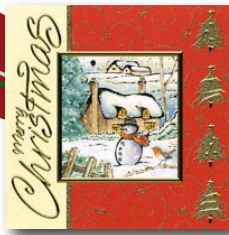


Christmas in the Mail



AND SO IT BEGINS.

SOON OUR LARGE BLACK

MAILBOX, STATIONED OUT

ON THE GRAVEL ROAD, WILL

BEGIN FILLING WITH THE

ANNUAL INFLUX OF CHRISTMAS

GREETINGS.

The idea for the modern Christmas card was dreamed up in 1843 by John Callcott Horsley. In that year he created 1,000 copies of a hand-painted card which included the drawing of a family yuletide celebration, and the greeting, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You." Thirty-two years later Louis Prang had made improvements in color lithography that enabled the German-born printer to mass-produce for sale a color Christmas card. Sales were brisk, and, as they say, the rest was history.

Today the exchange of printed Christmas greetings has become an institution. It has become one of those hardy traditions that are just assumed: one buys a car, one gets married, one buys a house, one has kids—and one keeps an official Christmas Card List, on which is noted whether or not each beloved recipient responded in kind (two strikes and you're out).

The form of the modern Christmas card has modulated into a mind-numbing panoply of shapes, sizes, iridescent colors, multi-folded, tune-included, gilded, computerized, recycle-green missives that would cause Messrs. Horsley and Prang either to rejoice out loud or blanch over what they had so naively birthed.

At some point over the decades since, Christmas cards evolved (or *devolved*, as the case may be) into less a yuletide greeting than a condensed diary of the family's previous 365 days. Perhaps what is responsible for this is the steadily rising cost of postage, or, more probable, the utter disdain modernity holds for written correspondence. As a result, we cram every-

thing remotely pertinent into one, all-encompassing message, thus relieving the correspondent of any obligation for the rest of the year. (Don't bother; I'll include it in the Christmas letter.) Whatever the reason, this narcissistic tradition, in which the recipient is regaled with details of every vacation, ailment or educational progress for every member of the family down to second and third cousins living in Lower Slobovia, has become *de rigueur* for the season.

And now comes a new low for holiday missives. Now, for the chronically stressed, there are companies who, for a fee, will happily sign and address your cards—by hand—for you. How nice.

The Holy Nucleus

There is no getting around it: from the beginning, Christmas cards were both secular and commercial. It would be futile to rise in high dudgeon over the despicable lowering of Christmas cards into crass commercialism—for that was their purpose from the outset.

But just as believers should always look beyond the ubiquitous tinsel and flash surrounding the modern Christmas, to focus on the holy nucleus from which all else in its orbit sprang, so we should always rise higher than the base genesis of the holiday card. For in it is the perfect opportunity to share the Good News contained in the day.

Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Luke 2:10-11 NKJV

Like the lowly shepherds in the rural environs of Bethlehem, we are to receive the glorious news of a Savior, then pass it along.

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

Luke 2:15-18 NKJV

Sharing the Joy

No doubt someone of your acquaintance will want to know that Uncle Albert had his gall bladder removed on May 12. Or that little Sally went on a school field trip to the Chicago Museum of Natural History in October. Or that you finally got that corner office at work.

But what has any of this to do with celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ?

The ubiquitous Christmas tree may be, for most, little more than a pretty ornament of a festive season. For children it is something under which gifts magically appear. For the believer, however, the tree can represent the life we enjoy in Christ, the gifts cradled beneath its branches can stand for the ultimate Gift cradled in the lowly stable manger.

The Christmas card—so common, so utilitarian—can be a vehicle for staying in touch with friends and family, and for keeping them all up to date with one's life over the previous year. But for the believer it can be an occasion to share the joy Christ has brought to that life, the meaning of the Son's incarnation, the sweet condescension of a gracious, loving God willing to sacrifice Himself for sinful man.

More than two thousand years ago God the Father sent a very personal, heart-felt message to us in the person of His Son. He did not send a two-page missive telling all about the goings-on in heaven over the past year. He didn't send snapshots of His last vacation. Instead, God sent Jesus. He sent a very specific, carefully Worded message: "Here is my Son. My gift to you. Right now He is just a babe, but soon He will be a man, and He will give His life that you might live. Believe what He says to you. Believe in *Him*. And be saved."

And so we must tell others.

*While shepherds kept their watching
O'er silent flocks by night,
Behold, throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light.*

*Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.*

*The shepherds feared and trembled
When, lo! above the earth
Rang out the angel chorus
That hailed our Savior's birth.*

*Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.*

*Down in a lowly manger
The humble Christ was born,
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn.*

*Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.*

*Traditional spiritual,
stanzas by John W. Work II*