



THE LIGHT STILL SHINES

AND OTHER ESSAYS BY JIM SHELBURNE

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



Curtis Shelburne

The God who created this world, who created light and order and meaning out of darkness and chaos, is the same God who sent into this world at Bethlehem the true Light who banishes darkness. The angels proclaiming the birth of a tiny Baby are pointing us to a very large, brilliant, beautiful hope. We hope you enjoy Jim Shelburne's essays in this issue as he reminds us of the glorious truth that "The Light Still Shines."

INCARNATION:

**A Savior
HAS BEEN BORN**



Curtis Shelburne

"I bring you good news of great joy . . . Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

*** Luke 2**

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Curtis Shelburne

the light still **SHINES**

CHILLY AIR and blowing leaves and pumpkin pie all point to one thing: Christmas can't be very far away. I'm writing in the last week of November, knowing that very soon I'll be up in the attic swimming through dust bunnies and cobwebs to get to the "Christmas Decoration Section" in my attic archives. As I'm hauling boxes up and down each year at this time, it always takes me back to the decorating seasons of my childhood, and how different things were back then.

Curtis Shelburne

Whereas the Shelburnes who live on Everett Street in 2015 have, I'd say, maybe twenty-five boxes of different Christmas decorations (we do love Christmastime!), back in 1964, the Shelburnes who lived on North Goliad Street had, maybe, two boxes. They (the boxes) lived up on a dusty shelf out in our single car garage that had never seen a car.

For a five-year-old who could only remember three Christmases, that box held the stuff of wonder—colored glass ornaments, mirror-like and fragile, a star for the top of the tree, a little plastic light-up Santa with a bubble light, icicles made of foil (which my mother saved each year), and, most importantly, lights.

We had seven strings of lights with seven colored twinkle lights on each string,

the "modern" kind that would stay lit even if one light burned out. Those forty-nine twinkle lights transformed our humble four-dollar fir tree into a work of art. They also fired my imagination with the wonder of Christmas.

“A sixty-five-year-old light bulb is nothing compared to the Light that came into the world some 2,000 years ago.”

Outdoor decorations? Well, today we have four or five crates of those alone. But back then my

parents' sum total of outdoor Christmas regalia consisted of one string of about twelve lights.

You may have seen these in museums. They were not today's Chinese-made "\$1.99 for a hundred bulbs discount store throw 'em away each year lights." No, these were heavy duty. Fourteen-gauge red and green wires. Beefy bakelite sockets with brass inserts. C-9 textured bulbs that burned bright and hot. Just a dozen of them. Just

enough to drape across the small porch eave at our house. Just enough to let the neighbors (and Santa) know that Scrooge did not live at 125 N. Goliad!

Oh, they were pretty paltry decorations by today's standards, but I took great pride in plugging them in each night, bathing the front of our nondescript little white brick house in the wonder of Christmas.

I still have those lights. What's more impressive is that most of the bulbs still burn, even though the wires are a bit stiff and brittle. After all, they are approaching sixty-five years old. I'm pretty careful with them, and they don't burn long. But I try to sit quietly in their glow each year for at least a few moments, awash in their simple and

basic warmth that herald from a time when Christmas—and life, in general—was a lot more, well, simple and basic.

Christmas today is anything but either of those things. December calendar slots are already filling up with parties

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here and activities there, a couple dozen fun and festive obligations, but obligations

nonetheless.

We have halls to deck (see above, twenty-five boxes worth!), presents to search out and buy and wrap, special services to attend and prepare, relatives to meet and greet, cards to mail, . . . and the list grows along with our waistlines as the season unfolds. By the time it's all over—unless we've been stingy with our calendars and circumspect with our hearts—Christmas may have bloomed

and faded, and we may have pretty much missed the real and most important points of what Christmas means and why it deserves from us a more focused and careful celebration.

Now don't get me wrong. I love the lights, the smells, the sights, the sounds. I love the music, the decorations, time with friends, special events. I love buying and giving presents (if I don't have to go to the mall), and I love getting gifts. (I'm pretty easy to buy for!) But I also know that Christmas can easily be about a mile wide and an inch deep—unless we remember what it's really all about.

