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*The
Christmas
Scene*

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THE CHRISTMAS SCENE is so varied: frustrated fathers poring over directions written in failed English while trying to assemble toys packaged by someone who miscounted the nuts and bolts; bleary-eyed, bone-weary mothers desperately sewing after hours to finish a dress; a child neglecting an expensive gift in favor of something surprisingly simple; elegant, carefully applied wrappings being torn quickly apart as if they were an obstacle instead of part of the gift; the unforeseen need for more batteries increasing as parents' own energy supplies diminish; and with the deadline drawing ever closer, parental exhaustion finally triumphing over spousal communication.

We gladly shower so much on each other and then feel guilty amid our comparative abundance. Yet more presents were likely put under the tree than there were gifts placed in others' storehouses of self-esteem. More bright wrappings may have been scattered about than bright words of good cheer.

Nintendos follow yesteryear's coveted Cabbage Patch dolls into the dustbin of history. Our material gifts, like our natural Christmas trees, soon perish, if only from appreciative use. The new tie, at least in my case, will be spilled on before week's end.

Even so, commercialized as the Christmas scene has become, this season is still one of the few times when

much of the human family shares a focused pause and joins in some religious contemplation. For a moment at least, Christmas takes us outside the tiny theater of self into "the broad, sunlit uplands." Yes, we still wish Christmas were more deeply felt and lasted longer, but the visibly increased goodwill nevertheless reminds us, if only *briefly*, of what could be *everlastingly*. For a few days, the first and second commandments are more pondered and observed.

At Christmas time, and rightly so, the capacity for receiving is also needed. Yes, there really is also a season under heaven for receiving. In view of all God has given to us, we ought to be pretty good at receiving, but we are not. We who regard ourselves as quite self-sufficient and independent often find receiving awkward, even difficult. Sometimes the Lord provides us with unwanted circumstances in our lives in order to teach us how to receive.

Clearly, there are times in life when one person needs to say or to give something—and to do so much more than the other person needs to hear or receive it. How frequently our communications with God reflect this circumstance! He does not need us to inform Him of our needs through petitionary prayer. Nevertheless, He provides for our need to petition and our need to thank and to praise Him.

We should not be surprised, however, if the need to give and the need to receive are not always precisely matched. There is bound to be some disappointment at times, including Christmas.

Let us consider, however, a few fundamentals of the Christmas scene which are never dismantled and are never "over."

Celebrating that special star, as we do, denotes an acknowledgment of divine design that operates each day of the year, refuting those who declare that the universe represents "godless geometric space," or that we live in "an unsponsored universe," in an "empire of chance." The little star of Bethlehem was not little, given all its accompanying implications!

The new star, by the way, would have had to be placed

in its precise orbit long, long before it shone so precisely! By reflecting such careful divine design, it underscored what the Lord has said: "All things must come to pass in their time" (D&C 64:32). His planning and precision pertain not only to astrophysical orbits but to human orbits as well. This is a stunning thing for us to contemplate in all seasons! How great the implications of the revelations!

Therefore, what about our individualized orbits and schedules? Do we appear on the scene on time, and do we "shine as lights in the world" as the Apostle Paul urged? (Philippians 2:15.) Yes, there is a personalized plan for each of us. Like the Christmas star, each of us, if faithful, has an ordained orbit, a prescribed path, as we pass through this second estate.

We sing, "The stars in the heavens looked down where He lay." The on-looking universe, created by Jesus under the Father's direction, contained "worlds without number" (Moses 1:33). In that sense, Christ was cradled not only in a manger but also in the midst of His own vast creations.

On the Eastern Hemisphere, the special star which signaled His birth was recognized by only a few shepherds and several wise men. The multitudes were too busy with great feasts and taxes. They were too preoccupied with the ebb and flow of political power, as are so many in our own time. When Christ comes again, however, it will not be to the meekness of the manger but in majesty and power. The sign of His second coming will be such that "all people shall see it together" (D&C 88:93), not just a humble few. How the Lord will manage all that we do not know, but He clearly declares "all flesh shall see me together" (D&C 101:23). What an impending moment!

