



Christmas 2005

Views from

# the hermitage

*Creating an environment of attentiveness to God*

## Run and Hide

Since I was a small child, I have heard the despair of believers in Jesus during the Christmas season. We lament that the popular celebration of Christmas leaves Christ out of Christmas. But, is it possible that we believers have twisted the Christ-event ourselves and make it unbelievable? Our legends support a cozy stable overshadowed by angels and a special star, suffused with golden light and warmed by the bodies of many clean, inoffensive animals surrounded by the neighborhood's honest workmen who took time off to rush to see this baby shortly after his birth. This is indeed a miraculous setting. But not very true to either the gospel story or to the meaning of that story. The incarnation is *not* a sentimental story.

The problem of this legend is not the reverence it is meant to invoke, but the permission we take from it to indulge ourselves. Some follow the "example" of the Wise men giving gifts to Jesus and some point to Jesus as God's gift to us to justify our tradition of gift-giving. Some celebrate "Jesus Birthday" as an excuse for merry-making. But this is superimposing another cultural celebration onto the Christ-event to legitimate or explain our own seasonal activities which may have nothing to do with the incarnational presence of God.

Lest you accuse me of being a Scrooge, let me tell you that I am all for celebration. Not only because of the coming of the Christ-child, but because celebration is a fitting human activity. It is how we express that something has deeply touched us. I love Christmas celebration. But I need it in sparing doses and slowly administered. I choose carefully how much I can do and still have my wits about me for pondering the meaning.

It is difficult to be mindful of the reason for Christmas when we have to contend with almost two thousand years of traditions, both Christian and pagan, that inform our Christmas celebrations. You probably know that the Yule log, candles, twinkling lights and even the date of Christmas come from the pagan celebration of Saturnalia. You may have heard how the Wise Men didn't actually arrive at the stable but went to a house (that one's in the gospel of Matthew). You may even know that Christ-

mas trees, gift giving and Christmas cards are inventions of Europeans to make a dreary season of the year more joyful. Christians have invoked blessing and created beauty in this season because we need blessing and beauty.

We do not need to begin weeding out all the additions to Christmas just because they are not "authentic." We can be mindful of both the reason for celebrating a Christ-mass and the joy and goodwill that are generated by this celebration. The message of "peace on earth" was not a hoax. We are to be people who stand in awe of God's glory "in the highest," aware of God's favor resting on us. But this glory is just as heavy as it is full of light. We need time for pondering it and, if we dare, receiving it.

One of the advent scriptures that struck me this year tells of a pregnant woman in heaven who gives birth before the yawning maw of a great red dragon. "And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished" (Revelation 12:5-6a). It is very significant to our Christmas celebration that we notice that the child was *snatched away* to the throne of God and that the woman *fled and hid* in the wilderness where she was nourished. I am not going to try to explain this story to you. Great minds do not completely agree on its meaning. But my simple mind has grasped this, that the work of God is hidden. This is, after all, the real gospel story of the birth; *little* Bethlehem, a stable instead of an inn, unknown parents from "up north" (a particular Michigan-ism), disreputable shepherds, foreign Wise men, the family's flight into Egypt where *they* were foreigners.

Our celebrations may draw attention to how we care for one another or to our own wealth or poverty in how much we give to one another. We may feel better or worse because of this season. God is not in our celebrations. But, God works in *us* as it pleases God to do, in hidden ways. Maybe, this year, if I run and hide, I may find nourishment. Maybe I will glimpse God at work. That is, after all, the truth of the incarnation; I get to see God at work. This is my fondest Christmas wish for you, too.

-Naomi R. Wenger

## “Come, take a walk with me.”

You said, “Come, take a walk with me.”

I argued, “But it’s too cold.”

You said, “Come, take a walk with me.”

So I took a walk in the woods. The air was crisp and still. The sky was clear and the sun shone bright.

