

“For if the warhorn gives an indistinct sound, who will prepare for battle?”
1 Corinthians 14:8

WARHORN the CORN

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NATHAN ALBERSON

THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF THE STARS

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From the Editor

MISERY DOESN'T RHYME

Jake Mentzel

I'll never forget the first time I was introduced to a bitter and long-standing dispute about a certain line in "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." I was in college and we were caroling at a nursing home, and, for the very first time in my life, I felt a growing sense of tension mounting in the air while singing a Christmas carol. People began to glance up and make eye contact with one another. Some gave knowing nods of the head.

What in the world?

The problem, of course, was that one pesky verse, that verse that contains a line that doesn't rhyme:

Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

This is enough to make the average Christmas perfectionist an absolute basket case. How are our more fastidious brothers and sisters to pronounce "misery"? What principle shall they cling to? Should they grit their teeth and bear the inconsistency? Or ram that word into its rhyming box, protesting all the way, loudly and with feeling:

*And close the path to miiiser-ii-
I'm-looking-at-all-of-you-and-judging-you-if-you're-
not-singing-this-my-way...*

That's what I experienced for the first time at that nursing home. Half the poor old folks nearly jumped out of their seats, all because a couple disgruntled Christmas curmudgeons decided to make a point, loudly and with feeling.

But you know, the older I get the more I think it's kind of awesome that

one of the best Christmas hymns of all time upsets our expectations with such a glaringly bad rhyme. In fact, I kind of hope whoever translated it centuries ago did it that way on purpose, and I hope he got a good laugh in every time he heard it sung in church or at parties. And I like to think I'm in on the joke. (I mean, I'm sure it actually rhymed when he wrote it, but humor me.)

Because a good dose of lines that just don't rhyme could turn out to be a really nice antidote for the kind of Christmas expectations you get from watching too much Hallmark Channel, where the trees are all perky, there's always snow on the ground, and every line rhymes. (The truth is Lifetime and Hallmark don't exist to give you warm fuzzy feelings about how things are. They exist just to make you discontent and bitter about how things never actually turn out.)

I don't know how it'll work this year. Maybe there won't be any snow on the ground, or maybe your Christmas tree will look a little too Charlie Brownish, or maybe that present you thought so carefully about will be left unappreciated under a pile of discarded wrapping paper. Whatever happens, if you're not careful, your Christmas will amount to nothing more than unfulfilled expectation upon unfulfilled expectation. Utter misery. But misery doesn't rhyme, and that's kind of funny when you think about it.

Because you know what? As far as expectations go, no one *expected* God to be born as a man. And if they did they didn't expect Him to be born to a peasant girl. And if they did they didn't expect Him to be born in a barn. And if they did they didn't expect Him to be hailed by shepherds. And if they did they didn't expect Him to be chased down to Egypt or to live in utter obscurity in the backwaters of Nazareth for thirty years or to be crucified by the people He came to save so that He could do just that. And even if someone somewhere managed to expect all of those things, they certainly didn't expect Him to rise from the grave three days later.

Christmas teaches us a lot, and one of those things it teaches us is that our expectations can be pretty dumb.

It's true, your super special new cookie recipe might turn out awesome. But, you know, cookies do tend to get burned from time to time. It is possible that your estranged relative might show up at the last minute through a blizzard for a tearful reunion having finally understood the meaning of Christmas while all the bells (yes, all of them) chime in the distance. On the other hand, he might not.

But, no matter what happens, thinking that all of those things turning out just right will finally make for a good Christmas is just silly.

So laugh, drink some eggnog, eat some fudge, open some presents, love your neighbors, love Jesus, and get over it. And sing the word however you want (loudly and with feeling), just do it with a smile on your face, because now you're in on the joke.

Christmas is awesome. And in this issue we have two fine authors (Nathan Alberson and Michal Crum) with two fine ways of saying so. So enjoy and have a merry Christmas!

Also, if you want to check out how Jody Killingsworth pronounces “misery,” just send us a check in the mail (any amount will do) and we’ll get you a free copy of the new Christmas album (*All the Bells Shall Ring*) posthaste, ASAP, promptly, straightaway, and such like.

Jake Mentzel once got an oversized Charlotte Hornets Starter jacket for Christmas that he promptly put on and refused to take off. If he still had that jacket today, it might still be too big for him, because ‘90s.

ROLL
OVER,
BING
CROSBY!



This is not your grandma’s Christmas album. So you should probably buy it for her. And for all your other loved ones. It’s that awesome. The good news is you can get it for *free* with your tax-deductable donation of any amount.

**Offer Expires January 1, 2015*

CHUCK THE PLUM PUDDING

Michal Crum

Holiday traditions fill my heart with relish and anticipation, with promise and potential, like a handmade mug overflowing with mulled wine.

