

Have you noticed how dark it is this time of the year? We get up and stumble into the bathroom, flip on the light and nearly blind ourselves. Not wanting to wake up our honey still tucked under the covers, we fumble around in the closet in the dark, looking for the right shirt or blouse, and sift through a pile of shoes looking for two that match. We go into the kitchen and put on the coffee, and eat breakfast in the dark. We drive to work before the sun is barely up, have lunch and before too long the sun goes down, and drive home in the dark. It's so dark this time of the year. It is dark outside, and it is dark inside in so many places around the world.

Have you noticed how dark it is? Many of us sense it and feel it. I've seen it expressed recently in several places.

George Carlin spoke about it in a message which was passed around the internet recently. Whether or not the Hippie Dippie Weatherman himself actually wrote it, I do not know, but in those words I did notice the dark and somber tone of the post when I read it.

The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints.

We spend more, but have less, we buy more, but enjoy less.

We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences, but less time.

We have more degrees but less sense, more knowledge, but less judgment, more experts, yet more problems, more medicine, but less wellness.

We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get too angry, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too little, watch TV too much, and pray too seldom.

We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values.

We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often.

We've added years to life not life to years.

We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbor.

We've done larger things, but not better things.

We conquered outer space but not inner space.

Have you noticed the darkness? We need to see some stars! Have you seen any stars lately? At the Yonker household we've been looking for some stars. We've been

looking in the night sky watching the movements of the moon, and Jupiter and Venus and Mars. At least, that's what we think we've been watching. We're not astronomers, who knows, we might actually be looking at Uranus and Pluto, but we have been enjoying the stars in the night sky lately. Have you seen any stars lately?

But this, of course, is the proclamation of Christian faith: A star has appeared, bursting forth into brilliance which can dispel the darkness, drive our fears and doubts away, and truly light the way to a new international order. A star has been born.

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him'"

You have heard this story before. A star appeared in the night sky and wise men from the east came seeking new born king. Just at the time when it is darkest, a star appears.

It is not by accident that we hear this story again here in the middle of winter. It is not because we can prove that Jesus was actually born on December 25. As a matter of fact, we have no idea when Jesus was born. Scholars have suggested dates from 6 B.C. to 4 A.D. And in the first centuries church fathers argued about possible birth months, suggesting everything all the way from January, to March, April and May. One person even went so far as to the date Jesus' birth on February 6, 6 B.C.E.

We have no idea when Jesus was born. We celebrate his birth at time of the year because we believe that he is the light of the world, and because this is darkest time of the year. This is the time in the northern hemisphere when we are pointed away from the sun, when the days are shortest, and the nights are longest, and our ancestors feared that the light might never return.

For ancient peoples, the winter solstice was an awesome, mysterious, and powerful phenomenon. Harsh winter conditions and scarce food supplies made survival risky. Vegetation was dormant, migratory birds had long since disappeared to warmer climates, and many animals had vanished into hibernation. As the weeks drew closer to the solstice, it was a time of anxiety over ever-darkening days.

What if the sun lost its vigor and never came back?
Would light and warmth simply fade away forever?
Would the earth be wrapped in eternal night and cold?

To supplicate the forces of nature and ensure the return of longer, warmer days

ancient people developed many rituals and held many festivals. In the Roman world they celebrated Natalis Solis Invictus, the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun which was held on December 25, the date of the winter solstice on the old Roman calendar. First held to honor Sol, the sun God, it was changed in 2nd century to honor the Persian god Mithras, who, according to the belief, lived six centuries before Christ and was the son of the Supreme god of light.

After the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the fourth century Christians began to adopt winter celebrations for their own use. After much discussion and argument Pope Julius selected December 25 as the date for Christ's Mass, or Christmas, in 350.

The festival celebrating the birthday of the Unconquerable Sun had given way to the celebration of the birthday of Jesus. The light of the world revealed in Jesus Christ which takes away all the darkness was celebrated on the darkest night of the year.