As I walked I talked to you, and when I could think of nothing else to say, you said, “Be still.”

So I replied, “Okay, Lord. You must want to talk to me, I’ll listen.”

But we walked on in silence. The snow sparkled like diamonds in the sunshine. Six deer crossed my path. I felt joy in my heart at the wonder of your creation. But still you were silent. I saw all kinds of tracks in the snow made by deer, rabbits and birds. I heard a woodpecker knocking on a tree. The deeper I went into the woods, the more I heard the birds singing so sweetly. I asked, “What did you want to talk to me about?” But you were silent still.

I started getting cold and realized I’d lost my way. I started getting tired and felt myself wanting to panic. Then I knew why you wanted me to walk with you. To feel your presence. To know you’re always with me. So I could slow down. That’s why you asked me if I would walk with you, not could you walk with me. Because you always walk with me. I just don’t slow down enough to notice.

*The preceding reflection was written by a guest at one of our Advent Quiet Days. It is printed with permission.*

## Phoenix Gallery

Our Epiphany exhibit, *Epiphany in Icons*, will be works by local iconographer, Donna Rathert. Donna is a spiritual director in Southwest Michigan and leads icon writing retreats. We will be showing her icons from January 2–February 4, 2006.

The gallery is open weekdays and Saturdays from 9–5 for retreat guests and by appointment for others. Please call before you come, 269-244-8696.

## E-news Available

Some of you have received this issue of *Views from the Hermitage* electronically. If you would like to receive notice of an electronic posting of the newsletter rather than receiving it in the mail, send us an e-mail with the word “subscription” in the subject line. We will remove you from our mailing list for the newsletter and add you to an electronic list. You will receive an e-mail notice containing a hyperlink to the newsletter page on the web-site.

## Spiritual Classics Reading Group

The spiritual classics, books written by Spirit-filled people that have stood the test of time and still speak to our condition and situations today, are worth reading. And yet, we are often content to read short quotes others print in more accessible books because the original speaks in a different language or idiom and the reading is just plain hard work. So we shelve the book, vowing to complete it sometime. Now is the time!

A reading group is forming at the Hermitage to tackle the spiritual classics together. The group will meet from 7:00-9:00 pm on the last Monday of each month beginning on January 30, 2006. The first month’s reading will be the poetry of John of the Cross and use as a guide the commentary by Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God*.

The group will read one book or author each month and gather to discuss the content of the work, the impressions it left on us, and the suggestions for deeper development we may have gleaned from our reading. The group will decide each month what to read for the next month. The monthly selection will be published on our web site [www.hermitagecommunity.org](http://www.hermitagecommunity.org) for those who would like to select a particular author to read. Attendance at the book discussion night gives a participant a voice in the monthly selection.

For more information contact: Naomi Wenger, 269-244-8696, [thehermitage@juno.com](mailto:thehermitage@juno.com), [www.hermitagecommunity.org](http://www.hermitagecommunity.org).

## A Word from the Board on Finances

Recent history suggests that guest donations account for nearly 2/3 of operating expenses. This leaves the balance to be filled by our only other revenue source, charitable giving. To meet our 2005 budgeted expenses we are relying on \$30,000 in charitable giving. At this writing we are \$10,000 short in charitable gift revenues.

You may wonder how this shortfall impacts our current financial situation. We are grateful to report that the bills are being paid. Where we are not able to keep up is with mortgage payments and repairs. For the past two years we’ve paid interest only on a significant portion of the mortgage loan. We must begin to reduce the principle as well. In regards to repairs we’ll mention just a few. We’ve had to put off again some roof and gutter repair and the painting of the barn. These are preventive maintenance concerns that if not attended to soon will create larger and more costly problems in the future.

