

Setting the Stage for Christmas

I walk in the neighborhood, often after dark, to provide regular exercise. When it is dark I stick to lighted streets so I can find my way. After all, once it gets dark it is much safer to walk under the illumination of street lights.

As we approach Christmas Eve we anticipate that the service will include the familiar Christmas story. We know the story well but sometimes we overlook what the world was like at the time. At the time of Jesus' birth the world was in a time of darkness. Gloom, anguish, and contempt were just some of the adjectives used to describe this darkness. In fact, the writers of the various books of the Bible didn't pen books for approximately 400 years prior to the birth of Christ.

God just was not part of the culture in the four centuries before the birth of Christ. (Malachi and Nehemiah were both written in the 5th century B.C.). The people were living under the oppressive rule of Rome. The census, ordered by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1) was an excellent example that the people of Israel were really owned by others. Complying with the census was the reason for the 100-mile journey of Mary and Joseph that led them to the Bethlehem stable, where Jesus would enter the world as a baby. In reality, the nation of Israel, which had escaped captivity, was exiled in their own country. Even the temple in Jerusalem was built by a foreigner, Herod the Great. Four competing religious sects led to constant friction, increased by the oppressive rule of Rome. Riots were common. No wonder why God chose that time to bring His son into the world.



The events of Jesus' birth fulfilled the spirit-led prophecies of God's messengers. Centuries before, Isaiah wrote: *Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this (Isaiah 9:7).* As we all know from the Christmas story, Jesus' birth didn't sit well with rulers of his time. Herod had all the male children under the age of 2 put to death. *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi (Matthew 2:16).* Herod wasn't about to relinquish his power.

Biblical accounts of the Christmas story tell us about the star that guided the Magi to the humble birth place of the Christ child. They were wise men, indeed, to seek Jesus. Everything about his birth was the opposite of what you would expect from a "king" who would change the world. Jesus' kingdom would be about justice and righteousness, not power or oppression.

Our world today is also full of darkness. Events around the globe turn the stomach of those who seek justice and righteousness. Those of us who wish to live in God's light have an opportunity to shine that light to encourage others to seek a better way of life. God's gift of His son has shown us the right, lighted path. As people of faith we have the opportunity to win souls for Christ. Let us encourage others to worship on this Christmas Eve and feel, perhaps for the first time, that there is a place for Jesus in their life. If people are feeling oppression, gloom, anguish or hopelessness in the world today, Jesus has already shown us another way. We can tell others about the path He lights for all of us.

Isaiah 9:7 emphasizes that God's Kingdom is forever. Thus, Jesus' work on earth is not done.. Today we are the wise men who come to worship the King. His Word empowers us to spread the Good News of hope in today's dark world. The best gift we can give others is to share how our faith has provided a light for our path. They, too, may wish to follow the star to worship the King.

Question: Who are you going to encourage this Christmas season?

Prayer: Dear Lord. Let us not become so complacent in our own worship that we don't invite others to learn more about Jesus' birth and His purpose for our life. Amen.