Well, some of the time anyway. The rest of the time they fill me with dread, and a sense of foreboding failure, like a handmade mug overflowing with . . . well, something unpleasant.

I want my children to grow up with a strong sense of place and tradition, like Wendell Berry. I want them to hail progress while clinging to the heritage of their homeland, like Willa Cather. I want them to know where they belong, like Sam Gamgee. I want them to go out into the world but still have a home they long to return to, like Odysseus.

But how? We have no grandfather to tell us tales of the old country. The Gaffer is not puttering around our garden. We don’t even have a dog to grow half-dead with age while waiting for us to return from our travels around the world. Ours is a culture of Middle America, of strip malls and soybean fields. The best our culture can do for us is Black Friday stampedes, inflatable lawn ornaments, and music that makes my brain want to bleed out of my ears. Woe is me, oh, woe is me.

A couple years ago after puzzling over my dilemma, I began to get my act together. I made plum pudding (yes, plum pudding!). I baked it mid-November, then doused it in brandy every week or so until Christmastime. We dimmed the lights and flambéed it on Christmas Eve. We also hosted a neighborhood Christmas open house. We decorated, baked cookies, turned on some Nat King Cole, and opened our home for an evening of Christmas treats and neighborly good cheer. We took our boys for late-night cookies at a friend’s house, and we made sure to hang stockings early in December. Oh boy, now I was finally getting a handle on this Christmas thing.

But last year was different. I got pregnant in March, and there was no way around it. Baby Knox was due to arrive January 2, so we would be unable

to go to Michigan to visit with family. Leave it to a baby to get born at Christmastime and throw a wrench in everyone's travel plans. (Ha. Get it? I made a joke.) I also knew from experience that at eight-and-a-half-months pregnant I would not be up for all the activity that had filled last Christmas. December would be spent getting ready for the baby's imminent arrival. I wouldn't even be able to host our Annual Neighborhood Open House (if you do something once, that makes it annual, right?). Would I even get around to making plum pudding?

After one year, our "culture of home" was rapidly disintegrating, our traditions cast by the wayside. I clucked my tongue and thought, what would Edith Schaeffer say? How could the holidays be special for our boys without the traditions they cherished? How could they love Christmas if all they got out of it was a new baby? *I am proving to be seriously inadequate*, I thought.

The next night I was visited by the ghosts of Willa Cather, Wendell Berry, and Edith Schaeffer, and they told me to chuck the plum pudding.

No, what really happened was I went to church.

This might be a better Christmas tale if it ended with me running through the snow, yelling "Merry Christmas!" to some wonderful old building and loan. But, as with many Christians in many types of crisis, my story only resolved itself when I went into the house of the Lord.

Our church does the usual sorts of things for the Christmas season. The foyer and the sanctuary are decorated with wreaths and banners and a tree. We sing a carol or two with every worship service. And each week, a different family reads some scriptures and lights the Advent candles. This all leads up to the special Christmas Eve service, where we dim the lights, and everybody in the congregation gets to hold a lit candle as we sing "Silent Night."

And, as I sat (or stood) through all of this, it hit me. *I can totally pass the buck.*

I mean, what if our culture and traditions are determined mostly by the body of believers surrounding us?

After all, if the Church is our mother, shouldn't she really be the one that gives my children their sense of place? Shouldn't she be the one they long most to come home to? I'm not saying I can *totally* pass the buck, but what if the only things we do *every* Christmas are attend the Christmas Eve service, recite the Luke 2 passage, and open presents together on Christmas morning? Isn't that better than annual flambéed plum pudding? Can I still be a good mother even if a third of the Advent calendar is unopened come New Year's?

What if I never even got it out of the attic this year?

Turns out, it will be okay.

Although I fully intend to attempt plum pudding again this year, our family has no annual Christmas ornament. I'm a major underachiever when it comes to birthday parties. My kids have never had their own Easter baskets, and they've never worn a christening gown. And the traditions I have tried to start have been so very hard to maintain. But you know what? If I fail to make plum pudding, Jesus Christ was still born in Bethlehem. If we never learn much about our cultural heritage or countries of origin, our citizenship is still in Zion. And we have a Church that makes each holiday special, pointing us to Christ's incarnation as a reason to seriously celebrate.

□

[Michal Crum's](#) dad gave her a pearl-handled Buck pocket knife for Christmas when she was five. According to her, it was the Best. Christmas. Present. Ever.

CLEARNOTE

CHRISTMAS
SPECTACULAR



DEC. 7, 6PM (CST)

Faith Bible Church, Evansville

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THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF THE STARS

(AND OTHER CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS)

Nathan Alberson

Attention, please, boys and girls. The theme of today's article is "What Does Christmas Mean to Me?" I realize that sounds like one of those silly essay assignments that they give elementary schoolers to make sure they don't have too much fun over Christmas break. The dirty secret is that I was home-schooled through those grades, so I never got to write a silly essay like that, and I'd sort of like a crack at it now, if you don't mind too much.