I'm pretty proud and pleased that my parents' ancient and basic Christmas lights still burn. A sixty-five-year-old light bulb is impressive by any standard. But that's nothing compared to a Light that came into the world and split the darkness some 2,000 years ago.

Isaiah foretold it: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadowlands of death, a light has dawned” (9:2).

And John the Gospel eyewitness wrote about the culmination of Isaiah's words: “In him (Jesus) was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it” (1:4-5).

Christmas, more than anything else, is about Light. God himself pulled on a dingy cloak of humanity and came near to live among us, but the Light leaked through. It shone above a stable in a Bethlehem sky. It illuminated the minds of fishermen and rabbis and everyone who would open their eyes. It poured out of a sealed tomb to forever change the score in cemeteries. And it's still shining brightly today!

Merry Christmas!



don't be AFRAID

“DON'T BE AFRAID!”

That may well be one of the shortest and most pointed admonitions in the Bible. And nowhere in the Bible do those words appear more often than in the early pages of the Gospels surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Before long, you'll be taking down the tree, returning the gift you didn't want or that didn't fit, or you'll have spent your gift cards on those amazing post-Christmas bargains. But don't forget what those three little words had to do with the

coming of Christ, why they still matter so much right now, and why they will still matter when this Christmas season is over.

The priest Zechariah may have been the first to get that message when the angel came to tell him of the miraculous birth of his son, John.

Then it was Mary, a few months later, who is told, “Don't be afraid! You have found favor with God.” And then it was Joseph's turn: “Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She is carrying the child of God, who will save his people from their sins.”

And then a few more months later, that message came to shepherds in the fields: “Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy for all people.”

We've recently sung a little carol, about a little town called

Bethlehem. Down near the end, we sing, “Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

I do realize that most angelic announcements by

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

their very nature have to begin with the disclaimer, “Don't be afraid!”

because

the angels of the Bible are not the cute, cuddly, cotton-candy, cherubic, chubby arrow-shooting ankle-biters we picture in our culture. The Fed Ex/Storm Trooper type angels in the Bible (when not disguised as humans) are often warrior-like, huge, intense, and formidable beings of light. The only proper response is to fall on your face (and then go change your pants!). But beyond their imposing personas, consider

that their recurring message holds a deeper meaning also, targeting “the hopes and fears of all the years.” Theirs and ours. Then and now.

The world Jesus came into was a frightening place—politically, socially, and

religiously oppressed and unstable. Very little light, and even less hope, shone in the little town of

Bethlehem, or in the rest of the world of Jesus’ time.

But is it different now in our own? Not if you focus on the darkness, which is encompassing and deep. We live in a world where fear is the norm. We have locks on our doors, alarms on our cars, and firewalls on our computers. We have security guards and bright lights and police forces to keep the darkness at bay.

We live in a world where there’s a lot to be afraid of—

terrorist attacks, economic disaster, pandemic viruses, and incurable cancers. Some of us may be even more afraid of relationship failures or the battles we fight daily against the personal demons which would enslave or addict us.

“In the midst of conflict, darkness, and danger, the peace and light Jesus brings means nothing to fear.”

Some of us, truth be known, are practically paralyzed much of the time, afraid of what may lurk

in the shadows of an uncertain future. Our world is not all that different from the one Jesus came into, except in one very significant way: Jesus came into it. He’s been a part of ours all along. And that makes all the difference in the world.

Really!

The angel’s message to the shepherds was more than just, “Don’t be afraid.” They had a “why” as well. Don’t be afraid—for we bring good news: “A Savior is born, he

is Christ the Lord! . . . Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

This Savior/Rescuer brought peace and security. You might think that peace on earth is a pipe-dream, or just something invented by greeting card companies or beauty-queen pageant contestants. And that might be true—until you realize that this promise was specifically given not concerning the entire world, but to those favored ones, like those shepherds and ourselves, who would embrace the Christ who came, who would receive the light and be “delivered from the darkness.” The rest were promised neither joy nor peace. The rest are—and should be—very much afraid.

But us? Because of Jesus, we don’t have to be afraid. If there are areas of your life that give you concern (and we all have them), don’t forget that Jesus came.

Don’t forget that he’s still here. In the midst of conflict, and in the midst of darkness and danger, the peace and light Jesus brings means that beneath and in spite of it all, we really have nothing to fear.