Here is the star of Bethlehem shining in the night sky. Here is light of the world appearing on the darkest night of the year. Have you seen it?

We need to walk with the Magi to Bethlehem, to find the child, we need to fall down and worship him. We need to find out who he is, what he is doing in this world, and how he would have us live in this world.

One of the stars of my sky was a man named Albert Schweitzer. Many of you remember hearing about him, and perhaps even reading some of his books or sermons. And some of you do not know even his name. He was born in 1875, the son of a Lutheran pastor, in a little town near Strasborg, in Alsace, Germany (now a part of France).

At the age of 21, he decided to devote his life until his 30th birthday to the study science, music and theology, and after that, he vowed, he would serve humanity. In 1899 he took his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Strasbourg, where he later taught in the theological college, and published a series of influential books on the world of the Gospels. During this period, Schweitzer also became a leading authority on Johann Sebastian Bach--about whom he wrote a biography. And also became a noted organist and organ designer.

In 1905, Schweitzer began to prepare for his 'other life': He studied medicine, earned his degree in 1913 and left for west Africa with his wife, a nurse, to establish a missionary hospital in Gabon. Except for a few short-lived interruptions, Schweitzer spent his remaining 50 years in Africa fighting leprosy and sleeping sickness--a period of prodigious philanthropy that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

Schweitzer was a man who was convinced that the way of Jesus Christ in the world

was the way of service to humanity. And all who profess to believe in Christ have laid upon them the call to serve, to give something back for the gift of their lives. His Christianity was remarkably simple. He was not concerned with the theories of theology, nor with the development of doctrine. He was simply concerned with living as Jesus lived, a life of humble service in the name of God.

What has been passing for Christianity during the past (twenty) centuries is merely a beginning, full of weaknesses and mistakes, not a full-grown Christianity springing from the spirit of Jesus.

What Christianity needs is that it shall be filled to overflowing with the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and in the strength of that shall spiritualize itself into a living religion of inwardness and love, such as its destined purpose should make it. Only as such can it become the leaven in the spiritual bread of life of mankind.

And at the end of his life he still believed it to be true.

After more than a half-century in Africa, I still remain convinced that truth, love, peaceableness, meekness and kindness can master all the violence.

What would happen if we saw star of Jesus Christ and began to follow it? If we were filled to overflowing with the spirit of Jesus.

What would happen to us as individuals? One man put it like this:

“. . . everyone who has known Jesus Christ will testify: Since that time something new has entered my life. The darkness in my life that used to throw me into despondency can master me no longer. Granted, I have cares as others do. Yet daily I experience the miracle of having someone else who will lift them from me, someone to whom I can entrust them.

And if his hand touches them they are mysteriously transformed. Before, they were an oppressive mortgage on my life, yet now they have become the opportunity for faith. They have become the material out of which God will fashion my hope and joy. . . . “

(Helmut Thielicke)

What would happen to our world if we were filled to overflowing with the spirit of Jesus? In his New Year's Day message Pope John Paul II noted the shadow of violence and suffering hanging over the world in 2003 and said that we need a "new international order" to solve our conflicts and ensure peace.

“More than ever, we need . . . an order which is capable of finding adequate solutions today’s problems, based on the dignity of human beings, on integrating all society, on solidarity between rich and poor countries, on the sharing of resources and the extraordinary results of scientific and technological progress.” “We need to persevere and not bow to the temptation of losing hope.”

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We might see a vast change in international relations, in public policies for the poor and the hungry, we might see the world begin to change.

What would happen if we looked up and saw some stars?

Here is the star of Bethlehem. Shining bright, through all these years. There to help us find our way through the shadows, to follow the way of peace, to warm our hearts with the love, to keep our spirits up, to keep our courage up, to lead us every step, around every corner, to reach those new heights of living.

Here is the star of Bethlehem. Lift up your heads.

Open your eyes. Can you see it! Will you follow it?