Exclaiming "Joy to the world!" provides a much-needed antidote to those who say, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (2 Nephi 28:7). Truly, "men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25)—unless they choose questionable, perishable pleasure instead! Lyrics like "Christ, the Savior, is born" constitute a faith-filled response

to those who declare, "No deity will save us; we must save ourselves" (Humanist Manifesto II, 1973).

Still, despite Christmas and seasonal renewal, an objective observer of the human scene would agree that the sea of Christian faith is on the ebb. Matthew Arnold so wrote of that ebbing sea of faith, and of how there is only to be heard

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
("Dover Beach.")

In a world filled with distress, despair, and perplexity, Christmas reminds those who have eyes to see of the humble beginning of Jesus' great rescue mission. Many mortals, even those who do not believe we are a fallen race, agree that mankind is in distress. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "disgraced [man] may be, yet is not dethroned, and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned" (C. S. Lewis, *The Authentic Voice*, p. 88). If we look closely—and Christmas stirs us to look closely—the worn label in those "rags" tells us of our true identity.

God's gifts, unlike seasonal gifts, are eternal and unperishable, constituting a continuing Christmas which is never over! These infinite gifts are made possible by the "infinite atonement" (2 Nephi 9:7; Alma 34:10–12). Without the "infinite atonement" there would be no universal immortality, nor could there be given the greatest gift which even God can give—eternal life! (D&C 6:13; 14:7.)

Meanwhile, if we cannot distinguish the eternal things from the things of the day, we are to be pitied. The first Christmas in the Middle East was met with massive, uncomprehending indifference. In both fact and symbol there was no room at the inn. People were busy, just as in the days of Noah, and just as they will be prior to the Second Coming.

Sometimes the Lord's work meets with icy indifference; at other times, with stiff resistance. The latter was the case in the Americas that first Christmas. Unbelievers threatened members of the Church with death if the prophesied sign heralding Jesus' birth did not occur precisely as calendared (3 Nephi 1:9). What immense pressure and anxiety that band of Christians must have felt! Had the date actually passed? Could they hold out? Only at the last moment did the divine reassurance come: "On the morrow come I into the world" (3 Nephi 1:13). True faith can carry us past seeming breaking points! For real Christians, "hold on," "hold fast," "endure well" finally become much more than mere words.

Think of the wise men. From whence they came and how long their journey, we know not. We know only that they came from the east.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, the wise men made a courtesy call upon Herod and were requested by that wily one to return and tell him where they found the Christ child. Having been warned in a dream, they wisely hearkened again to divine counsel and did not inform the king (Matthew 2:12). They knew how to render unto Caesar what was Caesar's, but unto God that which was God's (Matthew 22:21). The world's Caesars and Herods come and go, "an hour of pomp, an hour of show," but these wise men had come to worship the King of kings.

Bethlehem blends with Gethsemane and Calvary to symbolize God's great gift of the Messiah and the infinite atonement!

He before whom a few gifts were laid in that lowly manger has spread so many gifts before us, thereby providing an unending Christmas. In fact, from Him for whom there was no room at the inn there comes to the faithful so many blessings "that there shall not be room enough to receive [them]"! (Malachi 3:10.)

The words expressed in celebration of Jesus' birth ("Good tidings of great joy," "A Saviour" is born, "Glory to

God in the highest” [Luke 2:10, 11, 14]) followed a millenia of waiting for the Messiah to be born. The birth at Bethlehem signaled that very soon that great redemption would come! What were a mere thirty-three more years until the glorious redemption, when some had waited thirty-three centuries!

Felicity is often followed by irony. Later in Jesus’ mortal Messiahship, Lazarus, whose life Jesus miraculously restored, soon found that happy life endangered. The enemies of Jesus clearly did not want a living witness to the Savior’s healing power. (John 12:10–12.) After Jesus was resurrected, one wonders, did Lazarus remain an object of curiosity, and even of hostility, among some of his contemporaries?

Ironies so often follow the felicities and the reveries in our lives. In fact, irony is a particularly sharp, customized, cutting tool of adversity. No one experienced more irony than Jesus during His mortal Messiahship.

