

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL



Thoughts on the Incarnation

It has been said that the late, great, and profoundly eloquent nineteenth century Puritan preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, did not like Christmas.

Certainly we do not believe in the present ecclesiastical arrangement called Christmas: first, because we do not believe in the mass at all, but abhor it, whether it be said or sung in Latin or in English; and, secondly, because we find no Scriptural warrant whatever for observing any day as the birthday of the Savior; and, consequently, its observance is a superstition, because [it is] not of divine authority.

Many would not consider they had kept Christmas in a proper manner, if they did not verge on gluttony and drunkenness.

If there be any day in the year of which we may be pretty sure that it was not the day on which the Saviour was born, it is the twenty-fifth of December.

Spurgeon

It would be more accurate, however, to say that Spurgeon had mixed feelings about the holiday, for he would later say, "Though I have no respect to the religious observance of the day, yet I love it as a family institution."

Spurgeon participated in holiday festivities and celebrated Christmas Day with the children at his orphanage. He even dressed up like Santa Claus and personally distributed Christmas gifts to his orphans. But most of all, Spurgeon leveraged the holiday for the gospel. He saw Christmas as an opportunity to tell an old story about "the grandest light in history"—a Light that dawned only decades before the sun first shone on the new fort of Londonium in AD 43.

Quotations from WWW.SPURGEON.ORG

For some Christians today it works in reverse: we are at peace with the religious observances—it is the secular aspect of the holiday that strikes a discordant note in our heart and in our soul. In either case we should take our cue from this Calvinist Baptist, known as the "Prince of Preachers," who endeavored on every occasion to glean the gospel from any Christmas celebration.

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IF ONLY ONE PERSON IN THIS WORLD thinks that the human being, the person given the name “Jesus” *became*, as the result of some post-birth endowment or acquisition, the Messiah and Savior of mankind, then that is one too many. Sadly, there are many more than just one.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, (founded in 1884 by Charles Taze Russell) say that Jesus is a created being. They say that Jesus was a perfect man who *became* the Messiah at his baptism. He is the “Son” of God, because he was created by God, but he is not “God the Son.”

The Way International (founded in 1942 by Victor Paul Wierwille) claims that Jesus is not God, not co-eternal or co-equal with God. He was a sinless, perfect man who may be called the “Son” of God. They deny his preexistence; before his conception he existed only in God’s mind.

As in most articles of faith, it all depends on who and what you believe: man, or God in His word. If you believe in a man (or a woman) you can believe just about anything you like. You can believe that your salvation will be found in wearing a polka dot jumpsuit and catching a ride on a spaceship to Saturn. You can believe that the true messiah stands behind the pulpit of your church and pronounces irreducible truth by supernatural prophecy—or is that hitting a little too close to home?

You are free to believe whatever you like, but if you call yourself a Christian—a Christ-ian, follower of Christ—then you must hold to God’s word, and in that holy text Jesus Himself claims with unmistakable clarity that He existed before Bethlehem. The Jewish leaders at the time, as we find them in John’s gospel, understood perfectly what He was saying about Himself, for they immediately picked up stones to kill Him for blasphemy.

[Jesus said] “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death.” The Jews said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets also; and You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.’ Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out to be?” Jesus answered, “If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God’; and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and

he saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

John 8:51-59

“Before Abraham was born, I am.” What a perfect response. That is not awkward grammar; that is eloquent theology. And the Jews got it: Jesus of Nazareth was declaring Himself to be deity. “Before Abraham was born” is better translated “Before Abraham *became*,” and then Jesus finishes the sentence with that remarkable two-word phrase that harkens back to the burning bush, where “the angel of the LORD” appeared to Moses—a real being who was at once identified with God, yet also was sent by Him, and thus distinct from Father God; in other words, the pre-incarnate Christ. To paraphrase, Jesus was saying to the Jewish leaders, *Have I seen Abraham? Let Me tell you the truth: Before Abraham even came into being, I am already there.* To the Jews, that was outrageous blasphemy, hence the stones.

