



RESURRECTION CHRISTIAN MINISTRIES

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EVANGELIZING THE HEART OF THE BELIEVER

Letters of Faith

Christmas 2016

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

Revelation 22:13 NASB

Dearly Beloved,

The month of December, and the way we relate to all the activities and memories it contains, makes us think of these words from Jesus. We look forward to the celebration of the birth of our Lord, which marks the beginning of God’s complete and final revelation of Himself to us, and yet we look back over the happenings of the nearly completed year. The beginning and the end...December is indeed the one month of the year in which we all tend to get rather sentimental, nostalgic, and somewhat introspective. December is much more of a “take stock and inventory” month with most of us than is January.

Some of us remember that as children our behavior record for the past year unfortunately determined if we would receive rewards around the Christmas tree. We anxiously wondered whether we had been judged “naughty or nice,” or if nice, “nice enough?” Had we “measured up” to our parents’ expectations, or (gulp) to God’s? Did the scarcity (or the abundance) of gifts we would be receiving silently signify an accurate evaluation of our efforts, or the extent of our parents’ love towards us, or even of God’s approval of us? Was our “haul” on Christmas equal to my friend’s “loot?”

We formed new “resolutions” for the year ahead. *“I’ll start over again, and this year I’ll do better, just you watch and see.”* The real meaning of Christmas was thus submerged or even lost altogether in focusing on ourselves instead of Jesus, especially on our faults; the anxiety that we would not receive what we wanted; and the concern that the presents we were planning to give were not sufficient to give the love (or bribe) message we wanted to convey.

It is amazing to all of us now that this uniquely focused worldwide corporate celebration of Jesus’ birth had become so introspective and so materialistic and so performance based!

At the other end of the spectrum of worldly Christmas celebrations was the extreme emphasis on the tinsel and lights and trees and brownies. Of course the fairyland and toyland motifs were great ways to build up childhood dreams and sugarplummy imaginations, but they had little to do with the miraculous reality of the Word of God becoming flesh and descending to live, and to die, here among mankind.

We were both blessed by being raised in seriously Episcopalian families that had found a delightful center ground to these extreme perspectives. We enjoyed a bit of Santa Claus “stockings hung by the chimney with care” and artistically decorated Christmas trees much too tall for even Granddad’s ten-foot parlor’s ceiling height. Traditional decorations combined our solid German foundations, our more lighthearted English creativity, and a bit of Celtic mystical mischievousness. In the midst of all the folderol, and most memorable, was the centerpiece of all decorations: the awesome Black Forest Crèche with the little Lord Jesus

asleep on the hay surrounded by sheep, a donkey, a moo-cow, the ruggedly handsome Joseph, and the most beautiful brilliant blue and hallowed ethereal Mary. Never mind the untimely presence of the three wise men in their amazingly brilliant robes with their stately camels, because our church choir sang “We Three Kings of Orient Are” so beautifully that my soul is still moved at the remembrance of those deep baritone voices.

After all our extended family love gifts were exchanged on Christmas Eve, Mom had led us in unforgettable Christmas Carols on the piano, Uncle Joe had shared his final silly, but really funny Christmas joke, and all the red candles in the window were snuffed out for the night, Mom drove us home from Granddad’s and we all immediately went to bed with a deep and unique peace in our hearts, too thrilled, loved, and tired to even have a single thought for what might be coming to our house the next day — except that it had something to do with Jesus.

Jesus’ words in John 10:10 were that He came to give us LIFE. Knowing that and knowing Jesus as we do now, we are cognizant that the enduring spirit of the Christian’s Christmas celebration should be focused on the coming of this New Life with each present we give and receive, with each greeting we minister, with each carol we sing, with each decoration we create or rehang, and with every special traditional function we perform or observe.

Jesus’ birth as a human baby, His life as a Holy Spirit-filled man, His death as the sacrificial Lamb of God, and His resurrection as the Glorified Son of the Most High Living God were orchestrated at God’s command to declare the end of the era of Satan’s dominion here on earth and the beginning of the era of the Kingdom of God. It marked the end of the old covenant and the beginning of the new covenant that allows us former Gentiles to be included in God’s promises to the righteous Jews.

Hebrews 7:18-19 tells us: **“For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.”** Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection revealed the fact that God, **“...appointed [His Son] heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And [Jesus] is the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature...”** (Hebrews 1:2-3). **“He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.”** (Colossians 1:18)

This is who was portrayed lying helplessly as a baby in the manger in my precious family crèche! He, **“who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.”** (Philippians 2:6-7)

Some years ago, on second thought many years ago, Gretel and I wanted to express this deep and exciting truth in a way that would be forever engraved on the minds and spirits of our children and the congregation of the church we were shepherding. The Holy Spirit heard our prayer and gave us specific and graphic instructions to build a simple wooden manger (two feet square, eight inches deep, and eighteen inches high) and make a snug little baby’s bed in it with nonflammable straw. Our children loved being part of such an exciting construction project and zealously measured, sawed, glued, hammered, stained, and sealed that precious little vessel. It looked beautiful! It really was fit for a King!

On Christmas Eve we brought our lovingly-constructed little manger to our Christmas service and placed a tray with the Communion bread and wine on top of the straw. After

blessing the bread and the wine, we invited the church to come forward in turn by families and friends to kneel at the side of the manger, and to let their minds and spirits dwell on the birth of this little child whose destiny was to be their saving grace. We encouraged them to see this divine birth as the beginning of hope and the end of Satan's control over us—to see Him as the gentle Lamb who was at the same time the awesome Lion of Judah—to see the cross beckoning to Him beyond the manger—to see the New Life that His new life was to make available to all mankind.

As we shared Communion and worshiped our Lord, we sensed the awesome flow of God's unfathomable love towards us—the love that was willing to die to pay the price of the judgment against us, to ransom us from our sentence of death.

What a blessing to know that “...**Jesus [Himself] has become the guarantee of a better covenant**” (Hebrews 7:22) by “...**the power of an indestructible life.**” (Hebrews 7:16) “**Hence, also, He is able to save forever those [of us] who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for [us].**” (Hebrews 7:25)

We took that precious manger home with us that Christmas Eve, and we hid our little love gifts to the kids in the straw for them to find next morning. We had a very special experience that Christmas of our Father God's special love gift to us—His Son, Jesus!

Our prayer is that your Christmas memories will be wrapped up in the warm, sure, knowledge that “...**the old things have passed away...new things have come.**” (2 Cor. 5:17), and “**may mercy and peace and love be multiplied to you**” in Jesus! (Jude 2)

Dear Heavenly Father, help us to focus on the whole person of Jesus this season of corporately celebrating Your giving Him to us here on the earth! Help me to see the Man in the Baby, the Lion in the Lamb, the sacrifice in the gift! Help me to filter out all of the worldly clutter that tries to pollute the simplicity and purity of Jesus' birth and the simplicity and purity of my devotion to Him as my Lord and Savior. Amen.

Special Christmas hugs,

Paul & Gretel