

Winter Tidings

By Jeremy Lucas

THE MONTH OF DECEMBER

With or without Christmas in the air, grandmas and grandpas can be seen snuggling next to a warm fire while the children hurry to touch their fingers to the first signs of snow. Through the front door races a father who must reach back inside to grab his coat when the chill of the morning breeze catches his nose. Something is changing. The further we get from the warmth of our summer days, the closer we get to the solace of these long winter nights.

December was originally named as the tenth month of the Roman calendar. Much like a decade speaks of ten years or the Decalogue speaks of ten commandments, December comes from the Latin root, *decem*, which simply means "ten." Far different from our current system, March was their beginning and December could hardly be seen as the end. They believed that winter should run its full course. To celebrate a new year in the midst of a dark and chilly season would have been like choosing to celebrate victory in a battle that hasn't yet seen a hero. Such history can almost make us wonder why we still do the things we do and think the way we think.

Preparing for the full course of winter was a common necessity of New Testament evangelists as well. Paul writes to Titus from Nicopolis saying that he has "determined there to winter" (Titus 3:12). Just a few years earlier, a concern rose up about which city would provide the best "haven" for this anticipated season (Acts 27:12). Few men have ever longed for the punching winds and overwhelming blizzards, but everyone knows when the time is near. It will be cold, it will be dreary, and it will sometimes feel like the loneliest time of the year.

But men of this modern day are not as the animals who still disappear in hibernation. Rain or snow, hail or sleet, we continue to rise up early and face the world. Almost as though we are propelled by the holiday shopping bug, we make our lists and check them twice on Amazon. The dust of last year's ornament box falls to the ground as we decorate our trees and light up our homes. Carols are less sung under the street lamps of yesteryear, but we still smile softly to any speaker that rings the bells of "O Holy Night." When the deeply chilled frost puts an end to our electricity, we gather the family together under a dozen blankets and pull out our favorite memories. Only here, when every gift has been purchased, every trimming has been cut, and every song has been sung, do we look across at our children, grandchildren, parents, and loved ones to find the most obvious reason for the season.

THE LIGHTS OF CHRISTMAS

With lights stretched from high to low, ornaments scattered in hopeless array, and the smell of apple cider boiling somewhere near, the timely event of winter decoration sets the tone of our December. Until the house is fully lit up, somehow it just doesn't seem quite like the season has started. Like a Thanksgiving without pumpkin pie or a birthday without candles, some of our most precious traditions can be the simplest pleasures of a momentary occasion soon to pass. At the center of our common tradition are the Christmas trees that find themselves adorned with silver, laced with tinsel, covered in lights, and crowned with a star.

During the late 13th Century, Thomas de Hales wrote a lengthy poem in Old English called *A Luve Ron* (A Love Song). During one of the stanzas, he referred to a "*treowe* king" by which he meant, "a true king." The word *treowe* took two different directions from the time of Hales to later scholars like Wycliffe and Tyndale (16th Century). Over a period of just 300 years, *treowe* became closely associated with both "true" and "tree" because in either case, it continued to mean someone or something that would not fall. A tree firmly rooted will never tumble unless broken by the axe. Greeks referred to their trees as *xylon* (think of the "wood" sound of a *xylophone*) while the Romans referred to them as *arbor* in Latin (think "Arbor Day" and the tradition of planting seeds).

Trees have always symbolized a practical and essential part of sturdy construction, but the fir and pine trees are uniquely mentioned during the Scripture of Isaiah 60:13. "*The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious.*" Although we find that many planters now grow the fir and pine on a farm, the natural pine grows on the mountainside. In fact, it is the fir and evergreen tree that adorns the forest of these "beautified" mountains. And when the snow comes falling, every needle and every cone is covered in white by the decoration of God's design.

The history of our modern Christmas tree can be traced back to the hills of Germany and the hero of the reformation. At various times during the winter, Martin Luther was known to take a small spruce tree and decorate it with candles as a symbol of the sparkling stars in heaven above. When German immigration began to increase on American soil in the 1830s (more than 300 years after Luther), English Protestants were initially frightened by what they perceived to be a very pagan tradition among professing Christians. But by 1838, just 32 years before President Grant declared Christmas to be a national holiday, the word "Christmas tree" had already become commonplace.

Some of you will share legitimate concern for the practice and decoration of trees (Jeremiah 10:2-4) while others will view it as a harmless activity in the age of God's grace. Whether you enjoy the smell of fresh pine in your living room or prefer to avoid it altogether, may you find that the season is no less inviting for the family you love and the fires that you build.

CAROLERS ON EMPTY STREETS

In the winter of 1997, the icy streets of Salem, OR were filled with the voices of college students singing carols. Laughter rang out as each of us would slip and slide from sidewalks to porch steps. Frosty noses brought silly faces and familiar smiles. With the snow falling as we sang, my memory brings to mind the warmth of young love and the comfort of good friends. On some level, we knew that "singing carols" was but a catalyst for our fellowship. To the listening ears of a neighborhood filled with lights and decorations, we were but a product of the season. Carols of the Yuletide were the ornaments of our December.

Ten years later, the tone of our nation has changed and I often find myself saddened by the absence of carolers or the silence of empty streetlights. Citizens are spending far less than they have in years past, but this oddly positive twist comes at a price. While almost every one of us can admit an awful disgust for the "Commercialized Christmas" that has every father and every mother maxing their budget, the result of this sour mood is that few can find reason to sing anymore. Within the first week of December, I lost count from the number of colleagues who were already telling me how much they were worn down from the Christmas music playing overhead.

Many of us put up our tree this year with a sense of similar exhaustion. Some didn't put one up at all. Still others had no reason to decorate the house or send any cards. The following lyrics tell the story of an empty home and the impact of distant carols:

"She leaned with her head on the window watching evergreen bended in the snow; remembering Christmas the way it had been so many seasons ago. When children would reach for their stockings and open the presents they'd found. The lights on the tree would shine bright in their eyes; reflecting the love all around.

This year there's no one to open the gifts. No reason for trimming the tree. And just as a tear made its way to the floor, she heard voices outside start to sing, 'Merry Christmas to all who may dwell here. Merry Christmas if even just once. May the joy of the season surround you. Merry Christmas with love.'

The carolers sang as she opened the door. Faces of friends in the crowd and all of the shadows of lonely reminders driven away by the sound. Now the heart that for years had been silent was suddenly filled with a song. As she clung to their hands like a child in the night, she found herself singing along." - C. Aiken, Merry Christmas With Love

As the darkness of winter sets in, I'm reminded of those midnight voices from Paul and Silas as they sang songs from the heart of their prison cell (Acts 16:25). Rather than lifting their voices when the sun was in the bright sky, they found themselves singing in their own darkness. Overlooked by many, Job 35:10 teaches that God our maker "giveth songs in the night." In other words, when all is dark, when all is cold, and when nothing seems right... there is still a song to sing (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16). There is no better time than the present to take the hand of a close friend (perhaps even a spouse), to

bundle up in your warmest attire and to stroll the sidewalks of your neighborhood. Find the music in your heart and start singing. Someone somewhere is waiting for a reason to smile.