God—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit—always “is.” There has never been a time when there was not God, and more than that, God spans all time: He “is” always past, present, and future. He cannot be contained spatially or chronologically; He is never at just one place, and never at just one moment. Regardless the time or place along the span of prehistory and human history, God—with Christ—always “is.” But at one predetermined point in man’s history, the eternal Son of God willingly “became” flesh for the salvation of man.

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

Galatians 4:4-5

“The Infinite Has Become the Infant”

Spurgeon

“When God stoops down to man it must mean that man is to be lifted up to God.”

Spurgeon

THE GOOD NEWS AND IMAGERY OF CHRISTMAS do not occur only in the gospels Matthew, Luke, and John, but are woven throughout all of God’s word. The birth of the baby Jesus is traditionally our focus—and rightly so. But that physical incarnation of the Son of God in Bethlehem is really just the visible manifestation of powerful cosmic and supernatural events being played out in the invisible realms.

King David, in one of his psalms, paints a vivid picture that, unbeknownst to him, fits right into the Christmas narrative.

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 And He inclined to me and heard my cry.
 He brought me up out of the pit of destruction,
 out of the miry clay,
 And He set my feet upon a rock making my
 footsteps firm.
 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of
 praise to our God;
 Many will see and fear
 And will trust in the LORD.

Psalms 40:1-3

Israel as a nation and King David as an individual were waiting for the Lord’s salvation. They did not know the form it would take. Most probably imagined a second Joshua or Gideon, a warrior and hero who would by force take back Israel from Rome. It is safe to say that none but the most studious scholars of prophecy imagined that this salvation would take the form of a peasant baby born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough.

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 And He inclined to me and heard my cry.

But this psalm of David is more personal than that; he is looking for immediate help with a problem in his life. What a perfect description this is of how it feels, for example, to be mired in the depths of sin or rebellion, or otherwise alienated from God. At such times it feels as if our feet are stuck in quicksand, in the filth of this earth’s sucking mud. And we yearn to know again the Lord’s strong foundation. Which is precisely how God answered David’s prayer—but don’t miss that one word translated “inclined.” Most of us might think that means that the Lord God just tuned his ear to the

pleas of his servant, or at most turned His head in his direction. But the word means “to stretch or spread forth,” to “extend” in his direction. That is, God’s first move in answer to David’s plea was to reach down into the muck in which the supplicant found himself.

Here is the biblical concept of condescension—not as the world defines that word, as assistance filled with patronizing conceit, but as a gracious, merciful rescue by an attentive and loving God. And the Lord did not just reach down to pat the sorrowful David on his head and console him with, *There, there. You’ll be all right.*

He brought me up out of the pit of destruction,
 out of the miry clay,
 And He set my feet upon a rock making my
 footsteps firm.

The words translated “pit” and “mud” or “clay” refer to Sheol—the place of death. Even the word translated “destruction” can be associated metaphorically with the roaring waters of Sheol. So the imagery here, though expressing an earthly condition, can easily represent the fate of those who reject Christ.

Yahweh reached down into the muddy filth of David’s life and lifted him free of it. More than that, He set David on a solid, unyielding rock. What a dramatic contrast to where he had been! And what a beautiful picture of the condescension of God at Bethlehem. The world was waiting in the mucky bog of sin, helpless in a sea of worldly filth. At just the right moment, Father God reached down and set His only begotten Son into that muck.

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painting by Gari Melchers

...born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Galatians 4:4-7

This Redeemer, this Savior—God's salvation extended to man—was Jesus, Son of God. He was and still is the "solid Rock" on which we stand in our newness as very sons of God. Yet even though Christ Jesus grants us a firm foundation in this world, that is the least of it. Christ is, in His person, the hand of God lifting each of us up and out

of this sinking mire to the very heights of heaven.

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God;
Many will see and fear
And will trust in the LORD.

And in this salvation, this newness of life made possible by the incarnation of God's Son, we rejoice and sing praise to His name with a new song in our hearts and on our lips.

