

# Unwrapping The Promise

Long Beach Alliance Church • December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006  
Merry Christmas • Pastor Chris Lankford

**THIS IS GOOD AND ACCEPTABLE IN THE SIGHT OF GOD OUR SAVIOR, WHO DESIRES ALL MEN TO BE SAVED AND TO COME TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH. FOR THERE IS ONE GOD, AND ONE MEDIATOR ALSO BETWEEN GOD AND MEN, THE MAN CHRIST JESUS, WHO GAVE HIMSELF AS A RANSOM FOR ALL, THE TESTIMONY GIVEN AT THE PROPER TIME.**

**~ 1<sup>ST</sup> TIMOTHY 2:3-6 (NASB)**

## **1) The Promise Of A Kingdom**

- A) The ancient promise of a Messiah for God's chosen people (Genesis 3:15, 12:1-3, 17:1-8) was fulfilled by the virgin birth of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:18-25).
  
- B) However, the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ was just the beginning of God's promise, the initiation of a much larger and more universally significant promise (Isaiah 9:2-7).
  
- C) Christmas is a wonderful celebration of God initiating His divine promises of the Messianic Kingdom. God's promises answer the key questions which concern any kingdom...

- i) Who is the King, and how will we know him?
  - ii) What makes him the King, and how will we know?
  - iii) When will the Kingdom come, and how will we know?
  - iv) How does someone become part of the Kingdom?
- D) All of the prophecies which were foretold in the Older Testament looked forward to the Kingdom of God. In one part or another, all the prophecies of the Older Testament answer one or more of the preceding questions.

## 2) The Promise Of Christmas

- A) God's Kingdom would be revealed by the provision of a Messiah to rescue the people from their oppression (Isaiah 9:4-5). This Messiah would come as a child (Isaiah 9:6).
- B) The Messiah was to be God Himself (Genesis 3:15, Psalm 2:7), clearly fulfilled by Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14, 23, 34; Matthew 3:17).
- C) The marvelous story of Jesus Christ's miraculous birth is magnificently recorded in Luke 2:1-20. Jesus Christ truly is 'God with Us' (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23).
- D) For many, this is where the story ends. They never get past the manger scene. We can be so captivated by the light coming into the world (Isaiah 9:2, John 8:12), we miss what the light has illuminated. But there is more...

### 3) The Inauguration Of The King

- A) As with any Kingdom, there must be an inauguration. The King must assume his throne. This was a significant problem, though, for the Kingdom of God. All of the subjects of God's Kingdom were slaves to another Kingdom (John 8:34).
  
- B) In order for the King (Jesus Christ) to assume the throne (inauguration as King), He first had to pay a ransom for His subjects, a payment to secure their transfer from one kingdom to God's Kingdom (Colossians 1:13, Mark 10:45).
  
- C) Mankind was originally designed to be in God's Kingdom (Adam & Eve, etc.). Mankind was removed from God's Kingdom because of sin (Romans 3:23). So, the ransom which had to be paid was not to Satan (Ephesians 2:2), but to God Himself (cf. Leviticus 4:32; Hebrews 10:3-4).
  
- D) Jesus Christ paid this ransom (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2:3-6), even when we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). We know that God accepted the payment, because Jesus was resurrected from the dead and restored to life (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:20-22).
  
- E) The birth of Christ began the promise, but the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ inaugurated the King (Philippians 2:7-11) and seals that the promise is available for us (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:12-15).
  
- D) Receiving the gift of God (Jesus) is accepted by trust/faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) in Christ through the humble confession of sin (1<sup>st</sup> John 1:9), and complete trust in God for forgiveness (Colossians 1:13-14) and eternal life (Romans 6:22-23).

# Advent Reading #4 ~ Brennan Manning

**Brennan Manning (1933-present) joined the Little Brothers of Jesus of Charles de Foucauld religious order (a Catholic order of priests) in the 1960's after fighting in the Korean War and graduating from seminary in 1963. Finding the cloistered life difficult and reaching for his own solutions, Manning ended up addicted to alcohol and without hope.**

**Manning went through alcohol rehab in the 1970's which set him on a spiritual journey toward Christ which has never ceased. He continues to this day as a director of renewal retreats, missions and evangelism outreaches, and is a highly sought after speaker throughout the world.**

**Most notably, Brennan Manning is a prolific author whose words cut straight to the heart. He calls Christ-followers to a white-hot commitment, rooting out the depths of our fallenness, and resting in the gentleness and compassion of Jesus. His most famous books include *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, *The Signature of Jesus*, and *The Lion & The Lamb*.**

**Manning is one of the most influential voices and authors within Christendom today, helping the church to focus on the marvelous character of God and personal practice of sanctification.**

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## *Shipwrecked at the Stable*

*But Jesus called for them, saying, "Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*

*Luke 18:16*

DO YOU THINK you could contain Niagara Falls in a teacup?

