

## “Wholesome, Hallowed, and Gracious”: Confronting the Winter’s Night

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In northern Europe, where our celebration of the Christmas season has its roots, the winter nights are long, dark, and foreboding and, at least in myth, teeming with unwelcome mysteries. It was against this backdrop that the early Christian monks and missionaries transformed the pagan Yuletide festivals into our modern Christmas celebration. Be that as it may, there can be no doubt that the physical and spiritual darkness of winter seemed, for many, to be lifted at the Christmas season.

For example, as Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet* opens, a trio of soldiers—Marcellus, Horatio, and Bernardo—are keeping watch on the battlements of the royal castle at Elsinore when suddenly the ghost of Hamlet’s father, the late king, appears. As the three battle-hardened sentries debate whether or not they have in fact seen something real, Marcellus observes that “it [the apparition] faded on the crowing of the cock,” and anyway, ghosts are probably not in season, for

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
 Wherein our Savior's birth is celebrated,  
 This bird of dawning singeth all night long,  
 And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,  
 The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike<sup>1</sup>,  
 No fairy takes<sup>2</sup>, nor witch hath power to charm.  
 So hallowed and so gracious is that time. (*Hamlet* I.i.181-88)

Consider with me, if you will, those three words that are said to characterize not just Christmas day, but the entire "season . . . wherein our Savior's birth is celebrated": wholesome, hallowed, and gracious. Few would quarrel with those descriptors. The literature of Christmas is filled with stories of the best of human nature, called forth by the spirit and spirits of the season; the carols say that not only mortals, but "heaven and nature sing" the praises of the newborn King. The blind poet John Milton, a generation after Shakespeare, imagined that

It was the winter wild  
 while the Heaven-born child;  
 all meanly wrapt, in the rude manger lies  
 Nature in awe to him had doff'd her gaudy trim  
 With her great Master so to sympathize . . .  
 No war or battle's sound  
 was heard the world around;  
 The idle spear and shield were high uphung;  
 the hookèd chariot stood  
 Unstained with hostile blood  
 The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng  
 And kings sate still with awful eye  
 As if they surely knew their Sovran Lord was by  
 But peaceful was the night  
 Wherein the Prince of light  
 His reign of peace upon the earth began  
 The winds, with wonder whist,  
 Smoothly the waters kiss'd  
 Whispering new joys to the mild ocean  
 Who now hath quite forgot to rave  
 While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmèd wave.<sup>3</sup>

In more modern stories of Christmas, Scrooge's miser's heart is turned inside out, and Tiny Tim Cratchit lives to make that most beautiful of all holiday toasts, "God bless us, every one!" George Bailey's friends, made during a lifetime of thoughtful good deeds and kindness, come back to rescue his bank and his family, and the angel Charlie gets his wings. The lame shepherd boy Amahl picks up his crutch and departs with the wise men to worship the King who does not in fact need their gold and who, the wise men sing, will build His kingdom on love alone, the King for whom Amahl's poor widowed mother has waited all her life.

Yet, as we all know too well, this charmed and charming view of Christmas coexists in us with more complicated realities: The bleak midwinter brings depression, sickness, and the reality of daily life once the parties are over and the Christmas lights have come down. The impulse to generosity toward the poor warms our hearts, but also makes us aware in our heads of otherwise unmet needs that will not disappear when the calendar changes. Doctors warn of enhanced risk of heart attack, the post-Christmas depression is only too well known to its victims as well as to the therapists, and the wellness enthusiasts admonish us of the dangers of that in which we have already indulged!

Yet over against both the bleak midwinter and the simple hope for a rescue from all sorrow and wickedness is the sober assessment of the soldier Marcellus: that this season of the year in which we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior is indeed wholesome, hallowed, and gracious. What might these words teach us as we reflect on Christmas past and look forward to a new year and its promise of fresh beginnings?

