

WE HAVE SEEN HIS STAR

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king (Herod the Great), magi (wise men) from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

MATTHEW 2:1-2 (AMP)

How simple ... “We have seen His star and have come to worship Him.”

As I was driving home from work one night, I was somewhat overwhelmed by the homes in my neighborhood. I felt as if I had been transported to Walt Disney World! House after house was festooned with an abundance of bright lights and animated characters.

While I admit that I enjoyed the glittering display, it also made me wonder. What if an alien from another planet (or maybe even just a human from Earth!) were attempting to understand Christmas based on the decorations they saw on these lawns and homes? Could they possibly make a connection to the birth of Jesus? They might think Christmas is about cartoon or television characters, maybe reindeer, and definitely about Santa Claus (or some kind of rotund character in a red suit). Would the observer make a connection to the birth of Jesus the Christ? Probably not!

However, as I continued to drive along, I did see some angels, and high atop a huge evergreen I saw a brightly lit star — finally two symbols of the true story of Christmas included among all those otherwise irrelevant decorations.

This Christmas season, as we view the abundant decorations, are we looking for that star? Are we remembering that “... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ...”? (John 1:14) Can we say, “I have seen His star and have come to worship Him”?

As you go about your day today, rejoice and worship the King of Kings.

Heavenly Father, as we go through the Christmas season, help us to look past all the secular distractions of the season and focus on you. Help us to be like the Wise Men and say, “We have seen your star and have come to worship you.”

MARSHA HAHN
PITMAN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

FOLLOW ME

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."
JOHN 8:12 (NIV)

I once heard a story about a farmer who was looking out his farmhouse window one night during a blizzard. As he looked, he noticed a flock of birds sitting in his yard, hunkering down trying to ride out the storm. They looked tormented and frozen. It seemed that they were helpless and doomed to suffering through whatever the storm had in store for them.

Feeling sorry for the birds, he thought he would go out and open his barn doors and turn on the light so the birds could fly into it and be safe and warm. After doing so, the birds just continued to sit there. They didn't understand that comfort was available to them just a short distance away. So he circled around them and tried to shoo them into the barn. But the birds just flew around in a frenzy, not trusting him. Then after a while they sat back down in the yard looking miserable and cold.

Frustrated, the farmer thought to himself: If only I could be a bird for a while, then maybe I could get them to trust me and follow me into the barn where it is safe, peaceful, and comfortable.

This story is an analogy of what God has done for us. God sent His Son to Earth as a human, and His name is Jesus Christ. And while He walked the Earth, He told us to follow Him. He showed us how we should live. He showed us that by trusting Him we could find comfort and peace during the blizzards in our lives. He opened the door to salvation and turned on the light of the world.

Father, we thank you this day for giving us the light of the world through your Son, Jesus, who beckons us to follow Him. In His name we pray, Amen.

LEE DUFFIELD
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

He who has not Christmas in his heart
will never find it under a tree.

Roy L. Smith

CHRISTMAS TREES

And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

1 JOHN 5:20 (NASB)

Think about it — you bring a tree into your house and put lots of “things” on it. Any other time of the year you would never dream of bringing an entire tree into your house! Why do we do this?

There are many legends from many different lands about Christmas trees. Some of them are from ancient times, some pagan and some Christian. Here is a sampling:

- In medieval Germany, miracle plays were acted out on December 24, which was Adam and Eve’s Day. People brought “paradise trees” into their homes, which were adorned with round pastry wafers symbolizing the Eucharist (Communion). Over time, these developed into cookie ornaments. Later it became popular to put Christmas trees in church sanctuaries. Alongside the trees were racks of candles, which were eventually placed on the trees, foreshadowing our modern electric lights.
- Over a thousand years ago, a monk named Boniface used the evergreen tree to tell people about the Trinity. The triangular tree, while having three corners, is just one tree, mirroring the existence of God the Father/Creator, Jesus the Son/Savior, and the Holy Spirit as one God.

You might have an artificial or live Christmas tree. You might place an angel or a star at the top, put on white or colored lights, create a “themed” tree, or use tinsel or bows. Maybe you hang a mix of ornaments the family has collected over the years, or maybe you enjoy the recent tradition of saving and dating the “slice” from the trunk.

Whatever your traditions, when you look at your tree, let it remind you of the real truth and meaning of this holiday called Christmas. Celebrate the truth that God wants all people to be reunited with Him for no other reason than because He loves what He created — us! This reuniting happens when we acknowledge who Jesus is and the reason He came to Earth — so that we can spend eternity in the presence of God!

Father, there are visible reminders all over your creation of your love for us. Thank you for the greatest Gift we could ever receive. Amen.

PEGGY MARKS
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

WINNING

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

HEBREWS 12:1 (NIV)

Those of us who have played a team or individual sport or those who are avid sports fans know the importance of scoring runs, points, or goals, or finishing first. Winning gets the team or individual recognition, fame, trophy, or some sort of prize.

In our Christian walk, we are aware that God offers us a “prize” — that of salvation. However, He is not concerned about us scoring points with Him, or how many good deeds we do. Yes, in some religions doing more good deeds than evil ones gets you rewarded in the afterlife. With our God, this idea couldn’t be further from the truth. We get the “prize” of salvation through the grace of God. “Goods works simply demonstrate the genuineness of your faith.”*

In his epistles, the Apostle Paul uses many athletic references regarding boxing, wrestling, and the best known, running. Paul states, “*Do you not know that in a race all runners run but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*” (1 Corinthians 9:24)

In our race, one designed specifically for us by God, we are not competing against others. Even with that, the race is not easy because of the many hurdles we will confront. Chapter 11 of Hebrews, sometimes referred to as the “Hall of Faith,” tells about those who have run the race before us and have won the prize because they kept the faith.