All this had its beginning in the manger of Bethlehem.

That is the good news of Christmas:
Salvation.

Harry clenched his fingers into a tight ball and struck his knuckles against the rough wood. Knock. "Ow." Knock. "Ow." Knock. "Ow!"

"Come in!"

Harry stood staring at the wall. He stared at the seams that formed a rectangle. He stared at the hank of rope. How? He screamed into the space between his ears.

Pull the rope.

Harry yanked down on the loop of rope. The rectangle shifted, but failed to open.

Pull the rope toward you, Harry.

He grasped the rope firmly in his hand and yanked it straight out toward him. Suddenly the door flew open, sending Harry careening backwards, leaving him sprawled in a tangled heap.

"Well, hello Harry! Good to see you." The Son reached down and set Harry back onto his feet.

"Y—you know me, God?" Harry stammered, nervously putting himself back in order.

The Son smiled warmly. "Of course I do. Now, what can I do for you?"

"What is this thing?" Harry asked, studying the curious structure. "Is it a new kind of throne?"

"No, no. It's a house—a mud brick house that people live in down on earth. And this is how one comes and goes from inside," he said, swinging the wooden door on its hinges. "Come on inside, Harry. It's rather cozy."

Harry followed The Son into the structure. "More like confined," he suggested. Inside it was dark, smelled of clay and damp straw, and the four walls and low ceiling seemed to move in on the angel, leaving him feeling uneasy, and more than a little claustrophobic. He sucked in his breath, as if air were in short supply.

The Son laughed and moved about the room testing its dimensions. "I think one could get used to it. Now, Harry, what's on your mind?"

The angel had never before been so close to God. Only one among countless millions, he had always been lost in the crowd of those offering praise and worship to the throne. He knew that the upper echelon—the splendid archangels—was almost constantly in the presence of God, but those of his stripe were seldom so close to the throne and the magnificent Presence.

Now here he was, granted a private audience with The Son, and without warning his tongue became a leaden obstacle to expressing his thoughts. But he pushed back the powerful feelings of inferiority—feelings that even he realized were created solely in his own mind—and pressed ahead with the purpose of his visit.

"W—well, God," Harry began, "I—I've heard a rumor—a rumor about you—and I thought I'd check it out for myself." Harry exhaled, relieved to have finally gotten it out.

"A rumor, huh?" The Son said. "This can't be good. What have I done now?"

"Oh, no!" Harry cried, horrified that The Son would think such a thing. "No—nothing like that, God. You see—"

"Listen, Harry," The Son interrupted calmly, reassuring the angel with a warm hand on his shoulder, "pretty soon I'm going to be taking a new name—a human name. Why don't you help me get accustomed to it by using it now."

"Uh, sure. I could do that."

"Good. The name's 'Jesus.'"

Harry rolled the unfamiliar word around in his mind, sampling the flavor of it, mentally affixing the name to The Son. "Je-sus. Well, that shouldn't be so hard. Jesus." He grinned up at The Son, feeling his earlier nervousness slip away more with every moment spent in the Presence. "Well, God," he began. "Sorry; Jesus, I've heard others talking about you going down to earth for awhile, and—"

Suddenly a light went off in Harry's brain. Of course! The new name, the curious structure in which they now

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Someone They Can Touch

(excerpted from *They Need a Savior: The Story of Harry the Angel*)

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stood—these were in preparation for The Son’s visit! Harry was slow, he knew; he wasn’t still on the 4th Rung after all his centuries for nothing. But sooner or later he was able to put the pieces together.

“Then, of course,” Harry blurted out, “it must be true! Why else would you need a human name!”

Jesus grinned at the angel. He winked and said, “Harry, don’t ever let them sell you short. You’re right on the ball.”

“Then it’s true?”

Jesus nodded. “That’s why I made this house: so I could get used to living as humans do—to experience the sights and smells and sounds of their existence.”

“But Jesus,” Harry shook his head, perplexed, “You’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Sure I have. A few times, anyway. Don’t you remember when I visited Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre?”

