

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



*a Gentle
Holiness*

Every morning the headlines drive us deeper into an existential funk. It seems as if everyone hates everyone else these days, and it is easy to lose hope.

A regular feature of a daily column I read is entitled “Everything Isn’t Awful,” and typically offers a brief video of cute animals doing cute things with other cute animals. It is trite, of course, but offers a glimmer of goodness in a sea of cynicism and despair.

In a season in which this world tries hard to superimpose its own twisted idea of “goodwill toward men,” the Christian must battle hard to remember the Incarnation, the Light who came to this earth for our Salvation. To that end we offer a handful of early *Reflections by the Pond* columns that celebrate the true goodness, and true reason for this season.



Gifts

BACK IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY, in the middle of the American Midwest, when this writer was living out the innocent childhood that today's cynical pundits claim never existed, Christmas was a time of uncluttered, fragrant, simple joys.

Children experience life at a more exaggerated, expansive pace; they take more time for the small things that adults haven't the time or patience to notice. When December rolls around the small child catalogs the marvelous sights, the powerfully fragrant odor of the trees, the sharp bite of the cold winter air, the sweet aromas wafting from the kitchen doorway throughout the house.

And children enjoy especially the presents. Oh yes, there is no small measure of greed in their excited opening of the gaily wrapped gifts bearing their name; their first motive is the fun they'll have playing with that new toy. But just as they are exquisitely aware of everything else going on about them, a child also understands that each gift represents a measure of love: they understand that another person cared enough to make or purchase a gift especially for them.

It has become too easy for adults to miss—or even disdain—the Christmas spirit entirely. Occupied with all the responsibilities of the season, the days become monotonous, if not sheer drudgery. Tempers show their ugly face as traffic queues form where once there were free-flowing arteries, parking spaces vanish in thin air, and high prices create aching vacancies in the bank account.

While the child happily inhales the rich aromas emanating from the kitchen, it is the adult who is out there laboring over a hot stove to create them. It is the adult who must clean the house and make all the preparations for the visiting relatives. And the adult wakes one frosty morning realizing the ache in the belly is for all those simple pleasures from childhood that once made Christmas a time of joy.

Yesterday in the midst of household drudgery in preparation for visiting relatives I unexpectedly enjoyed a small oasis of old-fashioned joy. Realizing I had not yet wrapped Linda's gifts, I called for the girls (our family of cats at the time) to join me downstairs.



Rousing themselves from afternoon naps, they gathered around as I collected the rolls of paper, Scotch tape, and bows. While I measured and cut, Gilley tried to fit herself into each empty box, and Donovan quietly munched on the enticing ribbons and bows. Curious whiskers got in the way of scissors, and more than once Amelia thought she spied a mouse in the wastebasket.

In past years I had often dismissed the exchanging of gifts at Christmas as little more than crass commercialism. But yesterday my spirit was revived through the simple act of wrapping gifts for someone I love. Oh, the contents of each package were nothing special, just inexpensive necessities that more normal people wouldn't even bother to wrap. But somehow the family project of wrapping Linda's gifts brought back the simple joys of a childhood Christmas.

And I couldn't help but imagine how God felt that night, as He carefully wrapped His gift, and placed it gently down into the straw of that Bethlehem manger.

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

1 John 4:9-10



Going Where We're Fed

SINCE IT TAKES FIFTEEN MINUTES just to dress for the outside during these cold winter months, one tends to cover all bases in one trip. So before stoking up the tractor to plow snow from the drive today, I first had to feed the birds.

Our one feeder this year hangs outside the sun room windows. So, when filled, any and all hungry birds in the area flock to this one spot. And with a foot of snow on the ground, they're all hungry. Birds aren't stupid; their bellies may be full, but let it snow and cover up the little bit of forage left, and they will immediately flock to whatever source of food they can find. In temperatures below zero, they take no chances.

They all come: the snow birds, of course, hundreds of the cute little gray and white birds that prefer to eat off the ground the seeds thrown down by one or two of their loftier brethren. Cardinals and blue jays take charge because of their superior size and temperaments. And many sparrows, leftover this year because of the unseasonably warm December, battle each other for a spot on the rail. So long as there is birdseed in the feeder, they stay close by, perched along all the bare branches or huddled under the nearby deck against the bitter north wind. Their first priority is to always be wherever they are fed.

At night my soul longs for You,
Indeed, my spirit within me seeks You earnestly;
For when the earth experiences Your judgments,
The inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.

Isaiah 26:9

The world is now white, cold and white, the forage covered over. Sustenance is not readily at hand; I must go searching. But first I must find within me the hunger, the right hunger that will take me to the right food. I live in a rich land filled with rich foods that rot the belly and cloud the mind.

Spirit, take me to where I will find true nourishment: food for the soul. Take me to the One who provides, who nourishes the heart, the spirit, the part of me that will never die. Let me never be satisfied by the fattening diet that tempts with sweets, but is empty of nourishment. Let me, instead, yearn for that which will take me higher into His presence. Feed me, my God! Feed me from Your storehouse of righteousness, and wisdom, and good and holy things.

Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.

Psalms 65:4



An Enveloping Purity

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the comfort of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Luke 2:25

THE WEATHER PROGNOSTICATOR THIS LAST WEEK forecast “one to two inches” of snow for our environs. Ten inches later, the world around us—which, only a few days before, had been a dull, persistent gray—is now a beautiful winter wonderland. Early Monday morning, as the sun tipped its focused light down into the valley, glittering sparkles danced across the landscape. Above the blanket of snow all the bare trees, bushes, and exposed grass and weeds in the fields were frosted in white, and, as if the landscape were dusted with faceted diamonds, the clean morning sunlight created brilliant, powdery sparkles across field and wood.

