

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

FINDING THE POINT OF CHRISTMAS

The feverish materialism of the Christmas season has been dampened somewhat by the recent recession. Americans are now more frugal in their holiday spending and more careful about their extravagance. But there remain all the trappings of America's Christmas season: the parties, the cards, the tree, the food, the tinsel, the concerts. . . . When Christmas Day finally arrives, we are nearly exhausted—and we thereby miss the point of Christmas. But what is the point?

Fred Rogers of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* once said, "I like to compare the holiday season with the way a child listens to a favorite story. The pleasure is in the familiar way the story begins, the anticipation of familiar turns it takes, the familiar moments of suspense, and the familiar climax and ending." The story of Christmas is like that! So, let's go back to the biblical narrative and review the story. The scene is the backwater town of Bethlehem. The innkeeper, Herod and the other political and religious leaders all missed the enormity of what was occurring before their very eyes. How could they have missed the obvious? But consider the shepherds and the magi; they understood.

The shepherds were tending their flocks in the fields near Bethlehem, keeping watch against thieves and predatory animals. In all likelihood, these very sheep would be offered as sacrifices on Temple Mount in Jerusalem, less than five miles away. Shepherds were despised and distrusted and were not even permitted to give testimony in a court of law. They were poor and most likely uneducated, perhaps even unable to read the Hebrew Scriptures. On that Christmas night, Luke 2:8-20 reminds us, an angel, joined by a host of angels singing praises to God, announced Christ's birth. The shepherds immediately went to Bethlehem, but, because they were poor, they offered no gifts to the Child; instead, they spread the word.

The magi (Matthew 2:1-12) were likely from Persia and members of a religious caste devoted to astrology and divination. Therefore, they quickly discerned the importance of the star, which guided them to the Christ child. Their journey was over 800 miles and would have taken about 40 days. Arriving at Bethlehem, they worshipped the Child and gave Him the most extravagant, valuable, and marketable gifts imaginable in the ancient world—gold, frankincense and myrrh. Perhaps, that is how Mary and Joseph financed their sojourn to Egypt. These potentates from the East were rich, powerful men of leisure who could afford a long, expensive trip. What a contrast with the lowly shepherds!

But the shepherds and the magi were united in their expression of joy, excitement and exhilaration. They understood the same truth that historic, biblical Christianity has always

embraced: This child was Immanuel, the world's Savior, the Messiah and the coming King of kings and Lord of lords. That is why we sing the carols, decorate our homes and give our gifts—all in celebration of God's provision in Jesus Christ. For millions, He still offers the abundant life—and that is the point of Christmas.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

THE HOPE OF CHRISTMAS

One of my favorite books, or actually series of books, is *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. In the first book of the series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Narnia is frozen in a seemingly permanent state of cold, frigid winter. There is never spring and there is never Christmas. Edmund is enslaved to the white witch, because he loved her offering of Turkish delights. He is trapped and hopeless! But Edmund notices it is less cold, there are green sprigs of grass bursting forth from the snow, and there is the sound of running water. The reason? Aslan, a clear Christ-like figure in the series, is near. Andree Seu writes: “His breath warms the sin-cursed ground, thaws the icicles around relationships, and ends indentured servitude to the witch we loved for Turkish delight. A lifelong winter that was never Christmas melts into first Christmas.” Indeed, Mr. Beaver almost sings:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.*

In so many ways, we are caught in this Narnia-like tension. The thawing has begun, but we are often cold, barren and seemingly lifeless when it comes to spirituality. We experience great defeat in our daily battle with sin, yet we see victories. We live with the reality of a sin-cursed, fallen world; yet we await the soon and certain return of our King. There is great, almost immeasurable sorrow in this fallen world, yet there is great comfort as well, a comfort that comes from Jesus. Seu writes: “For Christ has come indeed. But [we] live in the in-between time, where old age and new age overlap, and things are messy. The Lion is come—yea, is sacrificed on the stone table—but the book has several chapters in it yet. This is a mop-up operation but not a chimera; the skirmishes are real. Let us lay hold of Christmas, then, seizing the day and its power ‘until the day dawns and the morning star rises’ with all the confidence of spring.”

As Christians, we are caught in the tension of the already, not yet. We have the certainty of salvation that Jesus purchased for us, but we await His triumphant return and the establishment of His glorious kingdom. The rebellion will end and all of His creation will acknowledge Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the words of Revelation 7:16-17, there will be no more hunger, thirst, disease, pain—and there will be no more tears! Until that time comes, we wait. The First Advent provides the basis of our salvation through His death, burial and resurrection. The Second Advent will complete the program of redemption. That is the promise and the hope of Christmas.

The hope of Christmas morning gives us a certainty about God's Providence in the affairs of the humans. One of the best examples of this hope is the writing of the Christmas carol, *Silent Night*. The setting is Oberndorf, Austria, near Salzburg. On 23 December 1818, the new village priest, Josef Mohr, faced the challenge of a broken organ, which could not be repaired until after Christmas. That night he attended a Nativity pageant in a neighboring village. As he walked home from the stirring pageant, he reflected on that first Christmas. He began to fashion a poem in his mind, entitled "Silent Night." That night he wrote three stanzas. He showed the poem to the church organist, Franz Gruber, who composed the melody, writing his arrangement for the guitar. That Christmas eve, Mohr and Gruber sang, with a choir of young girls, the new hymn to the accompaniment of a guitar. Church members loved the new Christmas carol and it spread rapidly through the hills of Austria—and around the world. Had the organ not broken in Oberndorf, there would have been no *Silent Night*. God's Providence, as we live in the tension of the already not yet, is real and dependable. God continues to accomplish His purposes, His way. That is one of the key themes of Christmas.