Harry did remember, and recalled how fascinated he had been watching The Son personally give the two old believers the news that Sarah would indeed give birth to a son. Yes, and he now recalled even more instances in which God had visited earth to deal more directly with His people.

“So then,” Harry said, “this is no big deal.”



The Son turned quickly serious, moving about the small room as if measuring its space. “Actually it is,” He said, stopping before the wall opposite the door. Instantly a small square opening appeared in the mud brick, and white heavenly light pierced into the

dark interior of the structure. “This time, Harry, will be quite different. This time I’ll be there in the flesh.”

Horrified at the prospect, Harry felt his stomach twist in revulsion. “Flesh?”

“Oh, it isn’t all that bad,” Jesus chided. “There are millions of people living that way right now.”

“Yeah, but they’re used to it! You’re used to so much better.”

“But it’s the only way it can get done.”

“What?” Harry screwed up his face. “What would be so important that you’d have to do all that?”

The Son looked into Harry’s eyes in a penetrating way that the angel had never before experienced, and said, “Their redemption. It’s time for me to go down to earth and fulfill the law We established long ago.”

Becoming transfixed by the Presence, and The Son’s willingness to sacrifice His own comfort, Harry said in a hushed tone, “But, in person? Couldn’t you do it from up here?”

The Son moved toward a corner and a small, crude stool appeared. He sat down, rested his chin in his hand, and said, “There was a time, long ago, when We considered that. But you know, Harry, these people need a Savior. They really do. They need someone they can see with their own eyes, whose voice and words they can hear for themselves—and they need someone they can touch, and feel is really there with them.”

Having never been assigned to earth, Harry’s experience with humans was strictly secondhand, but he was beginning to understand how, because of the type of beings they were, they might appreciate God meeting them on their own level. He turned to The Son and said, “They need a ‘Jesus.’”

“It’s the best way to show them God’s love,” Jesus said. “Put Him into flesh.”

Harry stared out the newly formed window, gazing into the more familiar brilliance that enveloped the tiny hovel. “Okay, I think I can see this,” he said. “But one thing—and please, Jesus, I don’t mean any disrespect—are these the right people? Is this the right time? As I understand it, the world’s a pretty small place right now, and these people have a lot to learn. Things are fairly primitive down there.”

“It was worked out long ago, Harry. Now’s the time.”

“But is it necessary to give all this up—the throne, the grandeur, the glory—to go where people live like this?”

The Son answered with a sigh. “It’s a small thing, really, to give up my glory for a little while, so that so many others might have it for eternity.”

“But Jesus,” Harry said seriously, “you’ll be losing who you are—your identity.”

“No, I’m not losing it. Just setting it aside for awhile. I’ll still be God, only now—for a little while—I’ll also be man.”

“Sounds complicated,” Harry said, screwing up his face.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Jesus said, rising from the stool. “But nobody ever said it would be easy to save all of mankind.”

A Sweet Savor

MEMORIES OF CHRISTMASES PAST are perhaps the most vivid of all childhood recollections, for they are, for many, those most filled with wonder and joy. Candlelight services on Christmas Eve, followed by soup and sweet fruit and nut breads at home—and maybe the opening of just one, small present as appetizer before the next morning’s feast. Building a snowman on the front lawn, or carving out a cave-like fort in the deep snow drifted in next to the driveway. Huddled beneath multiple blankets in our cold bedroom, straining to hear Mom and Dad playing “Santa” through the closed door. And at the center of it all, the decorated tree.

It was our practice, back in those halcyon days of yore, to select our tree about a week before Christmas. On one side of the courthouse square, in the middle of downtown, a vendor would string bare light bulbs between rickety poles and fill the temporary enclosure with fresh-cut spruce and fir trees. Even as we trudged through the compacted snow in our buckle boots, from the parking lot on the south side of the courthouse, we caught the aroma of the sylvan congregation. And the fragrance only intensified as we drew nearer, passing from the early twilight into the blazing illumination surrounding the trees. It was the fragrance of Christmas.