Is there anyone in our midst who pretends to understand the awesome love in the heart of the Abba of Jesus that inspired, motivated and brought about Christmas? The shipwrecked at the stable kneel in the presence of mystery.

God entered into our world not with the crushing impact of unbearable glory, but in the way of weakness, vulnerability and need. On a wintry night in an obscure cave, the infant Jesus was a humble, naked, helpless God who allowed us to get close to him.

We all know how difficult it is to receive anything from someone who has all the answers, who is completely cool, utterly unafraid, needing nothing and in control of every situation. We feel unnecessary, unrelated to this paragon. So God comes as a newborn baby, giving us a chance to love him, making us feel that we have something to give him.

The world does not understand vulnerability. Neediness is rejected as unprofitable. The great deception of television advertising is that being poor vulnerable and weak is unattractive. A fat monk named “Brother Dominic” is cute and cool because he conquers vulnerability and helplessness by buying into the competitive world with a Xerox machine.

The spirituality of Bethlehem is simply incomprehensible to the advertising industry. The opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony are being used to sell us pain reliever, and the prayer of St. Francis is being used to sell us hair conditioner.

The Bethlehem mystery will ever be a scandal to aspiring disciples who seek a triumphant Savior and a prosperity Gospel. The infant Jesus was born in unimpressive circumstances, no one can exactly say where. His parents were of no social significance whatsoever, and his chosen welcoming committee were all turkeys, losers and dirt-poor shepherds. But in this weakness and poverty the shipwrecked at the stable would come to know the love of God.

Sadly, Christian piety down through the centuries has prettified the Babe of Bethlehem. Christian art has trivialized divine scandal into gingerbread crèches. Christian worship has sentimentalized the smells of the stable into dignified pageant...

Pious imagination and nostalgic music rob Christmas of its shock value, while some scholars reduce the crib to a tame theological symbol. But the shipwrecked at the stable tremble in adoration of the Christ-child and quake at the inbreak of God Almighty. Because all the Santa Clauses and red-nosed reindeer, fifty-foot trees and thundering church bells put together create less pandemonium than the infant Jesus when, instead of remaining a statue in a crib, he comes alive and delivers us over to the fire that he came to light.

The Spanish author Jose Ortega puts it this way:

The man with the clear head is the man who frees himself from fantasy and looks life in the face, realizes that everything in it is problematic, and feels himself lost. And this is the simple truth – that to live is to feel one-self lost. Whoever accepts this has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground. Instinctively, as do the shipwrecked, he will look around for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere because it is a question of his salvation, will cause him to bring order to the chaos of his life. These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce. He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.

The shipwrecked at the stable are the poor in spirit who feel lost in the cosmos, adrift on an open sea, clinging with a life-and-death desperation to the one solitary plank. Finally they are washed ashore and make their way to the stable, stripped of the old spirit of possessiveness in regard to anything. The shipwrecked find it not only tacky but utterly absurd to be caught up either in tinsel trees or in religious experiences – “Doesn’t going to church on Christmas make you feel good?” They are not concerned with their own emotional security or any of the trinkets of creation. They have been saved, rescued, delivered from the waters of death, set free for a new shot at life. At the stable in a blinding moment of truth, they make the stunning discovery that Jesus is the plank of salvation they have been clinging to without knowing it!

All the time they were battered by wind and rain, buffeted by raging seas, they were being held even when they didn’t know who was holding them. Their exposure to spiritual, emotional and physical deprivation has weaned them from themselves and made them re-examine all they once thought important. The shipwrecked come to the stable seeking not to possess but to be possessed, wanting not peace or a religious high, but Jesus Christ.

The shipwrecked don’t seek peace because they aren’t disturbed by the lack of it. By that I mean the subjective feeling of peace. Circumstances can play havoc with our emotions, the day can be stormy or fair and our feelings will fluctuate accordingly; but if we are in Christ Jesus, we are in peace and there unflustered even when we feel no peace. Meister Eckhart’s equation, “In Christ equals in peace,” is always valid. When we accept the truth of ourselves – shipwrecked and saved – our lives are henceforth anchored in the Rock who is Christ, not in the shifting sands of our fickle feelings.