After Egypt, the First Family resided in Nazareth. Micah had prophesied Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), but Matthew wrote of prophecies saying Christ would be known as a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23). Earlier Book of Mormon prophets foretold that Mary would be a Nazarene (1 Nephi 11:13). Without a fulness of the scriptures, however, there occurred a misreading:

Many of the people therefore, when they heard this saying, said, Of a truth this is the Prophet.

Others said, This is the Christ. But some said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee?

Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was?

So there was a division among the people because of him. (John 7:40–43.)

Today there is still “a division” concerning Jesus. Some say He is merely a man, a thing of “naught” (John 7:42, 43;

1 Nephi 19:7). Others regard Him as a great moral teacher. Still others, as a minor prophet. Some say, correctly and happily, He is the redeeming Messiah!

The first Christmas included admirable Joseph, who endured misunderstanding. Being a just man, he had not wished to embarrass Mary. Then, while he pondered, an angel appeared to reassure and to direct him. (Matthew 1:18–24.) But Joseph first had to endure and ponder the trial of the unexplainable—before the witness came, just as in Moroni’s counsel: “Dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith” (Ether 12:6).

Then there was Mary. She knew more than she could tell. Furthermore, she also had been told things she could not fully understand, so she kept these things in her heart and pondered them. (Luke 2:19–51.) Even so, she could not be expected to see the full dimensions of the great work of which she was such an important part. Sometimes she was an understandably anxious mother, as when her twelve-year-old son seemed lost. Found, He said to her, “Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49.)

Is not a mixture of insight and anxiety to be found in each of us? We too sometimes know more than we can tell, more than tongue can transmit. Nor does our special gospel knowledge immunize us from all anxiety. We are still required to go through daily life, not around it.

Just why did God choose to have Jesus born in an obscure manger? To live in an obscure country, on an obscure planet, in an obscure solar system, which is at the outer edges of the Milky Way, a comparatively ordinary galaxy, one of a million million galaxies? We do not know.

Having genuine faith in God clearly requires not only believing that He is there but also that He is cosmically competent—that He can really bring to pass His purposes (2 Nephi 27:20, 21).

As we begin to sense the immensity of God’s plans, we

also begin to ponder the breathtaking personalness of His work. While guiding galaxies, God notices the fall of each sparrow and knows the secret desires of our individual hearts. The vastness of His work is unfathomable to us: "That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God" (D&C 76:24).

Does our faith in Jesus include faith in His timing, whether in His macro-management of the entire universe or in His micro-shepherding of us?

Bethlehem, Gethsemane, and Calvary thus conjoin to provide a Christmas which is as infinite as the infinite atonement—and as unending.

Jesus' name was determined premortally to be the loftiest, and the only name under heaven offering salvation to mankind. Yet on earth He willingly lived, wrote Paul, as a person "of no reputation" (Philippians 2:7).

As the Creator Lord, He constructed the universe, yet in Galilee He was known merely as "the carpenter's son"! (Matthew 13:55.) The Lord of the universe was even without honor in His own provincial Nazarene countryside (Mark 6:4).

He issued the original commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy, but was accused of violating the Sabbath because He gave healing rest to the afflicted (John 5:8–16).

The irony was constant. This whole earth is actually Jesus' footstool, but at Bethlehem there was "no crib for his bed." Christ was keenly aware of irony: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Luke 9:58).

Jesus was Lord of all the prophets. Truly, "before Abraham" was He, Jehovah (John 8:58). But for His so saying, some quickly sought to take Jesus' life (John 8:59).

Jesus, as Jehovah, called, prepared, and taught Moses, introducing the law of Moses as a schoolmaster for the later fullness of His gospel (Galatians 3:24; 2 Nephi 25:24). Yet when Jesus unsuccessfully reminded audiences that Moses

had written of Him, the people still preferred honoring Moses to listening to Jesus' words (John 5:46–47; see also Luke 24:27).

An anxious Pilate "saith unto Jesus, Whence art thou? But Jesus gave him no answer." (John 19:9.) Yet months earlier, to a woman of Samaria who expected the Messiah, Jesus had quietly disclosed, "I that speak unto thee am he" (John 4:26).

