

The Spirit of Christmas

THOMAS S. MONSON

I drove here today in a snowstorm, and my thoughts turned to the season of the year in which we find ourselves—a season that can be so meaningful if we will but let it be. As I heard my little son last evening stand before the fireplace and recite what he thought was a new poem, I was reminded that this is the Christmas season.

“Daddy, I’ve learned a new poem,” he said, “and I’d like to teach it to you. I know you’ll like it.” The poem that he then recited commenced:

*’Twas the night before Christmas,
when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring,
not even a mouse.*

[Clement C. Moore, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1921), 3]

And on he went.

He said, “Isn’t that a wonderful poem, Daddy?”

I had an opportunity to tell him it was a wonderful poem, because almost everything that I associate with Christmas is important to me.

A Little Girl and Santa Claus

Just a couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of taking my family downtown as Santa Claus made his appearance. It was interesting. Crowds gathered. One little girl I particularly noticed had been standing on the side of the curb for what seemed like many minutes, waiting for this great event. Just as Santa Claus was to make his entry, great throngs of people crowded in front of her, and she began to cry.

A six-foot-three man who stood by her asked, “What’s the matter, dear?”

She said, “I have been waiting to see Santa, and now I can’t see him.”

He picked her up and placed her on his shoulders, providing her a commanding view. As Santa Claus came by, she waved her little hand toward him, and he smiled and waved back to her and to everyone else who was in the crowd.

Thomas S. Monson, a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, delivered this devotional address on December 6, 1966.

That little girl grabbed the hair of that great, big fellow and exclaimed, "He saw me! He saw me and smiled at me! I'm so glad it's Christmas!"

That little girl had the Christmas spirit.

A Little Boy and a Blessing

I thought back on another little child, under different circumstances, who had the Christmas spirit. As a very young elder, I went to the old Primary Children's Hospital on North Temple Street to provide blessings for the sick children. As we entered the door, we noted the Christmas tree with its bright and friendly lights. We saw carefully wrapped packages beneath its outstretched limbs. Then we went through the corridors where lay tiny boys and girls—some with a cast upon an arm, some with a cast upon a leg, others with ailments that perhaps could not be cured so readily—each one with a smile upon his face.

I walked toward the bedside of one little boy, and he said, "What is your name?"

I told him.

He said, "Will you give me a blessing?"

The blessing was provided, and as we turned to leave his bedside, he said, "Thank you."

We walked a few steps, and then I heard his little call: "Brother Monson."

I turned.

He said, "Merry Christmas to you." And a great smile flashed across his countenance.

That boy had the Christmas spirit, as did the little girl in downtown Salt Lake City.

This spirit of Christmas—or Christmas spirit, said another way—is something I would hope every student of Brigham Young University would have within his heart and within his life, not only at this particular season but throughout the year.

Peter Marshall and the Christmas Spirit

I had the privilege of going to Atlanta, Georgia, not too long ago, and there I saw the church where Peter Marshall had presided. I thought of his declaration and his urge when he spoke to the people and pleaded:

So we will not "spend" Christmas . . . nor "observe" Christmas.

We will "keep" Christmas—keep it as it is . . . in all the loveliness of its ancient traditions.

*May we keep it in our hearts, that we may be kept in its hope. [Peter Marshall, *Let's Keep Christmas* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953), last page]*

This would be my plea today, for when we keep the spirit of Christmas, we keep the spirit of Christ, because the Christmas spirit is the Christ spirit.

One who had a keen insight into the Christmas spirit wrote:

I am the Christmas spirit!

I enter the home of poverty, causing pale-faced children to open their eyes wide, in pleased wonder.

I cause the miser's clutched hand to relax, and thus paint a bright spot on his soul.

I cause the aged to renew their youth and to laugh in the old, glad way.

I keep romance alive in the heart of childhood, and brighten sleep with dreams woven of magic.

I cause eager feet to climb dark stairways with filled baskets, leaving behind hearts amazed at the goodness of the world.

I cause the prodigal to pause a moment on his wild, wasteful way, and send to anxious love some little token that releases glad tears—tears which wash away the hard lines of sorrow.

I enter dark prison cells, reminding scarred manhood of what might have been, and pointing forward to good days yet to be.

I come softly into the still, white home of pain, and lips that are too weak to speak just tremble in silent, eloquent gratitude.

In a thousand ways I cause the weary world to look up into the face of God, and for a little moment forget the things that are small and wretched.

I am the Christmas spirit!

[E. C. Baird, "The Christmas Spirit," *Herald of Gospel Liberty* 114, no. 51 (21 December 1922): 1215 (15); citing the *Christian Standard*]

The First Christmas Day

This is the spirit I pray we might have, because when we have the spirit of Christmas, we remember Him whose birth we commemorate at this season of the year. We remember that first Christmas Day—a Christmas Day that was prophesied by the prophets of old.

Recall the words of Isaiah when he said:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. [Isaiah 7:14]

Again Isaiah declared:

For unto us a child is born, . . . and his name shall be called . . . The Prince of Peace. [Isaiah 9:6]

On this the American continent, the prophets said:

The time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent . . . shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay. . . .

