."

And that was it. I had admitted to guilt somehow, and they had me. No more questioning.

Suddenly, I was out in the cold again, or the fake cold, agreeing to help the agency. I walked to the bus stop. Here, there was no indication that a war was going on. But I knew that by the time I reached my own neighborhood, the lights would be fewer and going out. Yet I still felt mixed about the new government agency to protect Christmas. I felt that way about everything.

I wasn't sure I could warn the Lewis scholar to stay away. I wasn't sure if I should leave the country myself. But for a few moments, as the bus I rode reached the edge of my own neighborhood, I was glad that I was not a scholar of anything.





# *the Holy Ghost over the bent/World broods*

Diana Glycer

## **Saturday. 8:55pm. November 23. Glendora.**

Lord Jesus, meet us where we are. Help us to honor you. Bless the work of our hands. Do more than we know how to ask or think. Amen

## **Tuesday. 2:14 p.m. December 10. Pasadena.**

Danielle put down her pencil and sighed. The sketch expressed the seriousness she saw in his face, but it failed to capture his intelligence and compassion. "So much better than the last few attempts," she admitted. She stretched her tired shoulder and sighed once more.

The morning had crawled by. Some coffee, a few messages, a little tidying around the house before she realized that she was procrastinating on the drawings she was preparing for the new exhibit. A simple series, she thought. Won't take much time at all. But now she was not so sure.

## **Tuesday. 2:14 p.m. December 10. LaVerne.**

Joe typed another sentence then shook his head in frustration. "No. No, no, no. That's still not right." The new chapter just kept meandering all over the place. "I've known this story since I first heard it in Sunday school," he muttered. "Why can't I capture it now? Why does it feel like it's out of focus and out of reach?" He knew there was a way to make the story come alive. There had to be. But he just couldn't figure out what it was.

## **Tuesday. 2:14 p.m. December 10. Glendora.**

Diana chewed on a fingernail. Bills. Letters. Paperwork. Reminders. Sticky notes. She wanted to revise the latest chapter of the Dante book; she wanted to read the two new resource books that had arrived fresh from Amazon that morning.. Work on something else, anything else. Even better: start something new. But what she really needed to do was take care of the accumulated pile of the mundane, the annoying. "Anything but that," she whispered. "Anything."

## **Tuesday. 2:14 p.m. December 10. LaVerne.**

Susan piled another pillow behind her on the bed. Worship had come so naturally this morning, alleluia rising with ease and such joy. Praise, singing, and prayer flooded the room. But now the clarity she had known just a few moments ago seemed to have fled. Where to begin? Which project? What page? Which section? What part? She felt the push and pull of a thousand possibilities: Rewrite section three? Work on the newsletter? Start that class

handout? Tinker with the workbook? Where to start? Where to start? So many ideas. But she couldn't make up her mind.

**Tuesday. 2:14 p.m. December 10. Escondido.**

Lynn yawned and stared at the computer screen. "If I move this box over here and recolor that background, it should fix the balance" she thought. But she stopped herself. Maybe there was a different solution; maybe this wasn't the right photo after all. Try a different one? Or play around some more with this one? She thought she had allowed more than enough time to finish the designs. But one thing interrupted, then another. "Today," she told herself. "Today, I'll work my way through. I will. I'll stick with it. I'll get it done." But even as she said the words, she couldn't quite muster the focus. For some reason, making any real progress on this project was the last thing she felt like doing. She just didn't know what to do.

**Tuesday. 2:14 p.m. December 10. Alta Loma.**

The phone rang. Then two text messages. The meeting ran 40 minutes long, and the papers needed to be graded by Wednesday. Two sets of them, in fact. Today's block of writing time was evaporating like morning mist, dissipating before his very eyes. Tom frowned, wondering if there was even any point in working on his story. "There's hardly any time left," he said. Then added, "And not much energy either."

**Tuesday. 2:15 p.m. December 10.**

As it was in creation, God's Spirit hovers, and broods. The wind blows and *ruach elohim* breathes and leads, guides, strengthens, and redeems. The Spirit creates purpose and meaning out of disorder. The Spirit fills the empty void with beauty and goodness. The Spirit turns darkness into light, night into day, the evening into a new morning, and calls into existence those things that didn't exist a moment before. Guidance. Direction. Clarity. Courage. Focus. Renewal. Peace. Hope. All because the Spirit of God—the breath of God—broods over us as it was in the beginning. And on Tuesday, as in the beginning, it was very good.

EPILOGUE 1

**Sunday. 10:30 a.m. January 11, 2015. Stillwater, Oklahoma.**

Genesis 1 begins with this: 1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep In the second half of verse 2, we read this: "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." The Hebrew behind "wind from God" is *ruach elohim*. While it might be fair to translate *ruach elohim* as "wind from God" in some settings, the context argues for a different translation: either as the "breath of God," or as "the Spirit of God." What's being described is something much more intimate or personal. Say

you're standing in a field, and the wind starts to blow, and you can feel it on your skin. Maybe it's a welcome wind, because it's a hot day and the wind helps you to cool off. But maybe it's an unwelcome wind, because the day is already cold enough, and the wind is making you feel colder. But we've all had this sort of interaction with the wind, and we don't give it much thought.

Now imagine someone is standing close enough to you that you can feel their breath on your skin. Now regardless of whether it's a good or bad thing, that someone is so close that you can feel their breath, I think we'd all agree that there's a much more intimate dynamic going on. God is so close to His creation that it can't help but feel God's breath; it can't help but react to it; it can't help but be changed by it.

And then, there's another Hebrew word in that same verse, which continues to tell us that there's more going on than meets the eye. And that word is *rachaph*. Interestingly, this Hebrew word is being used to describe what this "wind from God"—this *ruach elohim*—is actually doing. In our translation we read that this "wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Again, a fairly straightforward description. But the word *rachaph* really has the meaning of something being moved or affected, and especially with feelings of tender love; really, it means to cherish something; like, for example, in Deuteronomy 32:11, where the eagle broods over and cherishes her young, fluttering over them. In other words, like a tender mother, God's Spirit hovers, or broods over the watery chaos. And when we read passages from the Acts of the Apostles, and from the Gospel of Mark, we are then reminded that the Spirit of God also broods, and blows, and cherishes over our individual lives as well. At the baptism of Jesus, Mark describes "the Spirit" as "descending [on Jesus] like a dove." And when Paul baptizes those twelve clueless people in Ephesus, Luke writes that "the Holy Spirit came on them."

What does this tell us of the work or the function of the Holy Spirit? Well, that the Spirit of God forms the formless. That the Spirit takes simple matter and breathes life into it. That the Spirit creates purpose, order, and meaning out of chaos. That the Spirit fills the empty void with beauty and goodness. And that the Spirit turns darkness into light, night into day, the evening into a new morning, and calls into existence those things that didn't exist. That's what the Spirit did in creation, and that's what the Spirit can do in our lives.

What I hope we can all take away from all this is the fact that the same *ruach elohim* which brooded over the formless void of chaos, and which has brooded over the messy lives of God's people throughout history, also broods over our messy lives as well; looking for ways to bring purpose and meaning to our chaos; looking for ways to bring light and hope into our darkness; and affirming that, despite the chaos and darkness around us, that creation is good and lovely and something to be cherished. And all because the Spirit of God—the breath of God—broods and hovers over us all.

[Adapted from a sermon by Fr. Jim Cook]

## EPILOGUE 2

**Friday, February 23, 1877. Oxford, England.**

### God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
**And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil**  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings

*(Gerard Manley Hopkins)*