*Wholesome.* The word itself means "salubrious, tending to promote health and virtue," and is related to the German word *heilsam*, which means "healing." The German word for "Savior" is *Heiland*, the One who heals. Indeed, in our Christmas carol, the herald angels sing of Christ as "risen with healing in His wings."<sup>4</sup> According to *Strong's Concordance*, the word "wholesome" itself appears only twice in scripture. The quality of wholesomeness is intimately linked on the one hand to the acceptance of Christ's teachings: Paul equates "wholesome words" to "even the words of our Lord Jesus" (1 Tim. 6:3). It is also linked to speech that brings light and life: "A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverse-

ness therein is a breach in the spirit” (Prov. 15:4). But it underlies much more.

Not surprisingly, then, an abiding theme of the Christmas season is the curing of breaches in human relationships, the healing of estrangement, loneliness, and alienation. The wholesome, healing quality of the Christmas nights derives from the bridging of those gulfs between both those we know and strangers. Sometimes the healing of those rifts begins with an acceptance of Christ’s teaching about “the others,” their relationship to us as spirit children of our Heavenly Parents. In other cases, the healing takes place when remembered words of judgment and condemnation are blotted out by a heartfelt expression of love and concern.

The parable of the prodigal son embodies the quintessential Christmas message of this reconciliation: “When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). We have no record of the sleepless nights when this son’s parents undoubtedly had wept over him, prayed for him, and hoped against hope for such a reconciliation. But in the moment of the son’s return, all those nights are swept away by the flood of a parent’s love, a prototype of the infinite love of God for even the wayward.

There are also healings of physical ailments that are associated with Christ’s ministry, and Christmas stories are full of such healings. However, the Savior’s healing touch for specific ailments was almost always combined with a deeper healing of the person, not merely the curing of the disease.

Behold, a woman which was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years, came behind him and touched the hem of his garment:

For she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole.

But Jesus turned him about, and when he saw her, he said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour. (Matt. 9:20–22)

Jesus does not say: “I have healed you” but credits the healing to the woman’s simple faith, encouraging the growth of that mustard seed of belief. If we accept the concept of faith taught by Alma in the Book of Mormon (Alma 32:21–43), such an experience is the basis on which the desire to believe is transmuted into

saving, certain knowledge. Of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2–11), Jesus asked “Woman, where are thine accusers?” To her response, the Savior gave the simple, reassuring admonition, “Go thy way and sin no more.” The reproof implicit in these words remained unspoken. The lesson he taught both to her and to her accusers became indelible. But more importantly, the words He chose conveyed a respect for even this fallen daughter of God and a confidence that the spark of divinity within her could once again become a glowing flame.

*Hallowed.* To hallow (German, *heiligen*) means “to make holy, to sanctify or to set apart.” It is closely related to the word “consecrate” (German, *weihen*) and in fact, in its noun form in German, is the word that translates “Saint,” as in “Latter-day Saint.” The Christmas season is hallowed partly because many of us, however partially or imperfectly, commit ourselves to that which is holy, whether it is in the impulse to worship or the equally important impulse to serve others. The Christmas spirit makes it easier for us to imagine ourselves as partaking of a life consecrated to the Christ and His teachings. We temper our image of the great Jehovah, the eternal judge of the quick and the dead, with the softer picture of the Child at whose feet we lay down our burdens as well as our gifts, and who is strong enough to bear all our infirmities, our failures, our sorrows, and our forlorn hopes. And we seem to find it easier to see the son or daughter of God in those around us—even those we find unlovely or unlovable at other seasons of the year.

In its most practical sense, that hallowing occurs through covenants and promises made in sacred ordinances, some formal, others informal. “Salvation comes by the grace of God, through ordinances.”<sup>5</sup> The elders of the Church were, in its earliest days, enjoined to “bind yourselves to act in holiness before me” (D&C 43:16).