And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God. [Mosiah 3:5, 8]

Then came that night of nights when the shepherds were abiding in the fields and the angel of the Lord appeared to them, announcing:

Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. . . .

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. [Luke 2:10–11]

The shepherds, with haste, went to the manger to pay honor to Christ the Lord.

The Spirit of Giving

Wise men journeyed from the East to Jerusalem, saying:

Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. . . .

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. [Matthew 2:2, 10–11; emphasis added]

Since that time the spirit of giving gifts has been present in the mind of each Christian as he commemorates the Christmas season. I wonder if we might profit today by asking ourselves, “What gift would God have me give to Him or to others at this precious season of the year?”

The Spirit of Obedience

I feel that I might answer that question and declare in all solemnity to you that our Heavenly Father would want every student at Brigham Young University and each one of His children to render unto Him a gift of obedience so that all would actually love the Lord our God with all our hearts, all our minds, and all our strength. Then, I am sure, He would expect us to love our neighbors as ourselves (see Mark 12:30–31).

I would not be surprised, if He were here today, if He would instruct us to give of ourselves and not to be selfish nor greedy nor contentious nor quarrelsome, remembering the words of the Savior in 3 Nephi, when He said:

And there shall be no disputations among you. . . .

For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who . . . stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.

Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away. [3 Nephi 11:28–30]

So I would plead with you to rid from your lives any spirit of contention, any spirit wherein we might vie one with another for the spoils of life, but rather that we might cooperatively work with our brethren and with our sisters for the fruits of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit of Gratitude

I trust that we will not forget at this Christmas season the gratitude that must be within our hearts and that yearns to be expressed. I hope that no one of you will take his birthright for granted. I hope that no one here will forget his mother or his father, but rather that we might honor our fathers and honor our mothers. What finer Christmas gift could they receive than to know that a son or a daughter was honoring them by honoring God and living the commandments of the gospel of Jesus Christ? I recognize that you represent the hopes and dreams of parents everywhere.

A Missionary's Letter Home

Just this weekend I was in Corpus Christi, Texas. A proud father came forward to me and slipped into my hand a letter from his son serving in the Australian Mission. I would like to read this letter to you. It may form the format whereby you might write a similar letter to your parents as an extra Christmas gift this year. The letter reads:

Dear Mom and Dad:

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the many wonderful things you have done for me. I want to thank you for listening to the message the elders presented to you when they knocked at your door and thank you for the way you grasped the gospel and made it the mold around which you shaped your lives and the lives of your children. I love each of you very much.

Thank you for the way you taught me, for your love which you expressed in many ways. Thank you for directing me in the right pathways, for showing me instead of forcing me. I am thankful for your beautiful testimonies and for the guiding love in which you helped me gain mine. I know the gospel is true. My few experiences here have strengthened my testimony. I pray that I might live up to your expectations, and with God's help, I will.

Thank you again, Mom and Dad.

*Your loving son,
David*

What finer expression could a boy give his parents than the gift of gratitude?

The Gift of Yourself

I would hope that, in addition to the gift of gratitude that you bestow upon your parents, you will remember that your loved ones—your brothers, your sisters, your relatives, your friends, those with whom you mingle and associate on this great campus—can benefit and be profited if you will give of yourselves in helping them to see the truth and helping them around the quicksands of life, which would claim them if only those quicksands could. I would hope that you might be able to light a spark in the lives of others and enable them to see their possibilities rather than the problems that beset them day by day.

I would hope that we would become experts in the field of human relations. Mr. Robert Woodruff, a great American industrialist, went from one end of this country to the other telling us how we might better get along one with another. The focus during that time on improved relations was outlined in a capsule course in human relations:

Five most important words: "I am proud of you."

Four most important words: "What is your opinion?"

Three most important words: "If you please."

Two most important words: "Thank you."

Least important word: "I."

[Capsule course in human relations in "Labor Relations: Contented Employees," *Forbes* (15 July 1953): 27; compiled from Five Friend-Makers in Elmer Wheeler, *How to Make Your Daydreams Come True* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952), 55–56]

Isn't that the spirit of Christmas, really—to forget self and to think of others?

Scarcity, Affluence, and Talents

I clipped an item recounting the memories of Mrs. Rebecca Riter as she described that first Christmas in 1847 in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake:

The winter . . . was cold. . . . I had brought a peck of wheat over the plains, and it was carefully hidden away under a pile of wood to keep it dry. Christmas came and the children were hungry. I thought at first I would take a handful or two of the wheat from its cache and cook

it for the baby. Then I thought of how we had carefully conserved it for our spring planting, so I left it alone. [Rebecca Wollerton Dilworth Riter, in Levi Edgar Young, “Early-Day Trials and Difficulties of the Pioneers,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 34, no. 7 (July 1923): 349; also Riter, quoted in Levi Edgar Young, *The Founding of Utah* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924), 246; see also Jennifer Larson Lund, *Everyman’s Saint: The Lives of Levi Evans Riter and Rebecca Dilworth Riter* (Salt Lake City: Pioneer Trail State Park, 1989), 12]

In our bounteous lives, we may well reflect upon the more meager Christmas seasons of our pioneer ancestors.

