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**Christmas Stars:
Inviting Us to Come to Christ**

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Christmas Stars: Inviting Us to Come to Christ

Shirley S. Ricks

Abstract: *The Christmas season evokes tender feelings within us as we contemplate the newborn Christ child, whose life and mission would change the world forever. Many retellings of the nativity story include the unusual—the awkward boy/innkeeper who impulsively offers his own room to Mary and Joseph or the Herdman kids who unwittingly impart a realistic view of the Christ child's birth. The Christmas star of Bethlehem, leading the wise men to the newborn baby, symbolically invites us to come unto Christ as we celebrate the season through memorable stories and Christmas songs.*

What is it about the Christmas season that tends to evoke tender feelings within us? Naturally, we think of the newborn Christ child, whose life and mission would alter the course of the world forever. We think of his earthly parents, Mary and Joseph, and the challenges that were yet in their future. We think of those who followed a star in order to worship the young child and of those who professed a desire, though stemming from ulterior motives, to find the babe and worship him.

Often, our hearts are touched by the stories of love, compassion, and kindness that seem to abound at this time of year—stories that perhaps have a different twist from the usual retelling of those first Christmas events.

Unlikely Stars in the Christmas Pageant

I think, for example, of the *Guideposts* story, “Trouble at the Inn,” by Dina Donohue, which I read in 1966.¹ Wallace Purling, a nine-year-old, was larger than his second-grade classmates. He should have been in the fourth grade, but he was held back because he was a bit slow in body and mind. Wally was nevertheless well-liked and relished the thought that he might be a shepherd in the annual Christmas pageant. Because of his size, though, Miss Lumbard assigned him instead to fill the role of the innkeeper. She assumed that Wally, as the innkeeper, would be successful in learning and reciting his few lines.

All proceeded according to script as Joseph tenderly guided Mary to the door of the inn. When Joseph knocked on the door, Wally, the innkeeper, swung open the door and asked, “What do you want?” Joseph’s reply, “We seek lodging,” brought forth a stern response from Wally, “Seek it elsewhere; the inn is filled.” Joseph pleaded again because of their weariness, but Wally properly answered, “There is no room in this inn for you.” Once more declaring their weariness, Joseph explained that his wife was heavy with child and just needed a small corner. After a long pause and some prompting, Wally dutifully recited his line, “No! Begone!” The couple wearily started to leave while Wally stood in the doorway, his eyes filling with tears. And suddenly, Wally found a better solution. “Don’t go, Joseph,” he called out. “Bring Mary back.” And smiling, Wally offered, “You can have my room.” Those in attendance would never forget that remarkable Christmas pageant as the innkeeper became the star of the show.

Many of us are also familiar with Barbara Robinson’s fictional story of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*,² a novel made into a movie about the six Herdmans siblings who are known as “the worst kids in the world.” Though the Herdmans really have no inkling of what the Christmas story is about, the children hijack the town’s annual Christmas pageant and demand the most important roles, mainly because food and treats are involved. Since everyone fears the Herdmans, these incorrigible children are allowed to take on the roles of Mary, Joseph, the three wise men, and the angel of the Lord. Slowly, these unruly, irreverent children start to learn about Christ and his birth. Imogene, the oldest Herdman,

1. Dina Donohue, “Trouble at the Inn,” *Guideposts*, December 1966, guideposts.org/inspiring-stories/people-helping-people/trouble-at-the-inn/.

2. Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). Movie adaptations include a 1983 version directed by George Shaefer and a 2024 version directed by Dallas Jenkins.

who commandeers the role of Mary, ultimately dresses as a genuine refugee might have, thumps the back of the baby Jesus vigorously to burp him, and ultimately comes to recognize, with tears streaming down her face, the crucial role that Mary played in bringing forth Jesus, the Son of God. These unusual stars in the nativity play brought new meaning and reflection to the first act of the greatest story ever told.

The Christmas I Remember Best

Such stories often tug at our heartstrings. As I was growing up in Utah, one of the Christmas features published during December by the *Deseret News* was a series entitled "The Christmas I Remember Best." I was always eager to read every account that was shared during the Christmas season. Heartfelt and often poignant stories were related as individuals recalled a special Christmas in their lives.