This is a point of capital importance for those who would fully experience the grace of Christmas. When we are in right relationship with Jesus, we are in the peace of Christ. Except for grave, conscious, deliberate infidelity, which must be recognized and repented of, the presence or absence of feelings of peace is the normal ebb and flow of the spiritual life. When things are plain and ordinary, when we live on the plateaus and in the valleys (which is where most of the Christ life takes place) and not on the mountaintops of peak religious experiences, this is no reason to blame ourselves, to think that our relationship with God is collapsing, or to echo Magdalene’s cry in the garden, “Where has my beloved gone?” Frustration, irritation, fatigue and so forth may temporarily unsettle us, but they cannot rob us of living in the peace of Christ Jesus. As the playwright Ionesco once declared in the middle of a depression: “Nothing discourages me, not even discouragement.”

The shipwrecked have stood at the still-point of a turning world and

discovered that the human heart is made for Jesus Christ and cannot really be content with less. They cannot take seriously the demands that the world makes on them. During Advent they teach us that the more we try to tame and reduce desires, the more we deceived and distort ourselves. We are made for Christ and nothing less will ever satisfy us. As Paul writes in Colossians 1:16, "All things were created by him and for him." And further on, "There is only Christ: he is everything" (3:11). It is only in Christ that the heart finds true joy in created things.

To the clotheshorse fretting about what to wear on Christmas Day, the shipwrecked say, "Put on Christ." To the merchant whose Bible is the Wall Street Journal and who pants down the money-making street, the shipwrecked say, "You have only one Master; serving him is incompatible with any other servitude." To the power-broker dealing strength to get things done, the shipwrecked say: "However powerful you are, the most you can do is change the décor of a world that is collapsing into its own death."

The shipwrecked stand on firm ground. They live in truth and are rooted in reality. They do not allow the world to order them around. Kneeling at the crib they find the vanity of the world ridiculous, bloated, preposterous...

Do you hear what the shipwrecked are saying? Let go of your paltry desires and expand your expectations. Christmas means that God has given us nothing less than himself and his name is Jesus Christ. Be unwilling next Christmas to settle for anything else. Don't order "just a piece of toast" when eggs Benedict are on the menu. Don't come with a thimble when God has nothing less to give you than the ocean of himself. Don't be contented with a "nice" Christmas when Jesus says, "It has pleased my Father to give you the Kingdom." Pray, go to work, play Trivial Pursuit, eat banana bread, exchange presents, go caroling, feed the hungry, comfort the lonely, and do all the in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a beautiful story recounted every Christmas in the forests of Provence in southern France. It's about the four shepherds who came to Bethlehem to see the child. One brought eggs, another bread and cheese, the third brought wine. And the fourth brought nothing at all. People called him L'Enchante. The first three shepherds chatted with Mary and Joseph, commenting on how well Mary Looked, how cozy was the cave and how handsomely Joseph had appointed it, what a beautiful starlit night it was. They congratulated the proud parents, presented them with their gifts and assured them that if they needed anything else, they had only to ask. Finally someone asked, "Where is L'Enchante – the Enchanted One. Like a flag or a flame taking the direction of the wind, he had taken the direction of love. Throughout the entire night, he stayed in adoration, whispering, "Jesu, Jesu,

Jesu – Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”

As Christmas approaches, an honest question is: do I want to be or merely appear to be a Christian? Like the shipwrecked, the Enchanted One is laid waste by one pure passion. His singlemindedness leads him to a realistic assessment: anything connected with Christmas that is not centered in Christ Jesus – tree, ornaments, turkey dinner, exchange of gifts, worship itself – is empty gesturing. Blessed are the shipwrecked, for they see God in all the trappings of Christmas and experience a joy that the world does not understand.

One day Saint Francis and Brother Leo were walking down the road. Noticing that Leo was depressed, Francis turned and asked: “Leo, do you know what it means to be pure of heart?”

“Of course. It means to have no sins, faults or weaknesses to reproach myself for.”

“Ah,” said Francis, “now I understand why you’re sad. We will always have something to reproach ourselves for.”

“Right,” said Leo. “That’s why I despair of ever arriving at purity of heart.”

“Leo, listen carefully to me. Don’t be so preoccupied with the purity of your heart. Turn and look at Jesus. Admire him. Rejoice that he is what he is – your Brother, your Friend, your Lord and Savior. That, little brother, is what it means to be pure of heart. And once you’ve turned to Jesus, don’t turn back and look at yourself. Don’t wonder where you stand with him.

“The sadness of not being perfect, the discovery that you really are sinful, is a feeling much too human, even borders on idolatry. Focus your vision outside yourself on the beauty, graciousness and compassion of Jesus Christ. The pure of heart praise him from sunrise to sundown. Even when they feel broken, feeble, distracted, insecure and uncertain, they are able to release it into his peace. A heart like that is stripped and filled – stripped of self and filled with the fullness of God. It is enough that Jesus is Lord.”

