

Christmas Miracles of Salt and Light

‡ No lumps of coal (vv.13,17-18)

‡ Bright candles of hope (vv.14-16,19-20)

In the name of Jesus Christ, our newborn Savior, dearly redeemed children of God:

Sometimes leaving church can be hazardous to your health. A left turn on Hodgson Road can be far worse than a fender bender. Turn right out of the driveway, circle to the traffic light, then head south to avoid the hazard. But don't ever think the danger or disappointment is only physical. After the last glorious practice for the Children's Christmas Service, I had to make a stop on the way home.

*And what should appear in the corner of my eye,
but a man dressed in red with groceries nearby.
And what did he say as he passed from my sight?
Not "Merry Christmas" – no, no, not this night!
A fine "Happy Holidays" would just have to do,
since new PC Santas don't have a clue.*

I like the first St. Nicolas much better, the one who knew what Christmas was all about. He could have explained quite well the full grown Baby Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* that fills our hearts today with **Christmas Miracles of Salt and Light**. Forget the chimney. He had no reindeer, and rest assured...

‡ No lumps of coal (vv.13,17-18)

Something besides coal was highly prized by ancient people. Sometimes they even used it for money. If Mary and Joseph had had some, maybe they might have found room in the inn, or at least a place nearby. But God's own Son would be born in poverty to defy the world's wealth. His first cries would be among the lowly to shame the worldly wise. His virgin mother and righteous stepfather were commanded by emperors and kings, but no worldly ruler could match the power of God in the grasp of this tiny Infant's hands. God Almighty – born in a manger, what a **Miracle** beyond the telling!

Some thirty years later He would preach to His faithful followers, "***You are the salt of the earth.***" His stepfather Joseph was surely **no lump of coal**. For a while he thought Mary was pregnant with a child not his own. But Joseph's faith in the Lord God of the Jews made him righteous and merciful like God. "Salty" Joseph did not want his betrothed to be disgraced. But his plans to divorce her quietly were interrupted by the angel in his dream: "***Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary, your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.***" (Matthew 1:20f)

There's no test here for "naughty or nice," only "***faith expressing itself through love.***" (Galatians 5:6) And there is a warning far more serious than finding **lumps of coal** instead of stocking stuffers. "***You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.***" That's all they thought the Baby Jesus was worth. No room in the inn was easy, compared to the bloody swords of Herod's soldiers killing all the baby boys in Bethlehem in a jealous rage to wipe out his supposed rival, the King of the Jews. But the Magi-Wise Men who were following a star from the east knew where the Christmas story was heading. Not to "Happy Holidays," but to miraculous, "Blessed Holy-Days" filled with God's **Light**.

As Rabbi Jesus later preached, "***Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.***" A world of sinners might wish that God's condemnation of

greed, adultery, slander and gossip would all be gone. But every dot on every “i” and the cross on every “t” would all stay in force even if you could burn all the Bibles in the world. Would it help your bottom line to burn your mortgage paper without paying it off? God’s copy of our debt to Him is in the lockbox of heaven. Only Christ has the key. And only He who was born in Bethlehem could pay the ultimate price to remove sin’s guilt forever. Only Christ could keep us from turning into the burning charcoal of hell’s eternal fires. But thanks be to God for making us His **Christmas Miracles of Salt and Light** and saving us to be **No lumps of coal** forever. No, in Christmas mercy the Lord’s Christ proclaims: *“You are the light of the world.”* God was pleased to make us His very own...

✠ **Bright candles of hope (vv.14-16,19-20)**

Mary and her cousin Elizabeth were glad to hide their pregnancies with Jesus and John the Baptist in the normal seclusion of expectant Jewish mothers. But once their babies were born, there was no hiding the message God sent them to bring – John as the forerunner and Jesus as the Christ of God. On this Christmas morning, Jesus, the Light of the World, says to us: *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

Sometimes what stops us from shining like **Bright candles of hope** in Christ is our discontent to be like someone else. As my Confirmation *Prayer Book* puts it: “The outward glamour of certain people or occupations sometimes causes unrest in my heart. Sometimes I aspire to be what I cannot or should not be. I sometimes lose my sense of gratitude for what Thou hast made me and given me, and as a result I become unpleasant or unhappy.”¹ The Christ-Child in His manger bed shows what God thinks of glamour, pomp and position. His sky-shining messengers to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem show where God’s true Glory lies – sucking the milk of His virgin mother’s breast while giving the rain drops to green up His planet. A Child, yet true God. There will never be a reason to stop wishing our fellow forgiven sinners, “Merry Christmas.” You are God’s **Bright candles of hope**. No “bowl” of discontent or persecution should ever shut out your light.

No one in Jesus’ day was considered more scholarly than the Scribes, no one more holy than the Pharisees. The Scribes knew the Scriptures and the Pharisees kept them – or so they thought. But Jesus says, *“Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* One might look ever so holy, but he needs far more than his own works and merits. Even the most religious soul is like a semi spinning on a slope too steep to drag his guilt up the side of a volcano.

What mountain are you trying to climb these days? Do you find your best only makes things worse? What if you finally found someone to marry at age 48, were blessed with five children, then all but one died before you did? What if the government took your job about the time God took the love of your life in illness? What if the people you served so faithfully withheld your salary and support for your family? What if you were blamed for religious unrest because you humbly kept confessing your faith in Christ by word and deed? Would it kill your Christmas with angry bitterness at God?

We are about to sing a hymn by a Christian pastor who suffered all I just described and so much more. Eighteen of Paul Gerhardt’s 120+ hymns are in our hymnal overflowing in righteous joy and holy peace in Jesus. “Come, your hearts and voices raising, Christ the Lord with gladness praising; Loudly sing his love amazing, Worthy folk of Christendom.” – **Christmas Miracles of Salt and Light**. Amen.

¹ “For the Grace to Be True to Myself,” *My Prayer Book*. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1957, p. 81.