The other thing we should probably mention is that "What Does Christmas Mean to Me?" is, of course, a rather personal question. Fortunately (or unfortunately, as the case may be) I just happen to *be* a person, and am therefore uniquely qualified to give a personal answer.

So what does Christmas mean to me? Here are five answers:

First of all, Christmas means to me, lights. Me, I love the old-fashioned standard Christmas lights, with loads of green and red and blue, and the appropriate smattering of yellow and orange. Maybe some royal purple for texture. A lot of people like the all-white ones, but I've never been able to quite get behind those. There's something sort of highfalutin' about them, the urge toward austere and colorless beauty over warmth and variety and fun. That said, I have a special place in my heart for the strings of nothing but blue. Nothing glows like a blue Christmas light. If I was one of those explorers of old, the ones like Admiral Byrd that discovered the wonders of the North and South Poles—if I was one of those explorers, and I unearthed some icy cavern of treasure, buried by some ancient lost arctic civilization, I imagine that it would glow the same blue as those Christmas lights. It's a magic blue, a storybook blue. Maybe all the Christmas light colors are magic, storybook colors.

Second of all, Christmas means stars. Now here's where I can feel a little sympathy for the all-white-light advocates, because maybe what they've got in their heads when they gaze upon their seemingly spartan strands is stars.

Christmas, for me, is all about stars. You just think about the Christmas story: you have God who is called the Father of Lights, who gives us every good thing given and every perfect gift. A generous, extravagant God. And light is maybe the best example of His extravagance. He made lights, and placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on earth and to govern the day and the night and for signs and for seasons. Don't believe TED talkers when they give lectures on how the vastness of the cosmos dwarfs our puny planet and human ambitions. The Father of Lights sprinkled the night sky with stardust, assembled whole galaxies just to give light and signs and seasons to our puny planet. Just to help guide and inspire our absurd human ambitions.

And that, of course, brings us to the Star of Bethlehem. It's appropriate that the wise men followed a star to Bethlehem, because it is in the extravagance of the stars that we begin to see the bounty of the generosity of our Father. He could make and move and unmake an entire sun, billions of light years away, just to guide a few sages to His Son. He could pluck a star from the sky for the use of those wise men, as easily as a lover plucks a flower from a field for the use of his beloved. He could throw away an entire heavenly body, just to make sure some gold, frankincense, and myrrh got delivered at the right time by the right people. And what did the Son of God, with a thousand angels at His command, really need with gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Not much. But the Father of Lights could afford to spend an entire star, just to make sure His Son got His birthday present.

And that's the third thing that Christmas means to me: presents. I know some people have a tough time with that one, because presents mean (or can mean) materialism and greed and confusion and heartbreak. Some people think of Christmas presents and they think of how little Timmy, whose behavior has been known to put cherubim to shame, catches one sight of a Toys "R" Us

catalog, and he transforms, Jekyll-and-Hyde-like, into a conniving little ogre. And they think of how Mommy just wants something thoughtful from Daddy, although she guards the secret of what might actually constitute thoughtfulness like the Sphinx guarding its riddle. And then of course, Dad wants something cool, like, say, a paintball gun, or a potato gun, or a nail gun, or, maybe, a gun of some type. But he knows with the weariness of bitter experience that his gift is more likely to emit aftershave lotion than it is to emit armor-piercing rounds. Everybody wants something they don't get, everybody gives something nobody wants. The only winners are Amazon and Walmart.

Well, that's all true, some of the time, because we are sinful and stupid human creatures. But I still like presents just fine, because more often than not, they're not like that at all. More often than not, they're lovely little acts of generosity and courage and good will, wrapped up in ribbons and bows. Because, of course, the gift giver is only acting in the image of his Creator, who gives us much more than we can possibly ever use. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. And not simply so that the just and unjust may all have something to drink and water for their crops. The rain makes puddles for just and unjust children to splash in, and rivulets on window panes for just and unjust scientists and poets to contemplate. It makes gloomy afternoons for just and unjust novel reading, and it helps both the just and the unjust drift to sleep as it patters on the rooftop.

I defy even the most hardened sinner, who has felt God's rebuke time and time again, to tell me that his heavenly Father never gave him a good gift. And some of His gifts are as big and important as Justification and Sanctification, and some of them are as simple as a raindrop. I like that. I love God for it. And I love daddies and mommies who exhibit the character of God when they give little Timmy the gifts of life and love and discipline, and also the gift of a tricycle.