After much deliberation over style, size, quality, and price (for we had to be careful with every dollar), we would make our selection, tie it to the roof of the car, and conduct it home. Once the tree was in its stand, and positioned in its place of honor before the living room window, its rich aroma would permeate every room of the house. And even after the special day itself, the now-drying tree would exude its earthy perfume. For a small boy, it was the perfume of Christmas.



Alas, today’s small boy may not even know that a Christmas tree is *supposed* to have a fragrance. The tightly wrapped bundles, stacked, spindled, and compressed, leaned against the grocery store’s exterior wall since before Thanksgiving have no

direct lineage back to the Christmas trees of my youth. They are already brittle, desiccated husks upon arrival from whatever farm was the site of their birth. Separated from their roots far in advance of their ultimate purchase, they are devoid of any natural aroma, and sometimes artificially colored with something vaguely bluish-green in a sad effort to extend their usefulness.

Even trees we cut ourselves—fresh, drawing life from the soil just moments before—have mysteriously lost that rich, evergreen scent that once permeated the modest domicile of my childhood. Where has it gone? What diabolical Scrooge stole the natural fragrance of Christmas?



As much as we may lament the passing of something as natural as the fragrance of a Christmas tree, we should lament all the more the passing of our own—fragrance, that is.



But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

2 Corinthians 2:14-16a NIV

Where has it gone? What has happened to the sweet and penetrating aroma that accompanied the youthful days of our faith? Has it evaporated, leaving behind only a brittle, desiccated husk? Have we been too long separated from our roots?

A believer’s life is to be, as the King James Version puts it, a “sweet savour,” first to his God, then to those sharing this temporal plane—both those who are perishing, and those who are being saved.

But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.

Philippians 4:18

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The Christian life is to be *lived*. As the vivacious and formidable character Auntie Mame said so well, “Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death.”

Jesus was no shrinking violet, and the Christian life is meant to be lived to its fullest. Packed to the gills with the quickening Holy Spirit, it is meant to be productive, to count for something, to exude the spirit and vitality of Christ.

Those in close proximity are to know that we have a Lord, that we worship Him, that we serve Him gladly and wholeheartedly. We are to bear the penetrating aroma of unapologetic truth, the fragrance of kindness, the sweet, yet sincere perfume of grace. They are to know that we live by the truth of God’s word—and that we do it with joy. They are to know that we walk by the Spirit—that our grace is not of ourselves, but of He who dwells within. They are to know that while we are

far from perfect, we are forgiven—and they are to know how and why.



For the believer, the occasion of Christmas is not just a time for sweet-smelling trees, for tinsel and caroling, eggnog and presents. Nor is it just a time to remind ourselves of the historical Jesus, His humble birth and ultimate sacrifice.

Christmas is a time for the believer to be re-energized for a Spirit-filled life. As we gaze upon the child lying in the manger, the joy in that moment is to be translated into every corner of our lives. And as we worship and serve Him—gladly, unabashedly—we send up a pleasing fragrance to God.

And *this* is our praise: the sweet savor of a life lived for Him.

Christmas in the Mail

THE IDEA FOR THE MODERN CHRISTMAS CARD was dreamed up in 1843 by John Callcott Horsley. In that year he created one thousand 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 their inception, Christmas cards have 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 everything 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.



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

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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



No doubt someone of your acquaintance will indeed 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. Listen to what He says to you. Believe in Him. And be saved.*

And so we are to tell others.



***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,
stanza by John W. Work II

One Special Gift

WHEN I WAS BUT A WEE LAD, passing through my Norman Rockwell childhood in the heartland of the United States, Christmas was pretty much all about presents.

Oh yes, there was the Nativity set, there was singing in the children's choir (aka, the Cherub Choir) on risers in the sanctuary, there was the mystical luminescence of the Christmas Eve candlelight service. Having been raised in the church, I knew all about the true meaning of Christmas. But, after all, I was just a little kid, and all of that religious stuff couldn't overpower my fascination with what lay hidden in those enticing packages under the tree.