During the last board meeting we considered two words that could describe the financial status of The

Hermitage: subsistence and sustenance. We feel as if The Hermitage is operating at a subsistence level currently. We pray that we will move into sustenance in the near future. Can you help with a tax-deductible donation to the Hermitage now? Will you identify what you could give in 2006 when we will again be relying on \$30,000 in charitable giving to meet budgeted expenses? Any and all donations are gratefully received

Thank you to those who gave toward the cost of the new well and for those who have given throughout the year. You are a living testimony of God's faithfulness to provide what is needed.

## Cabin Dad

I'm always up for being a chaperone for our children's field trips so when John Mark asked if I would join his class on their trip, I said yes. I didn't ask too many questions at the time. Field trips are fairly predictable: depart from the school in the morning and return back to school by mid-afternoon. As it turned out, this was no ordinary field trip. The fourth grade was going to camp for three days. As a chaperone, I was responsible for putting the children to bed, staying overnight with them and getting them to breakfast the following morning, not just for one night but two.

It gave me a good laugh as I anticipated what I might encounter: eighteen rowdy nine-year old boys running around into the wee hours of the night, dads trying to round them up and put them to bed, sleeping on a camp bunk bed with my upstairs partner tossing and turning. Nevertheless, I dutifully arrived at 8:30 pm for my first night as cabin dad.

Thankfully, the camp staff had kept the children active throughout the day so that by bedtime they were ready for it. At lights out, everyone was in bed with very little coaxing from the dads. But this is when the fun began. The flashlights came out and everyone had a scary story to tell. The commotion wasn't out of control, it just persisted for awhile. However, a few of the boys would repeatedly and persistently call out, "Would everyone just be quiet, I'm trying to get some sleep" (or variation thereof). Taunts and jeers came right back at them, usually in some variation of "you're the one making all the noise".

The boys' voices calling back and forth in the dark were like glowing embers bursting into flame and then dying out, only to ignite again when stoked. I figured the fire would eventually die out so I lay in bed and waited for silence. But as the decibel level rose along with the anxiety of those calling for silence, I decided to take another approach. I slipped out of bed, walked to the bed of one of the boys causing commotion and whispered, "it's time to go to sleep now, lay down and relax". Then I

approached another bunk across the way and softly told the boy to go to sleep. I moved quietly in the dark between the bunks, putting the flames to rest and within five minutes the room was silent. I went back to my bed, pleased with the silence but far from sleep myself.

I was full of commotion of my own, restless with worry and feeling the heaviness of the world upon me. The groaning of the earth in hurricanes and earthquakes along with the resultant pain and misery of its people weighed on me. Though I had shelter, food and water, my way of life was threatened by rising gas prices and the uncertainty of what might happen next. I was scared that my ordered world was falling apart.

While sitting in spiritual direction one day, I expressed the anxiety and worry that I was carrying. I had already told of my experience as a cabin dad. My director said, "I see you as one of those young restless boys, wanting to go to sleep but being too full of angst to lie down and rest". She continued, "Now I see God coming by your bed, placing a hand upon your head and saying, "it's all right, things are not going to get out of control, it's time to go to sleep now, lay down and rest". At that moment, she was the very voice of God to me. I knew in my soul that God's hand was resting upon me and reassuring me that all will be well.

My step is lighter these days. There are still wars and rumors of wars and all kinds of devastation upon the earth, I still have to make hard choices and I don't know what will happen next. However, now I carry an image of the Holy Spirit moving swiftly around a bunkhouse room, appearing by the bedside of restless souls, placing a hand upon us and whispering words of rest and peace.

-David Wenger

### The Hermitage Calendar

Jan 8	Taizé Evensong, 7:00
Jan 30	Spiritual Classics: Book Discussion, 7:00
Feb 12	Taizé Evensong, 7:00
Feb 27	Spiritual Classics: Book Discussion, 7:00
Mar 5	Taizé Evensong, 7:00
Mar 27	Spiritual Classics: Book Discussion, 7:00
Apr 9	Taizé Evensong, 7:00
Apr 24	Spiritual Classics: Book Discussion, 7:00