In his 2010 Christmas devotional address entitled "A Bright Shining Star," President Thomas S. Monson, the consummate storyteller, retold in his own words one such story written by John B. Matheson Jr. In December 1945, Matheson was serving in the army of occupation in Frankfurt, Germany. Wanting to give a gift to the frail, elderly woman who cleaned their quarters, Matheson gathered up some extra candy bars, soap, and cans of fruit juice and left them for the woman. He thought smugly that his generous gift, though not given in compassion but in pity, was the best of all.

Not expecting to receive anything in return, he was surprised and humbled to see her simple gift to him.

On that dimly lit table, along with her painstakingly written "Merry Christmas," were 10 old and dog-eared picture postcard scenes of Frankfurt as it had appeared before the war had so devastated it. The housekeeper had placed each card on edge and fastened them together so that every 2 cards formed a point and all 10 together formed the Christmas star.

She gave all she had, and Matheson reported that the little housekeeper's Christmas star shone brightly throughout his life, reminding him of the true meaning of love and giving.³

For me personally, the Christmas I remember best occurred when

3. See Thomas S. Monson, "A Bright Shining Star," 2010 Christmas Devotional, 6 December 2010, Conference Center, Salt Lake City, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/article/christmas-devotional/2010/12/a-bright-shining-star.

we, as a small student family, were living in Jerusalem. Our planned year of study for my husband had stretched into its second year, and we found ourselves expecting our third child around Christmas. The students in the Jerusalem program had returned home to spend the holidays with their families. Those few members and families who lived more permanently in Jerusalem gathered at our so-called Shepherd's Field near Bethlehem for a branch party two days before Christmas.

Away from the city lights, the stars were shining brightly, and we could imagine the shepherds being struck with awe at the pronouncement of the visiting angel:

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 Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. (Luke 2:10–12)

The words of the children's song "Stars Were Gleaming" echoed in my mind:

Stars were gleaming, shepherds dreaming;
And the night was dark and chill.
Angels' story rang with glory;
Shepherds heard it on the hill.
Ah, that singing! Hear it ringing,
Earthward winging, Christmas bringing!
Hearken! We can hear it still!⁴

Of course, the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem to find Mary, Joseph, and the newborn baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. The shepherds then broadcast the great news to anyone who would listen.

Our branch program that starry night featured readings (surely of the nativity story), music, and stories, after which we ate a delicious and plentiful feast—sloppy joes, hot chocolate with marshmallows (a favorite with our young daughter), potato chips, apple cider, cookies, and brownies. (This menu, I assure you, was not our usual fare while we lived in Jerusalem.) After the festivities, our family drove into Bethlehem to visit the Church of the Nativity and ponder Christ's birth.

4. Nancy Byrd Turner, "Stars Were Gleaming," in *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 37, verse 1, churchofjesuschrist.org/media/music/songs/stars-were-gleaming.

We wanted to beat the crowds who would be flocking there the next day on Christmas Eve.

It was a good thing we went into Bethlehem a day early, for during that night it became apparent that our own baby was eager to make its appearance. Not wanting to bother anyone too early to stay with our two older children, we busied ourselves decorating our small tree (a live tree left over from the U.S. Consulate, where a ward member worked) with strands of popcorn and whatever else we could find.

Stephen, my husband, finally called a ward member to come to our apartment to stay with the children. By then, my labor had advanced, and I was barely able to climb into the back seat of our Volkswagen van. Stephen, totally oblivious to any fading stars in the early morning sky, raced on the nearly deserted road to Ramallah in search of the Jerusalem Maternity Hospital, where we were headed. Once the lighted sign of the hospital appeared, my husband careened into the parking lot, jumped out, and urgently rang the bell and pounded on the locked door. A nurse clattered down the stairs to let us in, and Stephen, energized with adrenaline, carried me up the stairs to the delivery room. Just moments later, our second son entered the world, quite unaware of the fuss he had caused.

Oh, the miracle of birth—a sweet, new, dark-haired son had joined our family. Truly, we rejoiced in his birth, as did Mary and Joseph at the birth of Jesus. Yes, this was the Christmas I remember best.

The Nativity Story

My favorite film version of the nativity is an eighteen-minute video released by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2019 for their Light the World campaign.⁵ *The Christ Child: A Nativity Story* weaves a believable tale of a couple seeking refuge in Bethlehem and of the wonder of the child's birth, even treating us to an unscripted mother's tender lullaby. Hearing the angel's good tidings of a Savior born in Bethlehem, the shepherds respond in haste to see this miracle.