May the peace of Jesus Christ encompass your life in 2016, and may you know his peace so that you can have no fear.



the christmas you **LONG FOR**

IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, Christmas brings along with it a truckload of memories—and after Christmas, you often feel like that truck ran right over you! Christmas can be demanding, delightful, depressing, dazzling, delicious, and deleterious—all at the same time. Now, that said, you need to understand—I still love Christmas!

I love the music and the lights and greenery. I love candles and carols and candlelight services and gatherings throughout the season with friends. I love Christmas trees,

beautifully decorated and shimmering in the darkness of a quiet house late at night with soft music playing in the background. I love the smell of real Christmas trees (although I must confess it has been years since our home has had that old-fashioned pleasure; I don't love the plastic "made in China by Buddhists" Christmas tree that smells of dust and attic heat. I tolerate this kind because I'm cheap).

I love hot chocolate and spicy wassail and the smells of Christmas in the kitchen. I love walking through the neighborhood on a crisp, December night, houses all around decked out and glowing in their own finery. (My late dog, Riley, loved Christmas, too. He thought all the shrubs along our nightly

walking route had been lit up just for him; no, though I was afraid he might salute and electrocute himself, that's not what actually got him.)

I really do love Christmas. But have you noticed that Christmases of the present often seem far removed from those in our more distant memories? For children, I suspect

“Have you noticed that Christmases of the present often seem far removed from those in our more distant memories?”

the lights are brighter, the trees more beautiful, the presents more tantalizing, simply because the pool of their memories is much more shallow. If you've only had, say, six or eight Christmases, well, it's a fairly novel experience. Time moves slowly for children, and Christmas seasons are an eternity apart. But when you've seen forty-nine such Yuletides—and they seem to come along almost every

other month now—that’s a lot of history to dilute the experience.

My own December 25ths seem to run together a bit, a mingled mass of memories not unlike a tangled strand of Christmas lights which seem to have no end or beginning. I still remember the early ones, the Christmases of my childhood, much more vividly. They were simply amazing, and, albeit perhaps unfairly, they are still the standard by which all things Christmas are judged!

In these delicate ethereal memories of Christmases past lies the crux of the problem with Christmases present. We want this Christmas to be just as special, to sweep us up just as much in its joy, to tantalize us just as much by its

freshness and newness and uniqueness, to mesmerize us just as much by the possibility of what Santa might bring this year, as it did in those sweet Christmases long past.

This is harder when you know too much about Santa.

There are three stages in a man’s life: first, he believes in Santa Claus; second, he doesn’t believe in Santa Claus; third, he becomes Santa Claus. And, as the magic and mystery fade, so fades the feeling that once came with each December.

This change of perception isn’t all bad. In fact, it may be the only thing that paves the way for us to begin to let go of some intangible idea of “the Christmas that we’ve always wanted” and be able to embrace the Christmas that we’ve always needed.

“May the Christ of Christmas walk with you every step of this glad season, and may all your deepest longings be met in him.”

Christmas is a wonderful season, and there is still much to be said for it, in spite of some of the modern warping and commercialism attached. But we must realize that any Christmas centered on the pursuit of some magic “Hallmark” moment is destined to fall short. In fact, any Christmas that is centered on anything besides Jesus Christ will always be far less than anything we either need or want. If the celebration is named in his honor, doesn’t it make sense that the celebration should mainly be about honoring him?