After certain religious leaders enflamed the pre-crucifixion crowd, He who within hours would rescue all mankind heard the manipulated crowd cry "Barabbas," who was thereby rescued instead of Jesus (Mark 15:11).

Christ the Creator fashioned "worlds without number," providing us with astrophysical awe when viewing even "the least of these" (D&C 88:47). Yet with His fingers He created clay from spittle, restoring sight to one blind man (John 9:6).

No wonder the declaratory focus of the first Christmas was on "a Savior is born." What greater tidings could there be than those "good tidings of great joy"? No wonder the reverential exclamation praising our planning and loving Father—indeed, "Glory to God in the highest!"

"Come, let us adore Him," Jesus Christ. The ultimate form of adoration of Him is emulation! Come, let us glorify God with our daily lives!

Like the wise men from the east, we too must travel a great distance in order to come unto Christ, the Light of the World. No matter—He waits for us "with open arms" (Mormon 6:17). May Christmas cause us deeper contemplation and deeper determination to complete that journey, the journey of journeys—in order to experience that resplendent rendezvous.

What counsel then comes to us out of that Bethlehem chapter to help us be worthy and effective participants in the further unfolding chapters?

1. We should be like that star—in our proper orbit and place, on time, putting our talents to work, doing what we

have been asked to do. God has placed us in our proper human orbits with the same precision he used as He placed that star in a certain trajectory ages before it shone brightly that special night. Like that star, we too must reflect the glory of God and not seek to shine for our own sake. Illuminated individuals should remember that "a candle is not lighted for itself, and neither is a man." (George McDonald, *Life Essential*, p. 79.)

2. We should emulate the shepherds who "made known abroad" all that which was told them. And we have been told so much more! We too must be willing to leave off other tasks in order to declare the glad and good tidings of Christ's gospel and Church fully restored. The scriptures say the shepherds "came with haste." Their lengthening of their stride is a sermon in itself.

3. We can be like the wise men and notice the signs in the midst of an unnoticed world and seek the Savior—refusing, as did the wise men, to be used improperly by earthly rulers, yet giving freely of our gifts and talents and time, for these are the real gold, frankincense, and myrrh of our lives.

4. Let us do what is right even when misunderstood, just as Joseph did, and endure the doubts and even the derision of others who simply do not understand what divine purposes are under way.

5. We should, as did John the Baptist while yet a babe in Elizabeth's womb, leap in anticipation and acknowledgment of the impending Christ. We too need a sense of history and of our place in preparing the way for His coming.

6. Like our fellow members of the ancient Church on the American Hemisphere, we ought to be willing to trust (even up to the last moment) in the fulfillment of prophecy. These Saints trusted in Samuel's prophecy about the Savior's birth (Helaman 14:3–5) even when their lives were forfeit (3 Nephi 1:8–9).

7. We will need to be like Mary and keep some things in our hearts and ponder them trustingly, for we too know

more than we can tell. And should we, like the Christ child, need to spend a season in an Egypt of patient preparation and waiting, so be it!

8. We should avoid being deeply disappointed or surprised when the modern innkeepers or the establishments of the world have no room for Christ's servants or cannot "give place for a portion" of Christ's word (Alma 32:27). For us too, better a spiritual manger than a stay in those secular inns of the intellect which are so exclusionary of spiritual things.

9. Let us not be surprised, either, if the Herods of today are no more humane than the one of the Christ child's day, especially when they think their kingdoms are to be threatened by the kingdom of God. Let us be wise as serpents and harmless as doves as we are confronted with the modern counterparts of that wily Herod who asked the wise men to return to him to tell him where the Babe was so that he too could come to "worship." It is better to be rejected than "taken in" by those who would use us to hurt God's work.

Yes, the larger Christmas story is clearly not over. It is not solely about some other time, some other place, and some other people. It is still unfolding, and we are in it!

Like the wise men who persisted to Bethlehem, let us not turn back from our full journey—beyond Bethlehem—and we too shall be led to Him.

So, in gospel gladness, we wish for ourselves and each other not only a "Merry Christmas" with all that implies, and not just a "Happy New Year," but also the joys and happiness of eternal life, God's greatest gift!