After a long pause, Leo said, “Still, Francis, the Lord demands our effort and fidelity.”

“No doubt about that,” replied Francis. “But holiness is not a personal achievement. It’s an emptiness you discover in yourself. Instead of resenting it, you accept it and it becomes the free space where the Lord can create anew. To cry out, ‘You alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,’ that



is what it means to be pure of heart. And it doesn't come by your Herculean efforts and threadbare resolutions."

"Then how?" asked Leo.

"Simply hoard nothing of yourself; sweep the house clean. Sweep out even the attic, even the nagging painful consciousness of your past. Accept being shipwrecked. Renounce everything that is heavy, even the weight of your sins. See only the compassion, the infinite patience, and the tender love of Christ. Jesus is Lord. That suffices. Your guilt and reproach disappear into the nothingness of non-attention. You are no longer aware of yourself, like the sparrow aloft and free in the azure sky. Even the desire for holiness is transformed into a pure and simple desire for Jesus.

Leo listened gravely as he walked along beside Francis. Step by step he felt his heart grow lighter as a profound peace flooded his soul. The shipwrecked have little in common with the landlocked. The landlocked have their own security system, a home base, credentials and credit cards, storehouses and barns, their self-interest and investments intact. They never find themselves because they never really feel themselves lost. At Christmas, one despairs of finding a suitable gift for the landlocked. "They're so hard to shop for; they have everything they need."

The shipwrecked, on the contrary, reach out for that passing plank with the desperation of the drowning. Adrift on an angry sea, in a state of utter helplessness and vulnerability, the shipwrecked never asked what they could do to merit the plank and inherit the kingdom of dry land. They knew that there was absolutely nothing any of them could do. Like little children, they simply received the plank as a gift. And little children are precisely those who haven't done anything. "Unless you... become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). Jesus is not suggesting that heaven is a vast playground for infants. Children are our model because they have no claim of heaven. If they are close to God, Simon Tugwell says "it is not because they are innocent, but because they are incompetent..."

When Jesus tells us to become like little children, he is urging us to forget what lies behind. Children have no past. Whatever we have done in the past, be it good or evil, great or small, it is irrelevant to our stance before Jesus. It is only now that we are in his presence, and this Christmas is the First Christmas of the rest of our lives. Like little children, the shipwrecked don't bring the baggage of the past into the stable of the present moment...

The shipwrecked at the stable are captivated by joy and wonder. They have found the treasure in the field of Bethlehem. The pearl of great price

is wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Everything else is cheap, fake, painted fragments of glass.

The question for all of us is what we will really aim at next Christmas. If all we are going for is a placid decency, routine prayer, well-behaved worship and comfortable compassion, then we have effectively parted company with the shipwrecked and have no fellowship with the pearl-finder.

I wonder, if we were to stop people at random in the street on December 24 and ask them what they want most for Christmas, how many would say, "I want to see Jesus"?

I believe that the single most important consideration during the sacred season of Advent is intensity of desire. Paraphrasing the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "Jesus Christ is of no importance unless he is of supreme importance." An intense inner desire is already the sign of his presence in our hearts. The rest is the work of the Holy Spirit.