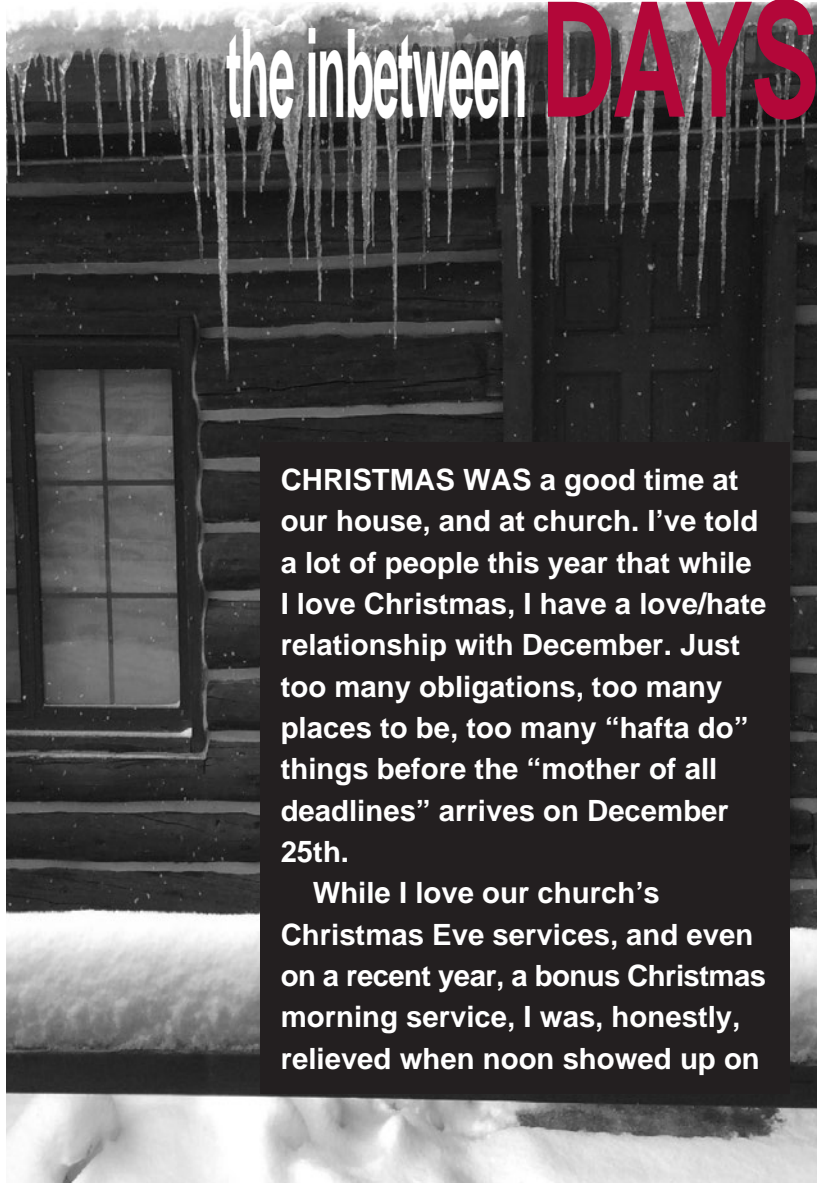
The Christmas birthed in Jesus Christ is indeed about peace on Earth and joy and good will and glad tidings. It is about silent and holy nights and angelic messengers. It is about shepherds and a Baby in a manger. It is probably not so much about presents as it is about the gift of his Presence. It is not so much

about trees and lights as it is about a Light that was once hung on a “tree”—the price paid for the one Gift everyone truly needed, and at some deep level, even longed for.

So if you can really want this Christmas to be mainly about Christ . . . If you can let his being permeate your thoughts and hopes and fears and dreams . . . If you can celebrate his coming of old and his Presence in the present . . . If you can want what you have already been given more than you worry about being given what you presently want . . .

Then this Christmas just might be the one you’ve always longed for. It all depends on what, and on Whom, you place at the center. May the Christ of Christmas walk with you every step of this glad season, and may all of your deepest longings be met in him.





the inbetween DAYS

CHRISTMAS WAS a good time at our house, and at church. I've told a lot of people this year that while I love Christmas, I have a love/hate relationship with December. Just too many obligations, too many places to be, too many "hafta do" things before the "mother of all deadlines" arrives on December 25th.

While I love our church's Christmas Eve services, and even on a recent year, a bonus Christmas morning service, I was, honestly, relieved when noon showed up on

CurtisSheburne

Christmas Day, and I was home, cooking some lunch and anticipating the opening of presents and then a long winter's nap.

It seems like Thanksgiving arrives and then the next five weeks are spent in a break-neck race. That's a big part of the reason I'm glad many of us are rediscovering Advent.

We don't do a lot of overtly "liturgical" things in our church circle, but we could all use more of the Advent liturgy of rest, quietness, and contemplation as an antidote for so many of the things that are wrong with our society, so many of the things that ail us all.