Fourth thing Christmas means to me: it means the time a couple years ago when it was Christmas Eve, and I was in Walmart buying gifts for my mother and brothers, and I had just left the Christmas Eve church service where everything and everyone seemed so joyful and holy, and I was feeling mean and nasty, because I was having one of those moments that you have from time to time, where I felt like sin had broken some things for me and my family, crushed and shattered them, things that should be happy things at Christmas time, but instead were sad. I had my two or three hastily-chosen gifts under my arms, and I got in the checkout line right behind a Mexican family—a short fat jolly dad and a thin elegant but jolly mom and a couple jolly kids. And they were all chattering jollily in Spanish and they had two (two!) carts full of Christmas goodies. I stood behind them with my three lousy items, waiting for the clerk to begin the interminable drama of processing their two full carts, and I felt miserable and stared at my feet.

Suddenly, I realized the dad was looking at me. I glanced up, not quite meeting his eyes. He didn't speak English too well, but he gave me a smile that was as gentle as a shrug, and made a sweeping gesture with his hand and he said, "You—you go first."

I mumbled my thanks and walked past the family and bought my stuff and walked out. By the time I reached the parking lot, I was crying. I cried all the way to Mom's house, and then I went inside and wrapped my presents, and my mom and brothers and I had a good, contented Christmas.

Now it goes without saying that I should have been more faithful and less cynical as I stood in that checkout line, but, in this particular instance, God didn't send me a sermon. He just sent me a jolly little family to be kind to me. And I really needed somebody to be kind to me that night. That jolly little family will never know that the best Christmas gift they gave that year was to a shabby mopey guy behind them in the checkout line. I hope and pray that God blesses them this Christmas.

So what's the fifth thing that Christmas means to me? Well, you all knew it was coming. But hopefully you didn't care, because you knew I saved the best for last. The fifth thing that Christmas means to me is Jesus Christ.



I love Jesus. I really do. It's a tragedy that those words sound so trite, because they're not. I love Jesus. And Christmas is a terrific time for loving Jesus.

In particular, it's a terrific time for loving him in a childlike sort of a way, the way you love your daddy and mommy, not because they symbolize anything big and important, but because of course you love them. What else are you supposed to do? You love them because you love them.

Obviously, there are plenty of reasons to love Jesus. He died on the cross to take away our sins. He is our King and our Lord. He dealt a death blow to Satan and all his works. He rose again and defeated death. He's coming back to judge the wicked and give the righteous their reward.

There are times to meditate on one or another of those. There are times to praise Him for this or that good thing in your life. There are times to cast yourself on His mercy as you struggle with this or that sin that still entangles us in this fractured, sad, and doomed old world of ours.

But I think Christmas is a time for loving everything about Him all at once. It's a time for loving the humble little babe in the manger that He was born as, and the man that He grew into who was stern with the proud and pitied the poor. It's a time for loving Him in His agony on the cross, and in the glory that is His to come, when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. It's the time for loving the Son of God who was there at creation, who scattered stardust with His Father and made lights for the heavens, so that we could make little electronic lights on earth to better celebrate Him. It's the time for loving the God who gives us so many good things that we don't deserve, who gives us folks in our lives who can be strict with us, or who surprise us with their kindness and mercy, as we need in the moment. He is the Son of a generous and extravagant Father, and He is a generous High Priest, and an extravagant King.

All the things that make me happy this time of year, from blue lights to kindly strangers, from daddies giving tricycles to wise men giving myrrh, would all be nothing better than rot and dust without Jesus Christ, the Lamb Who Was Slain, to hold them up and make them new. And that's what Christmas means to me.



[Nathan Alberson](#) once got a Lego set for Christmas. It was a forest hideaway for Robin Hood and his merry men. It had a tree bridge and tree tunnels and other tree-related stuff. It was coolest thing he ever got. He carried the box around with him all of Christmas Day.

IN BETHLEHEM

Jake Mentzel

Come before Him, gather 'round
In royal chamber underground.
There He lies by sheep and ox
Asleep inside a feeding box.
See the hay, it forms a crown:
Behold your king.

For our sakes the prophets say,
He's soon to trade sweet manger hay
And shepherds' praise for Adam's scorn,
And on His brow don Adam's thorn.
Still the mules around Him bray.
Behold your king.

High they'll hang Him as a thief
Crying, desperate for relief,
They'll mock Him 'til His final breath
Whose only crime is killing death.
Who has known or felt His grief?
Behold your king.

Yes, very soon, know full well:
This tiny babe whom angels tell
Will bear the curse of Adam's fruit—
He'll climb the tree and strike the root
And so destroy the powers of Hell.
Behold your king.

So come before Him, bow your knee.
Though this lamb a lion be,
And though He make you quake with fear,
He proves His love to sinners here
In Bethlehem, come, come and see:
Behold your king.

Who We Are

Clearnote Fellowship is a small, like-minded body of reformed and evangelical churches dedicated to building God's Kingdom. We plant churches, train pastors, and provide local churches with biblically sound and culturally astute resources like those featured in this issue of *The Warhorn*.

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