Dad was just your basic blue-collar worker, and our family never had much money, but I cannot remember a Christmas when, come Christmas morning, our modest tree was not surrounded by a generous contribution from "Santa." Somehow Mom and Dad and Auntie Norma were able to find the wherewithal to overwhelm the senses of a little boy blinking sleep from his eyes.

crib under the tree, smiling up at me.



I knew that my parents loved me. I knew that from my earliest days. I knew their love was expressed not just in hugs and kisses, but in Dad working hard every day to support us, in Mom always being there when I came home from school, and in her dedication to a clean house and three square meals every day. I also knew, even then, that their love was expressed in their discipline of me, and that they always wanted to know where I was—and with whom. Even as a little boy, I knew their love was real.

But because our family had so little money, their love for me was expressed all the more in those special gifts at Christmas time. I knew that we really couldn't afford them. I knew that very often they did not purchase the gift, but gave of their time and energy to make it themselves, or restore something old to make it new just for me. I knew that every special gift for Christmas meant sacrifice for them.



From an early age I knew that God loved me. From the first Sunday when my parents brought me to church in a basket, I heard the story of His enduring love for me. But one day when I was seven years old it struck me with a new and exciting force: God's love for me was so substantial and real that He sent to earth His one and only Son.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

John 3:16-17



Invariably each approaching Christmas was accompanied by an overpowering desire on my part for one special gift—one thing that, to me, was heads and tails more important than any three-pack of underwear, new Sunday-go-to-Meetin' shirt, or pair of slippers. One year I had my heart set on a stuffed dog. One year I *really* wanted a set of Tinker Toys. And one year I was desperate to get a doll for Christmas (yes, you're right—I was an odd little boy). That year was the most special of all, for Mom took the old doll she played with as a girl to the doll hospital, and had the head and hair changed from female to male. On Christmas morning there was "Tommy," sitting in his wooden

Suddenly the tiny figurine lying in the Nativity set manger became something far more significant—and real. Here was not just a nice thing, a pretty, pink-cheeked baby, part of the rich pageant of the season. Here was not just the center of a fascinating story about angels and shepherds and wise men and a flight to Egypt. Here was not just someone to sing about once a year while clinging precariously to the top row of rickety risers.

As if struck by a bolt of lightning, I realized for the first time that here was embodied God's sacrificial love—for me. Here was very God in flesh.

(continued)

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Later, through patient nurturing, my infantile understanding of the baby Jesus of Christmas matured. Jesus was God in flesh, born of Mary in much the same way I was born of my own mother. Yes, it was a supernatural birth, in that His father was not Joseph, but the Holy Spirit. I got that: “Virgin birth.” Even in my Midwest, mid-century, naiveté, I understood that part. But what I learned later was that the Son part of God, embodied in that tiny child, was already ancient at Bethlehem.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

John 1:1-2

Harry’s mind was still on God’s logic in placing The Son in a humble, peasant family, rather than with a more esteemed family of prominence. It still seemed foolish to him. Exasperated, he said, “Will there at least be emissaries present to properly inform the public?”

“Mmm—yes, in a manner of speaking,” Jesus smiled as the pair came closer to the crowd of people outside the cave. “The shepherds will be close by,” he explained, “and they’ll tell others.”

“Shepherds?” Harry squawked, emitting a sound similar to that of a person being strangled. “Out in the country? What will you be doing out in the country?”

“Well, you see,” Jesus said as they approached the entrance to the cave, “the town will be filled with travelers there because of the census.” The people smiled happily at the pair, and politely moved aside to give them passage. Past the scruffy onlookers, the two stepped just inside the opening, their feet shuffling onto the deep mat of straw spread about on the floor. “So,” Jesus stooped to peer back into the cave’s dusty interior, “the only available lodging will be a stable.”

