

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL

Perceptions



Who alone stretches out the heavens
And tramples down the waves of the sea;
Who makes the Bear, Orion and the Pleiades,
And the chambers of the south;
Who does great things, unfathomable,

And wondrous works without number.
"Were He to pass by me, I would not see Him;
Were He to move past me,
I would not perceive Him."

Job 9:8-11

Light illumines.

It shows the way, it heals the melancholy spirit, it brightens the outlook. Light is a positive and powerful force.

But light also reveals.

Bright sunlight cheers a dark room, but also shows the layer of dust that coats a table, exposes the cobwebs draped in the corner where walls meet ceiling, casts shadows from the little bits of things that clutter the surface of the carpet, and makes visible the previously invisible drifting motes of dust in the air.

a comfortable familiarity

The epilogue to Christmas today is the same that it was more than 2,000 years ago. Now as then, man may pause for a moment to consider the Christ child—to linger over the prospect of forgiving grace and peace with God, to embrace the warmth of love come down to man—but eventually he turns away, choosing the more familiar darkness over revealing light. That peculiar decision remains a mystery, but it is not a stranger—even to those who have chosen to believe.

Through ignorance, misconception, sloth, or simple hatred, most in His Creation have rejected the life Jesus offers. And there is the tragedy: man rejects the One who made him.

“Then He shall become a sanctuary;
But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to
strike and a rock to stumble over,
And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants
of Jerusalem.”

Isaiah 8:14

There is something so warm and cozy about a newborn lying in a manger. Mix in a little *Silent Night, Holy Night*, the nostalgic whiff of ever-green boughs, and the glow of doing something nice for someone else, and Christmas becomes all warm and fuzzy and harmless. Or at least not so threatening. Even those who during the rest of the year are profoundly disinterested in things holy, are known to shed pieces of their protective armor for the birth of Jesus.

But as the calendar page turns, those who risked that uncomfortable nearness to Christ quickly lurch away, retreating like frightened mice back into the comfortable familiarity of their darkened corners. For even they know that when one lingers too long in the light of Christ, one might just become used to it. And want to stay.

The baby Jesus represents a goodness and grace that is an uncomfortable fit for the world. This present habitation prefers cynicism over innocence, selfishness over generosity, anger over kind-

ness, lies over truth. The baby Jesus coming into this world is like a Midwestern agrarian being dropped into Times Square. The culture shock is brutally overwhelming for the farmer. And before long the residents reduce the naïve newcomer to pitiable insignificance through derision and contempt.

This world doesn't much like Jesus. Oh, it has a passing affection for religion, with its ceremony and splendid architecture, its manageable turn-the-other-cheek submissiveness—but only so long as it stays within its stained-glass box. But the God /man Jesus? No, we can't have that. And Jesus, after two millennia, is still what He was declared to be: an offense.

Christmas is a time of God extending His hand to those who do not yet know Him. Just as the believer's ordinance of communion is an opportunity to remember Christ's sacrifice for our sins, Christmas is an opportunity to remember God's sacrifice in sending His Son as a gift of life and light to the world.

The child lying in the manger is God saying to all, *Come. Step out of your darkness and into my Light. Leave behind your cynicism and anger, your hard and callused existence, your self-centeredness and pride. Come. With the shepherds and magi kneel in worship and praise before the One who created you—the One who loved you, and gave you life. For He loves you still. And for you this Child will die, that you might forever live in His light.* ☩

a favoring blindness

One of the advantages to old age is a skewed perception. The true marvel of it is that at some point in the aging process, control of our perception is handed over from our logical, objective brain to our rose-tinted memory.

When I married my wife she was valedictorian-smart, intelligent, well-spoken, a good swimmer—and beautiful. We are now in our fifty-first year of marriage, and to my eyes and heart she remains all of the above. If I work hard at it and squint a little I can almost see that over the years she has gained a few wrinkles, some gray hairs, and that her silhouette is no longer that of the teenager I married. Nonetheless, almost every time I gaze upon her I still see that beautiful blushing bride.

And if this skewed perception is not reciprocated, I am in *big* trouble.

For the one whose outer imperfections or faults are not being recognized, this skewed perception of the viewer can be a real advantage. For, as a rule,

this means that he or she is invariably being judged not by what lies upon the surface, but by what lies within.

Just imagine what I would look like to my God if *His* perception of me was limited to what lies on the surface of my life. With the seventy-year accumulation of sin and apathy and outright rebellion which comprises my outer layer, I would be to Him nothing less than a putrid, gangrenous lump of ambulatory filth. He would rightly be repulsed by the very sight of me.