Christmas brings with it so many good things, and, I'm thankful to include in that list, good memories. I know that is not true for everyone at Christmas, and I'm sad

for them. I've spent so many Christmases now that they all pretty much run together, but I have a sweet collage of memories that I am able to enjoy, snapshots of over fifty years' worth of Christmases. In many ways, I become a

“I enjoy snapshots of over fifty years' worth of Christmases. I become a child again when I see the lights and candles, when I hear the carols.”

child again when I see the lights and candles, when I hear the carols. A little Andy Williams

or Nat King Cole or Bing Crosby constellate the "star trek" back to the universe of my childhood Christmas. Christmas truly is for children—and those of us who act like them!

This year we were treated unexpectedly to a present beyond our fondest hopes—a real white Christmas complete with five inches of snow that fell straight down from the sky, almost all day long. I will have that picture now to add to the

rarified events of Christmases past. It was good!

And these quieter days in-between Christmas Day and New Year's Day (still in the midst of the actual twelve-day Christmas season, you know) are good, too. These are days

when, for most of the world around us, no one is too ambitious about very much, days when we

can sort of recover from the pace of the last few weeks and get ready for the always too-soon-too-demanding days of a brand new year, struggling uphill against holiday negative inertia to regain some of the momentum we had right up until November 22nd or so. It's kind of hard on the last Friday of the year to want to do anything at all.

I find it strange that as many delightful memories as I have of Christmases nearby and

also far gone, I have almost as few memorable snapshots of New Year's events. That could be because I've slept through a lot of them! And on the occasions when I stayed up to "ring in" the New Year, it was so late and caused enough

brain damage that I can't remember the event. Call me an old toot if you want to, but I really fail to get much

of a charge from staying up to watch a calendar change.

Actually, when you realize that every single day is a brand new day, made perfect and opportune and precious by God's grace, then Dick Clark and a dropping crystal ball countdown in New York seem fairly mundane events. Every day is the real event, not to be missed or wasted in its "everydayness." If I were to have a resolution for the coming twelve calendar

“If I were to have a resolution for the coming twelve calendar pages, it might be to cherish every day and treasure it for what it is.”

pages, it might be just that—to cherish every day and treasure it for what it is instead of wishing away the time or wasting it on piffle.

It's ironic that killing or wasting time has an effect on eternity, since each moment is precious. We should embrace each of them, celebrate them, and seek God's guidance as stewards of this very limited resource. The hard truth is that more than a few in your circle today will not be a year from now. I do funerals almost every week, many of those services for people who had no idea months or even minutes before that their time on the planet was about to end.

Of all the things we have, beyond our faith in Jesus Christ, what could be more precious than time? It is the currency of our lives, and we really must make every day and every relationship count as we spend it away.

Do you have some connections that could use

a little attention? The greatest after-Christmas present you could give anyone is just a little of your time. Spend it wisely in the coming year!

These quiet “in-between days” are good ones as they allow us to breathe deeply before we have to brace ourselves and jump into the cold raging flow of one more new year. But don't forget that there is no guarantee you'll make it to the next one. The Bible talks about living “circumspectly”—that is a funny King Jimmy word that means to live with an awareness of all that's happening around us. And we are further commanded, emphatically, to “be wise and not foolish” when it comes to using the time.

After all, every day of our lives is an “in-between day,” another day in-between our first and last breaths.



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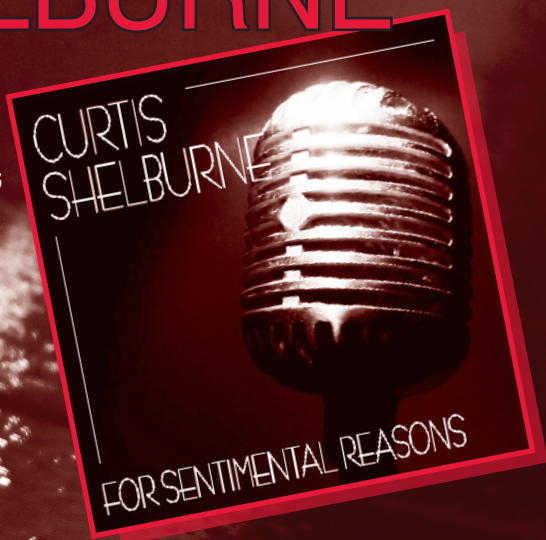
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