That covenant commitment to holiness finds its highest expression in the law of consecration, the commitment to consecrate our selves, our time and energy, our talents, and all that with which the Lord has blessed us to the building of His kingdom and the establishment of Zion. It is also linked throughout the Doctrine and Covenants to another of those characteristic Christmas virtues—concern for the temporal welfare of others:

Nevertheless, in your temporal things you shall be equal, and this not grudgingly, otherwise the abundance of the manifestations of the Spirit shall be withheld. (D&C 70:13)

For if ye are not equal in earthly things ye cannot be equal in obtaining heavenly things; for if you will that I give unto you a place in the celestial world, you must prepare yourselves by doing the things which I have commanded you and required of you.

Wherefore, a commandment I give unto you, to prepare and organize yourselves by a bond or everlasting covenant that cannot be broken. (D&C 78:6–7, 11).

For Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness; her borders must be enlarged; her stakes must be strengthened; yea, verily I say unto you, Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments.

Therefore, I give unto you this commandment, that ye bind yourselves by this covenant. . . . and all this for the benefit of the church of the living God, that every man may improve upon his talents, . . . every man seeking the interest of his neighbor, and doing all this with an eye single to the glory of God. (D&C 82:14–15, 18–19)

This idea that Zion must be enlarged in beauty as it increases in holiness is what we celebrate with the incomparable music, art, and literature of the Christmas season. In a way, it is the embodiment of the famous aphorism based on Doctrine and Covenants 130:18–19: “A man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge”<sup>6</sup>—and the less well-known “Bushman inversion,” namely, that “a man gains knowledge no faster than he is saved.”

But let us remember that what makes Christmas is consecration to its ideals even if imperfectly and fleetingly; the beauty of the fine arts and of religious ceremony awakens in us the memories of our desire to be committed to the Savior.

*Gracious.* The word “gracious” comes from the same Latin root as “grace,” and means “enjoying favor,” especially divine favor, and “being motivated or characterized by kindness and courtesy.” Its most evident characteristic in the Christmas season is its abundance. John Donne captured this sense of God’s overwhelmingly gracious response to our human needs in a Christmas sermon, “preached at St. Paul’s in the evening.”

God made Sun and Moon to distinguish seasons, and day, and night, and we cannot have the fruits of the earth but in their seasons: But God hath made no decree to distinguish the seasons of his mer-

cies; In paradise, the fruits were ripe the first minute, and in heaven it is alwaies Autumne, his mercies are ever in their maturity. We ask *panem quotidianum*, our daily bread, and God never sayes you should have come yesterday, he never sayes you must come again to morrow, but to day if you will heare his voice, to day he will heare you.

If some King of the earth have so large an extent of Dominion, in North, and South, as that he hath Winter and Summer together in his dominions, much more hath God mercy and judgment together: He brought light out of darknesse, not out of a lesser light; he can bring thy Summer out of Winter, though thou have no Spring; though in the wayes of fortune, or understanding, or conscience, thou have been benighted till now, wintred and frozen, clouded and eclipsed, damped and benumbed, smothered and stupified, now God comes to thee, not as in the dawning of the day, not as in the bud of the spring, but as the Sun at noon to illustrate all shadowes, as the sheaves in harvest, to fill all penuries. All occasions invite his mercies, and all times are his seasons.<sup>7</sup>

It is the same sense of the gracious presence of God and of his abounding goodness—and of the obligations that we have as the recipients of that bounty—that is so beautifully captured in the great valedictory sermon of King Benjamin:

Ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish. . . .

For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind?

And behold, even at this time ye have been calling on his name and begging for a remission of your sins. And has he suffered that ye have begged in vain?

Nay; he has poured out his Spirit upon you and has caused that your hearts should be filled with joy, and has caused that your mouths should be stopped that ye could not find utterance, so exceedingly great was your joy.