Harry was again feeling that nagging sensation in the pit of his belly: the feeling of being in an alien place. The dust-filled air attacked his nose with the sharp stench of aging manure; around him came the bleating of lambs nuzzling for their place at a teat, and the baritone lowing of placid bovines incessantly chewing their cud. The light was so dim—one small oil lamp supplied the only illumination—that Harry could just barely make out the crouched figures huddled back inside the cave. And on top

In fact, He not only was present with God the Father from eternity past beyond our comprehension, He actually was the agent of all creation.

All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

John 1:3

This One, this small child whose birth we celebrate every year was—and is—all of this and more. He is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. He is the “Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” But first, for us, in that lowly stable so long ago, He was God’s one special gift. He was the one thing we so desperately wanted and needed above everything else. Salvation.

of everything else, he had a sinking feeling that he had just stepped in something warm and squishy.

Harry felt The Son’s hand on his arm. He looked up to see the smaller of the two figures before them reach down into the deep hay mounded atop a stone. The young woman appeared to be exhausted, her face worn and ringed by sweat-stringed hair that betrayed some great exertion. That she could hold herself up was a wonder, but she lifted the tiny form to her breast. As the baby found the nipple, the woman smiled down at him and murmured something private and warm.

“Who is this?” Harry asked, still uncomfortable in this strange place, yet strangely drawn to the scene being played out before him. Who were these scruffy peasants with their newborn child taking refuge in such a wretched domicile? What sort of person would be so careless and unthinking as to give birth where the beasts were lodged? Surely these folks were the lowest of the low.

“I told you, Harry,” Jesus said quietly, as if he didn’t want to intrude on the moment, “I have to be born.”

The angel stared up at The Son, stunned. He couldn’t believe his ears! “You’re telling me that the long-awaited Messiah—the King of Kings—the very Son of God will be born in a filthy stable?”

Jesus chuckled at the angel’s not unexpected response. “You make it sound like a bad thing,” he said. “Harry, I’m not going to earth to be a member of royalty waited on by his subjects. I’m going down there to be a servant—so that I can wait on them.”

Meek and Lowly

(excerpted from *They Need a Savior: The Story of Harry the Angel*)

a fable



**Shadows
and
Light**

The people who
walk in darkness
Will see a great
light;
Those who live in a
dark land,
The light will shine
on them.

Isaiah 9:2

WHO CAN ARGUE that this world does not remain in darkness? Who among us can make the case that humanity has finally “seen the light” and emerged from the shadows? For a simple, unembellished recitation of each day’s headlines borders on the pornographic: terrorist violence of unimaginable depravity; vast swathes of humanity rising up in arms over something provably a lie; corruption and duplicity brazenly paraded by national leaders; perverse sexuality forced, even legislated into the norm.

We still live in a world that grows darker by the day.



The Godhead knows all about darkness, and since before there was man, before there was even time, it had devised a solution.

Light.

But just because people see a light there is no guarantee they will embrace it. Darkness is a powerful force in the human spirit, and its true depths can be almost impenetrable. Knowing full well the heart of man, God did it anyway: He sent Light in the form of His Son.

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

God’s impetus for this act was not blind, unrealistic optimism; He is not a Pollyanna, but a realist. God did it not because of His faith in the goodness of people.

He did it out of love.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:16

Why, then, is the world still draped in darkness? Jesus said it Himself.

“This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”

John 3:19-20

Jesus arrived on that night so very long ago to crack open the gates of heaven so that the true Light—the glory of God—would be available to all who would believe. The star that pointed the way to the manger was instantly overwhelmed by the blinding glory of God. By faith the Light pierces the heretofore impenetrable darkness to first reveal sin, then forgive it.

Oh, that the world would see beyond the pain of that initial revealing of sin, to the wonder and joy that follows in the forgiveness.

Christmas is the beginning of Christ’s story on earth, but perhaps more than that it represents the beginning of our life with Him. In the light of His salvation Christ holds out His hand to a fallen race dwelling in the shadows.

And those who take His hand enjoy the promise of dwelling forever in the light of His glory.

Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”

John 8:12