

Chrismons Mini-Messages Christmas Eve, 2020

The Angel(s)

This year, I decorated my house with a lighted star I was able to repair and light nets on a couple of bushes at my house. I certainly don't have the most decorated house in town; there are many others which are much brighter. In fact, NASA has noticed that, at night, small pockets of light from human activity are visible on Earth's surface. During the holidays, those lights get noticeably bigger and brighter.

In a new 200-page e-book, "Earth at Night," the agency has compiled 25 years of satellite images taken when the planet was enveloped in darkness. In that book, NASA has found a way to measure holiday spirit from space.

After analyzing the world's nighttime light patterns between 2012 and 2014, NASA researchers found, unsurprisingly, that the U.S. emits more intense light around the time of Christmas and New Year's. They also found more bursts of light during Ramadan in the Middle East. ...

That hasn't been the only light to announce the birth of a Savior. This past Monday night, we were privileged to experience the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn: an event that has not happened for nearly 800 years and will not happen again until March of 2080. There are some who explain away the star that led the Wise Men to the stable with a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.

The annual Christmas light display and the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn announce again the birth of Jesus. It is cause for celebration; it is reason for the announcement from the angels that "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." It is good news of great joy.

The good news is that Christ has come to offer you a new birth, a new beginning. His grace makes it possible for you to be forgiven, your life to be transformed; you can be made new! All you must do is receive him and let his grace and love catch fire in your life.

The Savior of the world has been revealed and laid in a manger. His coming, humanity and purpose were quietly revealed centuries before by prophets like Isaiah, who celebrated him as a child "born for us, a son given to us" who is the "Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father" and the true "Prince of Peace" who establishes the reign of God's kingdom (Isaiah 9:6-7). That is worth celebrating and lighting up our houses and neighborhoods and indeed, the whole world. Our angel Chrismon tonight is lit and shines atop our Christmas tree and points to God and the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world.

The Shepherd's Staff

There are signs all around us, "Garage Sale," "Information," "Wet Paint," "Help Wanted," I'm sure you can think of many more. They all give information and may tell us about something important. On that Christmas night, the shepherds saw and heard an important sign. Shepherds, who are the poorest of the poor, are watching over their flocks when the angel appears and, as the King James Bible says, they were "sore afraid." "Do not be afraid," says the angel a third time, "for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10).

They saw and heard this sign, a sign so important, that they left their sheep in the fields, defenseless against all kinds of dangers. They left their jobs and I don't imagine their employer could have been very happy about that. And yet, the sign they saw and heard was more important than anything else.

"Glory to God in heaven and on earth peace." Peace. Not despair, not fear. It is good news for all the people -- not just for some. Not just for that night and for that place, but for all time and for all places. The good news was the coming of Emmanuel: God with us.

Jesus will grow up to preach that the kingdom of God is at hand. It's a present reality of which we see glimpses, but also a future promise. The kingdom will be fully realized when Jesus comes for the second and final time, when Jesus claims the throne once and for all. This is the grounds for hope on Christmas -- that no matter what happens in the present, in Christ, God promises to set the world right once and for all.

The shepherds heard the angel voice: "Do not be afraid." Money will come and go, yet still God is with us. Our health may fail, yet still God is with us. Our lives may be broken by sin and our past mistakes. But still God is with us.

That is the good news for all of us, the thing you don't want to miss no matter how many times you've read it. Our failures are not final, our infirmities are not ultimately fatal, and our death will not be the last word. We can leave all of that behind. And so, the shepherd's staff, their multi-purpose tool is our 2nd Chrismon tonight, and points our eyes and ears and hearts toward Jesus.

The Manger

The Church has a Nativity scene on the altar lent to us by a Church Member, I put mine out today, and, I expect, many of you also have Nativity scenes on display in your houses. They are all over.

Why do people put up Nativity scenes at Christmastime, anyway? Where and when did they come from?

Credit Saint Francis of Assisi, who is said to have staged the first nativity scene in 1223. The only historical account we have of Francis' nativity scene comes from *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi* by Saint Bonaventure, a Franciscan monk who was born five years before Francis' death. According to Bonaventure's biography, Saint Francis got permission from Pope Honorius III to set up a manger with hay and two live animals — an ox and an ass — in a cave in the Italian village of Greccio. He then invited the villagers to come gaze upon the scene while he preached about "the babe of Bethlehem." (Francis was supposedly so overcome by emotion that he couldn't say "Jesus.") Bonaventure also claims that the hay used by Francis miraculously acquired the power to cure local cattle diseases and pestilences.

While this part of Bonaventure's story is dubious, it's clear that nativity scenes had enormous popular appeal. ...

The familiar cast of characters we see today — namely the three wise men and the shepherds — aren't biblically accurate and you'll notice, if you look closely, that some of them are still missing tonight. Of the four gospels in the New Testament, only Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' birth, the former focusing on the story of the wise men's journey to see the infant king, (they won't arrive until the 3rd), the latter recounting the shepherds' visit to the manger where Jesus was born. Nowhere in the Bible do the shepherds and wise men appear together, and nowhere in the Bible are donkeys, oxen, cattle or other domesticated animals mentioned in conjunction with Jesus' birth. But early nativity scenes took their cues more from religious art than from Scripture. ...

Yet, history and tradition help us to focus on Jesus' birth at Christmas. And so, the manger is a Chrismon, our 3rd Chrismon tonight, which points our attention to God and to Jesus, our Savior.

The Heart (of God)

We know that God is love. Not because God *says* it, but because God *does* it -- he shows his love by sending his only Son into the world, so that we will not perish but have eternal life.

But what do we mean by the word "love"? Is this just a human description of a warm and wonderful feeling? In his book *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis describes four kinds of love: affection, romantic love, friendship and the love of God. *Storge*, or affection, is the natural love a parent has for a child. *Eros*, or romantic love, is the desire two people have for each other. Eros is the longing for the beauty and company of the other when two people fall in love. *Philia* is the love of friendship, but may have conditions -- it gives, but may expect something equal in return. *Agape* is true, unconditional love, a generosity of spirit which gives and expects nothing in return. It is the love that God has for us, love at the highest level.

"Not that we loved God," John writes in verse 10, "but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." Or as John 3.16 says, "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." John makes the case that God is the source of love, and that this love is seen most clearly in the death of Jesus on the cross -- a sacrifice designed to bring us forgiveness of sin.

So God is love, at the very core of God's being. God reveals that he is the source of love by sending his Son to bring us forgiveness and new life. As recipients of such amazing love, there is really only one response we can make: To show love to one another. And this is precisely what John recommends: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (v. 11).

Love is who Christians are. These are challenging words. After all, John is not talking about an emotion here, but an act of the will that can have a transformative effect. "If we love one another," promises John, "God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us" (v. 12). If we take the bold step of loving one another -- friends, enemies, blacks, whites, gays, straights, Muslims, Christians -- God will live in us and bring his love to completion in us.

Love is at the core of what it means to be a Christian. So, the heart that we hang on our Christmas Tree tonight is another sign: a sign that

points us to God and God's love come to earth in Jesus every Christmas and every day.