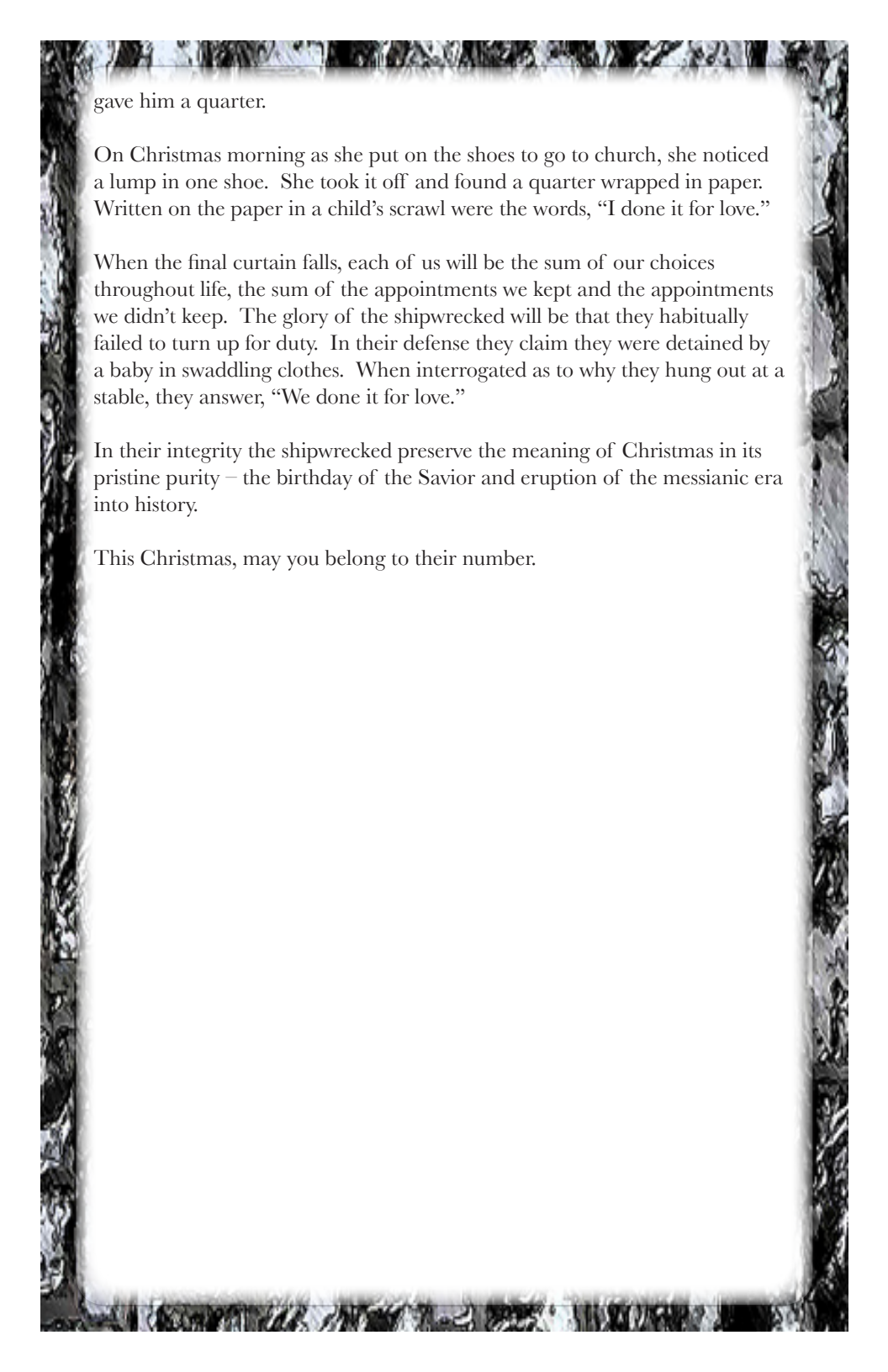
Perhaps many of us are in the same position as the Greeks in chapter twelve of John's Gospel who approached Philip and said, "We would like to see Jesus."

The question addressed to each of us is: How badly?

The shipwrecked at the stable are an indispensable presence in the church. They rescue the Savior from the snare of convention and the clutches of organized religion. They are marginal men and women, not leaders or decision-makers. In their ministry of quiet presence they do not need to win or compete. They may look like losers even to themselves. If they courted the world, the world might respect them; if they rejected the world in sullen disdain, it might respect them even more. But because they take no notice at all of what the world thinks of them, they are mocked and made fun of.

The only explanation of why the little band of the shipwrecked exists at all is the personal magnetism of Jesus. As Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, "Only he who has experienced it can believe what the love of Jesus Christ is." You could more easily catch a hurricane in a shrimp net than you can understand the wild, relentless, passionate, uncompromising, pursuing love of God made present in the manger.

In 1980, the day before Christmas, Richard Ballenger's mother in Anderson, South Carolina, was busy wrapping packages and asked her young son to shine her shoes. Soon, with the proud smile that only a seven-year-old can muster, he presented the shoes for inspection. His mother was so pleased, she



gave him a quarter.

On Christmas morning as she put on the shoes to go to church, she noticed a lump in one shoe. She took it off and found a quarter wrapped in paper. Written on the paper in a child's scrawl were the words, "I done it for love."

When the final curtain falls, each of us will be the sum of our choices throughout life, the sum of the appointments we kept and the appointments we didn't keep. The glory of the shipwrecked will be that they habitually failed to turn up for duty. In their defense they claim they were detained by a baby in swaddling clothes. When interrogated as to why they hung out at a stable, they answer, "We done it for love."

In their integrity the shipwrecked preserve the meaning of Christmas in its pristine purity – the birthday of the Savior and eruption of the messianic era into history.

This Christmas, may you belong to their number.

# Advent Notes