Our opportunity to run the race and get the “prize” was made possible through the birth of our Savior. Everyone is offered the same opportunity and the same prize, but they are expected to train and condition themselves as faithful Christians just like an athlete does for a physical event. We want to be able to say at the end of our life, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” And, if that is the case in your life, YOU WIN.

Heavenly Father, during this Advent season and all year long, give us the strength and endurance to run the race you have designed for us.

TED FRETT

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*From *Wisdom for Today*, Chuck Smith, 2013.

WAR IN HEAVEN

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

ISAIAH 7:14 (NIV)

Eons ago there was a war in heaven. The angel Lucifer stood against the Lord God. He thought he was worthy of the same worship as God, and thus the battle between good and evil began. (Revelation 12:7-9)

Two thousand years ago the battle escalated when the Father decided to carry His eternal gift to the planet Earth. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, as spoken through the angel Gabriel, God's greatest gift to all mankind, the seed of His only Son, was to be placed in the womb of a young girl named Mary, God's chosen vessel. The gift was called Immanuel, *God with us*.

God was successful in bringing forth His greatest gift — Immanuel, God with us! Jesus was born and the first Christmas was celebrated. However, the powers of evil were determined to stop Immanuel at all costs. In a desperate attempt to put an end to God's plan, Satan slaughtered all male babies up to age two through Herod's edict. (Matthew 2:16-18) But evil failed. Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt with Mary and the baby, and Jesus' life was saved.

But Lucifer, now called Satan, is still out to eradicate that first Christmas of Jesus' birth. The war in heaven has spilled out on Earth! (Revelation 12:17) Every year when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, Satan and his minions attack the true meaning of that first Christmas. Satan and his demons have strong-armed people to change "Merry Christmas" to "Happy Holidays." He has removed the creche and nativity scenes from the town square, so to speak. Demonic powers prevent the singing of songs and hymns that glorify the birth of Jesus. Movies, TV, and greeting cards mentioning the name of Jesus are scarce.

The birth of Jesus stirs more than excitement — it stirs evil! We are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against persons without bodies, the evil rulers of the unseen world, those mighty satanic beings and great evil princes of darkness who rule this world, and against numbers of wicked spirits in the spirit world. (Ephesians 6:12)

Yes, Satan is still at war with God and His children, but he will never be successful. For the Son of God is born again this Christmas morning! Maranatha — (come, Lord Jesus) and Merry Christmas!

Dear Lord, we thank you for the Gift, and we honor the Gift by singing Glory to God in the highest! In Jesus' name, Amen.

AL ZAPPOLA

NEW HOPE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

FOUNDATIONS AND THE SPIRIT

He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock...

LUKE 6:48 (NKJV)

And on this rock I will build my church.

MATTHEW 16:18 (NKJV)

One Sunday when Pastor Paul preached, he used the story Jesus told about two men. One built his house upon the sand, the other built his upon a rock. Pastor Paul commented that you never hear anyone saying, “Wait until you see my pictures of the foundations of places I visited on vacation.”

No, we rarely think about foundations. Usually they aren’t even seen, being totally covered by nice looking bricks, plants, or flowering bushes. Yet if the foundation isn’t strong and sturdy, the building will not last long.

I like to think of the foundation as the Spirit of God. We do not see the Spirit, but we know He’s there. In times of stress or trouble, we can lean back on Him knowing that He is the Rock of our faith ready to hold us up when we might faint or fall.

We do not have to bear the everyday trials of life. The unseen Spirit is ever near to help and guide us. I like a saying I recently read, “Faith is not about everything turning out OK. Faith is about being OK no matter how things turn out.” Sturdy is the Rock of our faith!

Dear Lord, be with us today. Help us to remember that your Spirit, the Rock of our faith, is there to help and guide us even though we do not see Him. Thank you for your ever nearness to us. Amen.

CAROL PHILLIPS
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

What star is this, With beams so bright,
Which shames the sun’s less radiant light?
It shines to announce a newborn King.
Glad tidings of our God to bring.

Derric Johnson, The Wonder of Christmas, 2005

HONOR

For this reason You are great, O Lord God; for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears.

2 SAMUEL 7:22 (NASB)

If you pay attention even a little to current events in our nation, you are well aware of recent upheavals and protests about statues and monuments being taken down, and even holidays being changed. This tension has arisen because the people being honored have been found to be not so honorable.

The difficulties and hard feelings caused by these protests might make us question who, if anyone, is worthy of being honored in such a way. The truth is that no one, no matter how much good they may do in their life, is perfectly honorable. Everyone has something in their life that could be scrutinized and found lacking in some way.

The only One who fully deserves such honor, by all people, came to Earth as a baby a little over 2,000 years ago to save all people. And I guess you could say we honor Him with a holiday by celebrating Christmas. But in reality, the way we celebrate Christmas is often not what honors our Savior, Jesus Christ. Yes, we work hard to “Keep Christ in Christmas.” We prepare our hearts during Advent to accept Him anew. We participate in joyful praise and worship throughout the season. Without question, these are all good and important things to do.

But the truth is that we must honor Christ with our whole lives. We honor Him by doing His will *all during the year*. We honor Him by loving and serving those He has created. We honor Him by doing as He would do, by being His hands and feet here on Earth. We don’t need statues or holidays to honor the One above all others. We just need to be His people and to act like He wants us to act, each and every day that He gives to us.

Father, help me remember that what I do to honor you is noticed by so many others. Let me be a worthy example of your love and truly honor you with my life. Amen.

BETH PRICE
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

I will honor Christmas in my heart,
and try to keep it all the year.

Charles Dickens