Now the top side of every oak and hickory limb is pasted with white frosting, and the brown grass has been covered over. The birds must now scratch through small drifts for their seed, and the roaming deer must paw through the covering for sustenance.

...and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

One might say that the snow is *upon* the ground.

It is not with a light touch; the snow is not hovering gently a few inches above the ground, dipping down only occasionally to teasingly brush the blades of brown grass. Nor is the covering of snow a rigid plane, knocking sharply against only the taller weeds and bushes.

No, the snow is a *blanket*, folding and forming itself over and around every contour of the ground. It has molded itself onto every subtle curve and roll of the terrain, every notch and bend, every stone and boulder, no matter its shape. In most areas the snow has completely eliminated everything else from sight. All around, the world is white; it is all one can see.

And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple...

Luke 2:26–27a

When we come to Christ, the Spirit rushes into us like the north wind that makes the snow blow parallel to the ground. He invades us, seeking out and filling every nook and cranny, molding Himself—without compromise to His own purity—to fit our essential being. As a true intimate, He shapes Himself over and around who *we* are without altering in any way who *He* is.

The Spirit comes upon us, blanketing us with His comforting touch. We have no say in the matter, no vote. He comes with Christ, and there is no turning Him back. He weaves Himself in and through the tangled network of our intellect, our imagination, our reason, connecting us to the intellect, imagination, and reason of God.

Some people think of the Holy Spirit as some ghostly apparition, hovering, floating out there in the ether—always in the vicinity, but never within reach. To them, He is more of an “it,” and something, if perhaps necessary, more often to be avoided. The Spirit is, to them, a little too spooky.

Some think of the Holy Spirit as radiant energy, and thereby find it impossible to establish a meaningful relationship. He glows in the dark, and makes mysterious, other-worldly things occur. To them He is something like invisible, yet admittedly powerful, electricity. But we do not have a relationship with the electricity coursing through the walls of our house; we have relationships with the people who live in the house.

The Spirit is a person living within the four walls of our corporeal house. As He fits Himself into that house, making Himself comfortable, we are to make ourselves comfortable with His ways. We are to mold our lives to His shape and dimensions. As He comes upon us, we are to accept His presence as something familiar—and wonderful.

The arrogance of our epoch turns this around. By its lights, if a supernatural presence chooses to come in and make Himself at home within one or more of us, then surely it must be for the expressed purpose of learning from *us*. This is only sensible, for, you see, *our* way is real, it is reasonable, it is logical. How else to explain this Spirit's willingness to mold and shape Himself to *our* convolutions, rather than His own.

But, once again, the citizens of this self-centered time have mistaken good manners for deference. It is not from capitulation that the Spirit treads lightly upon our own. Rather, as with most everything else from God, He comes in, makes Himself available, but waits for us to draw insight and encouragement from Him. He is a friend who will not force His friendship upon us.

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the depths graciously given to us by God, of which depths we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual depths with spiritual words.

1 Corinthians 2:12–13

There are few things more warming and comforting on a cold winter night than a thick, enveloping blanket. We live in a cold world—a world cold to God, His ways, and His Spirit. For believers to live in this world without giving up to despair, we are given the warm, comforting Holy Spirit. He leaves no part of us untouched and unwarmed, but He is only as effective as we permit Him to be.

The snow comes down from above, covering the earth with its gentle purity. But soon the pristine blanket is disrupted by deer hooves, turkeys scratching for hidden food, and the clomping of thick rubber boots.

The Spirit comes down from God above, covering the lives of His children with His gentle holiness. The world soon tries with all its might to disrupt the effect of His enveloping purity—and, to varying degrees, finds success. No guarantee of daily righteousness comes with the Holy Spirit; after the basics of salvation, the measure by which the believer draws upon what the Spirit has to offer is determined by the individual.

He offers us the very mind of God.

It is up to us to listen.

But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you do not do the things that you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Galatians 5:16–18



POWDERED HOARFROST, dislodged from the trees by the warming sun, drifts down through the brilliant morning air like diamond dust exhaled from a blue sky. Everything around is white, and each tiny branch is frosted—as if God woke us to dawn by exhaling His warmed breath against the frigid black skeletons of winter's trees.

Autumn's dried grass and dying weeds lie buried beneath a deep, downy comforter of snow. Cold temperatures have kept it there for weeks, only added to and made deeper as more layers have come blowing down from the even colder north.

The full force of winter has settled in upon us. For many, what seems fresh and festive before Christmas is reduced to inconvenient drudgery after. Cute, reddened cheeks acquired during holiday shopping sprees become only irritating wounds once the day has passed—and by February the delightful fluff outside the window will have become a claustrophobic barrier to the freedoms enjoyed in other seasons.

Yet the more snow we get now, the better will be next year's crops. Early thaws will let what is frozen now become much needed moisture that will seep down into deep levels of the soil, bringing life and nutrients to the seeds sown in the spring.

Life is a symphony with many movements. It holds within its grasp lyrical beauty, inconvenient sorrows, inexpressible joy, pain, discomfort, and embracing warmth. We are serenaded by bliss as we encounter trials; we pass through sadness on our way to joy.

The snow is both beauty and ugliness. It makes life hard, even as it brings life and potential for future growth. It kills quickly the fallen sparrow, but insulates the burrowing mouse. It holds everything in its icy grip, yet reflects and intensifies the sun's brilliant warmth. It is curse and blessing in one. ♦

“And He changes the times and the seasons;
He removes kings and establishes kings;
He gives wisdom to wise men
And knowledge to men of understanding.
He reveals the deep and hidden things;
He knows what is in the darkness,
And the light dwells with Him.”

Daniel 2:21–22