Because of Jesus, however, God is as blind to all that as I am blind to the changes that have been realized over the years to my good wife and myself.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation... He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19, 21

In his first letter to them, the apostle Paul itemizes a long list of reprehensible behaviors which had belonged to at least some of the Corinthians. But then he follows that with this profound statement that applies to every follower of Christ:

Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

1 Corinthians 6:11

Praise God that when He looks upon me He sees, instead of my failings, the atoning blood of His Son, even Jesus the Christ. ☩

the better country

Envy the meteorologist. No matter what is being discussed around him or her, all the meteorologist need do is talk about the weather. If the anchor person must put on his sad face to report on famine in Nigeria, the weather guy need not follow suit, for his report is all about cumulus clouds and intemperate temperatures. During the interminable election seasons with reports of Republicans and Democrats behaving like spoiled preschoolers and political polls forecasting winners and losers, the local meteorologist can remain above the fray and just focus on his own equally inaccurate forecasts. If the lead-in to the weather is all about the latest COVID numbers, how we're all going to die because the left tackle on the Kansas City Chiefs tested positive, the weather gal need not invest in the doomsday porn, but just report the current location of the approaching storm front.

This world is indeed filled with sorrow, bitterness, tragedy, and cataclysmic events. And there are times when we must address them—perhaps even be immersed in them. The Christian, however, has much in common with the meteorologist. For once Christ Jesus and His Spirit dwell within him, he is hence a sojourner in an alien land. Even before Christ's incarnation, those who trusted in God through faith realized that this present world was no longer their home.

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that

country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:13-16

The Christian, of course, is to care about the sufferings and fate, the joys and exultations of the lost. And since man was given responsibility for this planet shortly after his ultimate forebear was created from its topsoil, we are to be good stewards of this present world so long as we dwell upon it.

But believers do so as aliens, for this is no longer their home. We do not share in the periodic panic attacks from those who believe this earth to be the mother goddess of creation, that she is more important even than human beings, and her “sustain-

ability” should be our every waking consideration.

No, in His own good time the Lord God will do away with this present earth—and good riddance. And the universe *en masse* will then breathe a sigh of relief, for that cataclysmic moment will usher in the creation of a *new* earth that will not be encumbered by famine or earthquakes, politics, or rampaging viruses.

Even the weatherman will be out of a job. ☘

illumination

The pain is written across his face—the kind of pain that, try as one might, cannot be kept private. His uncomfortable step and slow toward the platform betrays the agony of being vertical when one should be horizontal, and his Sunday suit and tie do nothing to hide the fact that he should not be here at all. He makes every effort to appear his normal self, but cannot isolate from his countenance the wincing stabs that come from within.

His recent accident had left him hospitalized with broken ribs and worse, and though now on the mend at home, he still experiences brutal pain at every move. But he had insisted on attending the dedication of his little girl and boy at church this morning, for he lives and works for his family, for all of them, and nothing would keep him away.

Standing on the platform with his wife and the other parents and their children, he tries to respond to the pastor's gentle humor and the comments being made by others. But each time his face twists into an unnatural expression. Though his lips may turn up in a smile, his eyes cannot, revealing the physical price he pays for just standing here.

It is torture for him—and torture to behold. But then his little girl bounces and giggles and reaches out toward him—and the pain disappears. Then and only then do his eyes smile with open delight at the exultant joy radiating from the child. Her boundless and infectious spirit envelop him, wiping away, if only for a moment, any thought of his physical torment.

To someone who has been living in a darkened room, even the dimmest illumination may seem brilliant. We all live in a world filled with dim imitations of that which is authentic and true. We have grown accustomed to the *faux*, darkened reality that man has created for himself.

In the beginning, God's creation was filled with the true brilliance of His illumination. It was pure, pristine. It was a world bathed in the light of His glory and magnificence. And in that glorious light there dwelt the true joy.

But man chose an alternate world, one filled with darkness and pain, frustration, and alienation from the true light. Being alienated from the light meant that man was separated, as well, from the true joy. So man crafted a substitute joy, an earthly, counterfeit joy that was not joy at all. And, as time passed, man came to believe that this was indeed the highest joy one could have.

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

John 1:4,9-10

When the Son of God came to earth His true light cast the pitiful imitations to which man had become accustomed back into the shadows where they belonged. For the first time since his fall, man could have a taste of the authentic, glorious light of God's presence—a light superior to anything he could ever imagine.

And in that light was revealed the true high joy of Christ's presence. Radiance alone is little more than energy, but in *this* light was manifested the unbridled ecstasies of the Godhead. Now earth-bound

“joy” was unmasked as the pretender it had always been. Now man could know *real* joy—a joy native to the presence of all that is good, and right, and pure.

Long ago the first man chose darkness and pain over the light and pure joy of God's presence. He abandoned all that was holy for all that was corrupt. In Christ we regain that sweet communion, and can know—even while our feet tread the soil of fallen earth—some of His heavenly joy.

But, oh, what bliss on that day when we kneel before our Lord in person. And, after graciously accepting our worship and adoration, he gently lifts us to our feet, and smiles. Our eyes will meet His, and in that moment of communion we will experience, for the very first time, the exultant rush of pure, unfiltered joy!

No earthly experience—not even the delight found in a little boy or girl's adoring smile—can

compare to the true and profound heavenly joy that removes all pain and guilt, and passes every other earth-bound emotion into insignificance. ☘

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Jude 1:24-25