The other players in this drama, the wise men from the east, see a star in the heavens that ultimately leads them to the Holy Family in Bethlehem. But time has elapsed since the child's birth, and Jesus is now a toddler. As the wise men rejoice that they have finally found the one they have come to worship, they glimpse the child shyly peeking around a corner. The wise men kneel in wonder, awe, and adoration

5. View *The Christ Child: A Nativity Story* at youtube.com/watch?v=yXWoKi5x3lw.

at the feet of the young child. With tears in his eyes, one of the wise men presents the gifts they have brought—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—to the child. This poignant scene, in which the wise man shows genuine love and reverence as he approaches the Christ child, never fails to bring tears to my own eyes.

See the clearness and the nearness
Of the blessed Christmas star,
Leading, guiding; wise men riding
Through the desert dark and far.
Lovely showing, shining, growing,
Onward going, gleaming, glowing,
Leading still, our Christmas star!⁶

“Star Bright”

Permit me to share one other personal memory of my only Christmas in southern Germany as a young missionary. I was serving in a three-some in Karlsruhe in both the American and German units. One of my companions was going home soon, and we learned that we other two sisters were going to be transferred right before Christmas. As a Christmas farewell gift to the American branch, we sisters sang “Star Bright,”⁷ first in English and then in German. We had found this beautiful song in a Relief Society cultural refinement lesson.

I’m not sure if I fully realized it at that time, but this song, which will appear in our upcoming new hymnal, was written from the viewpoint of the faithful Book of Mormon saints who were awaiting Samuel’s prophesied signs of the Savior’s birth—a new star and a day and a night and a day with no darkness (see Helaman 14:3–5).

The heavens with light o’erflowing
A story of love will tell.

6. Turner, “Stars Were Gleaming,” 37, verse 2.

7. Loren F. Wheelwright, “Star Bright,” at churchofjesuschrist.org/media/music/songs/star-bright. The words originally appeared in English and Spanish in the October 1959 issue of *The Instructor*. In this publication, Wheelwright encouraged all to “search [their] own hearts and the heavens for a sign of that great day when Christ will again return to the earth and in all His glory rescue mankind.” “Star Bright [Estrella de Luz],” *The Instructor*, October 1959, 323, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/04db593c-a451-4e99-b81c-b5f1cde947f7/0/0. Our ward Relief Society sisters always sing this beautiful hymn at our annual Christmas lunch and program.

A new star will shine in glory
When Jesus comes on earth to dwell.

*O star bright, the world is pining
For you to turn night into the day.
O star bright in heaven shining,
Come, glow within me on Christmas Day.*

The persecutors of those faithful ones who awaited the prophesied signs mocked the saints and assured them the signs would not appear within the five-year period. They set a day when the believers would be put to death if the signs didn't appear in the heavens. However, those very tormentors were struck with fear because of their iniquity and unbelief when the new star *did* appear in the sky and the day, night, and day of no darkness came to pass (see 3 Nephi 1:9, 18).

The previous night, in response to the prophet Nephi's extended, fervent prayer, the Savior appeared to comfort and bless him: "Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world that I will fulfil all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets" (3 Nephi 1:13).

Be joyful with eyes upturning,
Beholding the time at hand.
The night sign will soon be burning;
He's coming to our promised land.

The final verse of "Star Bright" beautifully captures the universal yearning for peace, mercy, and everlasting life. These are the very things that the babe of Bethlehem, grown to manhood, offers us through his great atoning sacrifice.

Our Father with love is sending
The Christ child to conquer strife.
His mercy to all extending,
He's bringing everlasting life.

The star of Bethlehem led the ancients in both the New and Old Worlds to the Savior, and today the star beckons us symbolically to personally come unto Christ and accept his gifts of everlasting life and of mercy based on our repentance. We can indeed rejoice in the appearance of the star and the promised Savior and echo with the heavenly host, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).

*O star bright, the world is pining
For you to turn night into the day.
O star bright in heaven shining,
Come, glow within me on Christmas Day.*



Shirley S. Ricks earned three degrees from Brigham Young University—her PhD was in family studies. She put that education to work in raising three daughters and three sons. She received on-the-job training at the BYU Press, working as a proofreader during her undergraduate years. Since 1988, Shirley worked as an editor at the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, and finally at the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University before she retired in 2021. She produced many books and periodicals and has written articles and reviews. As a part-time senior service missionary, she currently serves as a blog editor/publisher at FamilySearch. She and her husband, Stephen D. Ricks, have attended all the temples in the United States and Canada and enjoy traveling, especially to visit their children and twenty grandchildren.

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