And now, if God, who has created you, on whom you are dependent for your lives and for all that ye have and are, doth grant unto you whatsoever ye ask that is right, in faith, believing that ye shall receive, O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another. (Mosiah 4:16–21)

Indeed, when He appeared to the Nephites after the resurrection, the Savior's gracious and grace-filled love for us is remem-

bered by those who heard Him as overflowing and ineffable: “No tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard Jesus speak; and no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father,” while at the same time, He declares: “Blessed are ye because of your faith. And now behold, *my* joy is full” (3 Ne. 17:17, 20; emphasis mine).

Now about those resolutions for the new year . . . The last ritual of the Christmas season for many of us occurs at the mid-point of the Twelve Days between Christmas and January 6, the traditional Three Kings Day, when we make resolutions to conquer faults and improve during the coming year. Without wishing to undervalue the need to get organized, to lay in a year’s supply of essentials, to lose weight, and to be more prudent with our credit cards during the coming year, I would like to suggest that these three qualities of the Christmas season—wholesome, hallowed, and gracious—might serve us better as guides to the real work, the much harder work, of home- and self-improvement that we can and should undertake in the coming year.

Let us resolve that our words and actions will be wholesome: tending to promote health and well-being in ourselves, our families, and in our relationships with our neighbors. Let us stand against the rising tide of poisonous words and venomous rhetoric that pollute the airwaves and the print media. Let us learn to pray for those whom we perceive to be on the opposite side of the political aisle, and even for our enemies, and in doing so, make them our friends and fellow beneficiaries of Christ’s healing spirit. (You might even consider taking a Democrat to lunch!). Above all, let us be sure that the language of love is cultivated intensively at home so that it becomes a perennial feature of all our private, familial, personal, and community relationships.

Let us resolve that we will do our part to hallow the year ahead, by building a Zion that will increase in beauty and in holiness. To that end, let us in our minds and in our ministries enlarge the borders of Zion to include our sisters and brothers who do not worship with us, but who are our friends and fellow pilgrims and who also serve the Master by feeding the sheep of His pasture. Let us “stand in holy places and be not moved,” and build our founda-



tions on the “rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, . . . that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo” (Hel. 5:12).

And let us above all resolve that we will share the abundance of God’s gracious presence in our lives, out of love for Him and gratitude for His myriad tender mercies that are the visible signs of that grace. Lynn Ellsworth once taught a memorable priesthood lesson on what he called “the grace principle”: leaving room in our time, our energies, and our budgets for unplanned opportunities to do the Lord’s work and thus to share the abundance of the Lord’s tender mercies. The ancient commandment still stands:

And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.

And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, either shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger; I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 19:9–10)

Let us not glean the edges of our fields of labor, to harvest the last bit of time, hoard the spiritual wealth of our testimonies, or take out of circulation those last few dollars, but instead leave some room for giving of ourselves, our interest, our listening ears, our time, and our means to those with whom—and among whom—we live, work, and worship.

I testify that the living Christ, whose birth we choose to celebrate at this astronomically darkest time of the year (at least in the northern hemisphere), brings His wholesome, hallowed, and gracious touch to our lives even at those moments when we feel unworthy of it. I bear witness that the Child, who in His mature ministry would later urge us to take His yoke upon us, is strong enough to heal us of all that burdens us and make us whole again—if we have faith enough to really drop those burdens at His feet. I have felt His hallowed influence through the glorious music of the Christmas season, composed through the centuries by those who loved and worshipped Him in the best light they knew. And I know that when we share His grace with others, the circle of our love and influence will grow to banish the darkness, literal

or figurative, in our own lives and in the lives of those who feel that divine influence.

#### Notes

1. "work evil by influence"
2. "bewitch"
3. John Milton, "Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity," <http://www.bartleby.com/101/307.html> (accessed July 15, 2011); spelling modernized.
4. Charles Wesley, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 209.
5. Truman Madsen, "The Sacramental Life," in *The Highest in Us*, reprinted in *Five Classics by Truman G. Madsen* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 226.
6. Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980 printing): 5:588.