See "Breakpoint" (25 December 2002) and Andree Seu, "We Shall Have Spring Again" in *World* (23 December 2006).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

WHY DO WE PUT LIGHTS ON OUR CHRISTMAS TREES?

The answer to this important Christmas tradition is Martin Luther. Luther was of course the great Protestant reformer of the 16th century. The tradition of having an evergreen in the home was established by the time of Luther. He enjoyed walking in the woods near his home in Wittenberg, where he taught at the University of Wittenberg. He and his wife, Katie, had six children and Luther was always looking for ways to teach his children the truths of the faith. He told them stories and, of course, wrote his famous Catechism for teaching his children. One December night he was walking in the woods and he marveled at the sight of the stars twinkling through the evergreen trees. He reflected on this extraordinary scene for some time. He and Katie had taken over an old convent in Wittenberg, where they raised their family. He decided to try and duplicate what he had seen in the snowy woods. So, he attached candleholders to the family's evergreen Christmas tree limbs. He taught his children that the candles burning on the Christmas tree represented the light that Jesus had brought into the world. It was effective as a teaching device and it added beauty to their home. Hence, the custom of placing candles on Christmas trees began—and it swept across Germany quickly.

Christmas historian, Ace Collins, summarizes the details of how the tradition of putting lights on Christmas trees spread:

1. Craftsmen began to produce ornate candleholders that were made just for using on tree limbs. Multi-colored candles also developed as the holders became more ornate.
2. By the mid-1800s, the tradition of Christmas trees trimmed with ornaments and lit by scores of candles came to represent two things. (1) It represented the perfection and order of Christmas. Illustrations in magazines, newspapers, books and on Christmas cards consistently showed the brightly decorated and lit Christmas tree as the norm for

Christmas. (2) It also represented a terrible hazard, for there were countless fires caused by the candles burning the trees and often the homes of families.

3. In 1879, Thomas Edison invented the light bulb and thereby changed Christmas tree decorations. One of Edison's employees, Edward Johnson, determined to apply the light bulb invention to the Christmas tree. In 1882 Johnson produced a string of 80 small and brightly colored electric light bulbs and placed them on his home Christmas tree in front of a large picture window. Far brighter than candles, the effect was electrifying and almost magical! Because at that time so few even had electricity, the tree in Johnson's home began to attract visitors and tourists who walked by Johnson's home just to see the lighted tree.
4. In 1895, President Grover Cleveland was the first president to have a lighted Christmas tree in the White House. The huge evergreen had more than 100 electric lights of red, blue and green hues. Those who were affluent throughout the nation sought to duplicate what the president had done for the White House. Some spent as much as \$3,000 per tree to do so.
5. By 1910, a string of 8 lights could be purchased for \$12, but was still too expensive for most Americans. In 1912, Ever Ready, a company that would soon be famous for making batteries, introduced a cheaper line of Christmas lights but still the cost was prohibitive for most families. But by 1924, General Electric and Westinghouse introduced a new set of Christmas lights that would dominate the market for the next 50 years. These multi-colored long-lasting bulbs burned cooler and offered better lighting than any type of lights yet produced; and they were inexpensive.
6. President Calvin Coolidge in 1923 began the tradition of lighting the national Christmas tree in a ceremony on the White House lawn. (Only the blackouts during World War II interrupted this annual ceremony.) Another similar tradition began in 1933 when Rockefeller Center in New York City began the lighting of their massive Christmas tree.

All of this draws us back to the original intent of Luther in the 16th century. The lights on the Christmas tree represent that Jesus is the light of the world and the billions of Christmas lights all over the world attest to that truth—whether people acknowledge that truth or not.

In thinking of Jesus as “the light of the world,” we are drawn to John 8:12ff. The phrase that Jesus uttered in this passage fulfills the Old Testament declarations of God being the light of salvation and that light is an attribute of God, as opposed to darkness as an attribute of Satan (see Exodus 25:37; Isaiah 9:2 and 42:6). Indeed, Isaiah tells us that the servant of the LORD was appointed as a light to the Gentiles, that he might bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth (49:6). Isaiah also sees the LORD as the light for his people (60:19-22). Jesus, therefore, manifested the dawning of a new era—the very kingdom of God. Jesus as the light of the world was a stunning and powerful metaphor in the 1st century; it is no less so in the 21st century. As we celebrate Christmas in 2009, let us remember powerfully and incontrovertibly that Jesus is the light of this desperately needy world; a truth the lights on our Christmas trees symbolize. I can think of no more significant message in this fallen and dark world than the truth that Jesus is the light of world. Merry Christmas and may 2 Corinthians 9:15 be your prayer of thanks to the Father this season.

See Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Great Traditions of Christmas*, pp. 118-24.