You might say to yourselves, “But that was yesterday. What about today? What about 1966—the season and the year in which we live? Have times changed? Is everyone so well off that he doesn’t need the real spirit of Christmas?”

To you I would answer, “Times have not changed. The commandments of God are the same. The principles of gratitude and of giving of oneself are the same, because today, like in yesterday, there are hearts to gladden and there are lives to cheer and there are blessings to bestow upon our fellowmen.”

You might say, “I am ill-equipped; my talents are so few.”

Then I would ask you to take a little journey with me—a journey to a hospital in Salt Lake City, the University Hospital, where a few weeks ago I had the privilege of being summoned to the side of a man who was an inactive member of the Church and who had many weaknesses, a man who was in danger of dying. As I walked to the hospital ward, I noted the sign on the doorway: “Intensive care. Enter only upon permission of the nurse.” I sought the required permission and then went to the bedside of this good man.

The great machines of medical science were by his side, mechanically taking over when his heart would falter. An oxygen mask covered his face. He turned his face toward me, but there was no glimmer of recognition in his eyes because the man in whose presence I stood was totally blind. Yet as he heard my voice and thought back on more

pleasant times, tears began to stream from those sightless eyes, and he asked a blessing from one who held the priesthood of God.

At the conclusion of that blessing, I recalled how this man had been blessed with a beautiful voice. While he was not a regular attender at church, he would come—particularly on Mother’s Day—and sing that beautiful number “Mother Machree” and other songs honoring mothers. No person who ever heard him sing left without a greater appreciation for his own mother, which resulted in his honoring her and all womanhood.

Similarly, he would participate in Christmas programs and would sing “O Holy Night.” No person who heard him sing this song came away without dedicating his life to better serving the Lord and *keeping* Christmas rather than *spending* Christmas.

The thought came into my heart that here is a man who, in his own humble way, has used the talent that God has given him to bring joy and happiness into the lives of others. Multiply his talent—a beautiful voice—with the talents which you possess—eyes that see, ears that hear, and hearts that know and feel—and then think where your Christmas opportunity might be this very year. It may come at a time when you least expect it.

The Gift of Love

When I was a very young bishop in 1950, there was a tap at my door, and a good German brother from Ogden, Utah, announced himself as Karl Guertler.

He said, “Are you Bishop Monson?”

I answered in the affirmative.

He said, “My brother and his wife and their family are coming from Germany. They are going to live in your ward. Will you come with me to see the apartment we have rented for them?”

On the way to that apartment, he told me he had not seen his brother for something like thirty years. Yet all through the holocaust of World War II, his brother, Hans Guertler, had been faithful to the Church—an officer in the Hamburg Branch.

I looked at that apartment. It was cold; it was dreary; the paint was peeling from the walls; the cupboards were bare. What an uninviting home

for the Christmas season of the year! I worried about it and I prayed about it, and then in our ward welfare committee meeting we did something about it.

The group leader of the high priests said, "I am an electrician. Let's put good appliances in that apartment."

The group leader of the seventies said, "I am in the floor-covering business. Let's install new floor coverings."

The elders quorum president said, "I am a painter. Let's paint that apartment."

The Relief Society representative spoke up, "Did you say those cupboards were bare?" They were not bare very long with the Relief Society in action.

Then the young people, represented through the Aaronic priesthood general secretary, said, "Let's put a Christmas tree in the home, and let's go among our young people and gather gifts to place under the tree."

You should have seen that Christmas scene when the Guertler family arrived from Germany in clothing that was tattered and with faces that were drawn by the rigors of war and deprivation! As they went into their apartment they saw what had been in actual fact a transformation—a beautiful home.

We spontaneously began singing, "Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright" ("Silent Night," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 204). We sang in English; they sang in German.

At the conclusion of that hymn, Hans Guertler threw his arms around my neck, buried his face in my shoulder, and repeated over and over again those words which I shall never forget: "*Mein Bruder, mein Bruder, mein Bruder.*"

As we walked down the stairs that night—all of us who had participated in making Christmas come alive in the lives of this German family—we reflected upon the words of the Master: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

The Spirit of Christmas

This is the spirit of Christmas—this is the spirit which I ask that we carry in our hearts—remembering the words of Charles Dickens recalling old Marley's ghost appearing to Ebenezer Scrooge:

Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunities misused! Yet such was I! Oh! such was I!

And then Marley added:

At this time of the rolling year . . . I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode! Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me! [A Christmas Carol (1843), stave 1, "Marley's Ghost"; emphasis in original]

May we learn a lesson from the pen of Dickens and from the words of Jesus Christ. May we lift our eyes heavenward and look upward and outward into the lives of others. May we remember this Christmas season that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

A Testimony

In so doing, I bear testimony to you that the spirit of Christ, which is the spirit of Christmas, will find a place in your heart and in your life and you will feel to say, "This has been the finest Christmas ever." This precisely would be my wish, my prayer—that each of you might have the finest Christmas ever, that our Heavenly Father might find in us the spirit of obedience to His divine law. In the name of Jesus Christ the Lord, amen.