

"Keeping Christmas"

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¹⁸Now the In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (Matthew 2:1-12)

Last week, while we were on the road for a brief vacation, we went into Cracker Barrel for breakfast. If you've ever gone to a Cracker Barrel around any holiday time, you know that the store out front is full of items themed for the season. In November and December, it is a Christmas retail explosion. But when we went in to eat on December 28th, it was all gone. The pathetic remnant of holiday wares that was left had been relegated to a little table in the corner -- all of it marked to move at 70% off. Just three days after December 25th, Christmas at Cracker Barrel had virtually disappeared.

Perhaps it is inevitable when we go so overboard as soon as November arrives. When Christmas finally arrives, part of us is ready to move on. But there has always been a part of me that is let down when Christmas is over. I am usually not quite ready to let it go. Perhaps that is why, when I was fourteen, my grandmother gave me this little book as a Christmas gift. It contains the Presbyterian preacher Peter Marshall's most famous sermon, which he called "Let's Keep Christmas."

When he wrote it, Marshall had not been in the United States for long. Some new friends, knowing that his family was back home in Scotland, invited him to their home on Christmas Eve. There, he had helped them decorate the tree. He sat on a stool in the kitchen and cut out Christmas cookies, decorating them with cherries and nuts before they were baked. He had joined them around the piano to sing "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen." Looking back later, he would say that there was an unmistakable presence in that home -- something that everyone had sensed. It was more than Christmas spirit, he said. "It was as if Christ Himself had entered into that home."

At the end of the evening, Peter did not want to go, but he had a long drive back to Birmingham. As he gathered his things, the host said, "If you must go, I have just one request to make of you. Will you have a prayer with us before you leave?" So, the family gathered around the fireplace, and the young Scottish pastor led them in a heartfelt prayer in his pleasant

Scottish accent -- a prayer which simply thanked God for the amazing gift of sending Christ into the world.

Driving home alone that night, Marshall realized that the angels' prophecy had truly come to pass in that family – that with them there was “peace on earth, good will toward men.” And as he thought he perceived other traces of that truth – light streaming from warm windows, snatches of laughter audible even in a passing car, the songs of children singing Christmas carols. And he was suddenly moved with a great wistfulness that brought tears to his eyes. And in that wistfulness he found himself praying aloud in the car: “Oh, God, why can't more people, all of us, open our hearts to the wonderful spirit abroad in the world tonight – not just on Christmas, but on every day? What a happy place this old earth could be if – oh, God, if only we would keep Christmas the whole year through.”

Later, the joy that had become wistfulness, and the wistfulness that had become the prayer, would become this sermon, which he named “Let's Keep Christmas.” In the world, the lights are coming down, radio stations have returned to normal, and empty trees are at the street... but in the church, it is still Christmastide. We are still celebrating the birth of light and life. The remainder of these words come from Peter Marshall, but I offer them to you today as our collective Christmas prayer...

“Changes are everywhere. Many institutions and customs that we once thought sacrosanct have gone by the board. Yet there are a few that abide, defying time and revolution. The old message: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord” is still the heart of Christmas. It can be nothing else. And this message can neither be changed nor quite forgotten, although there are many things that tend to make us forget. ...

There is no need to search for stories new and different. There is only one after all – and no modern author can improve it:

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

We all feel the pressure of approaching Christmas. The traffic is terrible. You can't find a parking space... The stores are crowded... Mob scenes make shopping a nightmare. You are thinking about presents – wondering what in the world you can get for so-and-so. You think of friends and loved ones who are so hard to shop for. You can't think of anything they need (which is rather strange when you take time to think of it).

Maybe there is nothing in a store that they need. But what about some token of love – what about love itself... and friendship ... and understanding... and consideration... and a helping hand... and a smile... and a prayer?

You can't buy these things in any store, and these are the very things people need. We all need them... Blessed will they be who receive them this Christmas or at any time. Let's not permit the crowds and the rush to crowd Christmas out of our hearts, for that is where it belongs. Christmas is not in the stores – but in the hearts of people.

I thank God for Christmas. Would that it lasted all year. For on Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day, all the world is a better place, and men and women are more lovable. Love itself seeps into every heart, and miracles happen.

When Christmas doesn't make your heart swell up until it nearly bursts... and fill your eyes with tears... and make you soft and warm inside ... then you'll know that something inside of you is dead...

Isn't it wonderful to think that nothing can really harm the joy of Christmas. Although your Christmas tree decorations will include many new gadgets, such as lights with bubbles in them, it's the old tree decorations that mean the most... The ones you save carefully from year to year... that crooked star that goes on the top of the tree... the ornaments that you've been so careful with.

And you'll bring out the tiny manger, and the shed, and the little figures of the Holy Family... and lovingly arrange them on the mantel or in the middle of the dining room table.

There will be the fragrance of cookies baking spices and fruit cake, and the warmth of the house shall be melodious with the lilting strains of "Silent Night, Holy Night."

And you'll listen to the wonderful Christmas music on the radio. Some of the songs will be modern – good enough music perhaps – but it will be the old carols, the lovely old Christmas hymns that will mean the most.

And forests of trees will march right into our living rooms. There will be bells on our doors and holly wreaths in our windows. And we shall sweep the Noel skies for their brightest colors and festoon our homes with stars...

And finally Christmas morning will come. Don't worry – you'll be ready for it. You'll catch the spirit all right, or *it will catch you, which is even better.*

And then you will remember what Christmas means – the beginning of Christianity... the second chance for the world... the hope for peace... and the only way. The promise that the angels sang is the most wonderful music the world has ever heard. "Peace on earth and good will toward men." It was not a pronouncement upon the state of the world then, nor is it a reading of the international barometer of the present time... but it is a promise – God's promise – of what one day will come to pass.

The years that are gone are graveyards in which all the persuasions of men have crumbled into dust. If history has any voice, it is to say that all these ways of men lead nowhere. There remains one way – The Way – untried, untested, unexplored fully... the way of Him Who was born a babe in Bethlehem.

In a world that seems not only to be changing, but even to be dissolving, there are some tens of millions of us who want Christmas to be the same...

We long for the abiding love among men of good will which the season brings... believing in this ancient miracle of Christmas with its softening, sweetening influence to tug at our heart strings once again. We want to hold on to the old customs and traditions because they strengthen our family ties, bind us to our friends, make us one with all mankind for whom the Child was born, and bring us back again to the God Who gave His only begotten Son, that "whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

So, we will not "spend" Christmas... nor "observe" Christmas.

We will "keep" Christmas – keep it as it is... in all the loveliness of its ancient traditions. May we keep it in our hearts, that we may be kept in its hope.

Amen.