

Mark Mail was waiting in line at his local post office. Only one clerk was working the window. The line was moving quite slowly. As Mark waited, he began to fill out a check. He was hoping to speed things up when he reached the counter. Unsure of the date, he turned and asked the woman behind him. 'It's the fifth,' she replied. Before he could write in the date on the check, he heard a voice. A man from the back of the line cautioned, 'Oh, I wouldn't write the date in just yet.'"

Now that was a slow-moving line. Maybe you had a similar experience at the Post Office this Christmas season. Most of us are giving a sigh of relief. Christmas is almost here.

There is no story more loved than the story of Christmas.

The story goes something like this...*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.*"

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*"

This simple little story contains so much detail, so much action, so much change for your life and mine.

First of all, we see God humbling himself in our behalf.

It's amusing, isn't it? Measly human beings puff themselves up to appear grander than they are.

But God, who is the source of everything in this universe, humbled himself . . . out of love for you and me.

I read a story about Charles Seymour, the sixth Duke of Somerset. Seymour lived at the turn of the eighteenth century. **Charles Seymour was such a snob that he refused even to converse with his servants.** He communicated with them only by sign language. He also had a number of houses built along the road from his country estate to London, so that whenever he traveled he would not have to mingle with the lower classes in public inns.

Compare Charles Seymour's approach to life with that of God's. See God in the person of the adult Jesus, ministering to lepers and the most miserable sinners. See him reach out to little children, to the blind, the deaf, the physically challenged.

Humans can be snobs—BUT NOT GOD! God's love will not allow God to stand off at a distance. God came into our world in the babe of Bethlehem. **We see in the Christmas story God humbling Himself in our behalf. We see**

God in both Joseph & Mary—2 young people willing to give of themselves to the world.

Christmas is a family celebration. It was from the very beginning . . . when Joseph heard the angel's voice in a dream, it was then that he could trust Mary. She was devoted to him and he to her. And they committed themselves to care for the baby she carried within her body. **Christmas is a celebration not only of God's love, but of human love as well.**

Did you know that the most popular American song ever written is Irving Berlin's **"White Christmas."**?

It's a simple tune that most of you know by heart: "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, Just like the ones I used to know . . ."

Berlin wrote the song in 1941, and in many ways, it became the theme song for American soldiers separated from their families a long way from home. **"White Christmas" captured powerfully their longing and yearning for home.**

Lutheran minister John Vannorsdall remembers as a young Navy seaman riding a long train through the night from Boston to Cleveland in a packed passenger car thick with cigarette haze and the grit of coal smoke. They were all, he said, going **"home for Christmas"**--maybe the most beautiful words imaginable--"home for Christmas." "We were bound together," he says, "by an overwhelming hunger" for home.

The heart does yearn for home at Christmas. Christmas is a family celebration. ***We have a God who humbles Himself and a young couple who cling to one another as they await the birth of their son.***

And we have the lowly shepherds. What would Christmas be without the shepherds? Probably millions of men's bathrobes over the centuries have been used to dramatize the presence of these guests at the first Christmas.

The shepherds represent the least and the lowest in society. Their social status was practically nil. And that's important to us. **It reminds us of our responsibilities to the least and lowest in our own society.**

Perhaps you've seen the story that has circulated on the Internet about a family who went to a restaurant one evening and encountered a very awkward circumstance. **It's so beautiful. Let me read it to you:**

We were the only family with children in the restaurant. I sat my infant son Erik in a high chair and noticed everyone was quietly eating and talking.

Suddenly, Erik squealed with glee and said, **"Hi there."** He pounded his fat baby hands on the highchair tray. His eyes were wide with excitement and his mouth was bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled with merriment. I looked around and saw the source of his merriment. It was a man with a tattered rag of a coat: dirty, greasy and worn. His pants were baggy with a zipper at half-mast and his toes poked out of would-be shoes. His shirt was dirty and his hair was uncombed and unwashed. His whiskers were too short to be called a beard and his nose was so varicose it looked like a road map. We were too far from him to smell, but I was sure he smelled. His hands waved and flapped on loose wrists. **"Hi there, baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster,"** the man said to Erik. My husband and I exchanged looks, **"What do we do?"** Erik continued to laugh and answer, **"Hi, hi there."**

Everyone in the restaurant noticed and looked at us and then at the man. The old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby. Our meal came and the man began shouting from across the room, **"Do ya know patty cake? Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo."** Nobody thought the old man was cute. He was obviously

drunk. **My husband and I were embarrassed.**

We ate in silence; all except for Erik, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring skid-row bum, who in turn, reciprocated with his cute comments. We finally got through the meal and headed for the door. My husband went to pay the check and told me to meet him in the parking lot. The old man sat poised between me and the door. "Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik," I prayed. As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back trying to shield Erik, but Erik leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's "pick-me-up" position.

Before I could stop him, Erik had propelled himself from my arms to the man's. Suddenly a very old smelly man and a very young baby met in a beautiful relationship. Erik, in an act of total trust, love, and submission laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, pain, and hard labor--gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back. **No two beings have ever loved so deeply for so short a time. I stood awestruck.**

The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm commanding voice, "*You take care of this baby.*"

Somehow, I managed, "I will," from a throat that contained a stone. He pried Erik from his chest--unwillingly, longingly, as though he were in pain. I received my baby, and the man said, "*God bless you, ma'am, you've given me my Christmas gift.*" I said nothing more than a muttered thanks. **With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car.**

My husband was wondering why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly, and why I was saying, "*My God, my God, forgive me.*" **I had just witnessed complete and unconditional love shown through the innocence of a tiny child who saw no sin, who made no judgment; a child who saw a soul, and a mother who saw a suit of clothes.** I was a Christian who was blind, holding a child who was not. I felt it was God asking-- "*Are you willing to share your son for a moment?*"--when He shared His for all eternity. The ragged old man, unwittingly, had reminded me, "*To enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we must become as little children.*"

A God who humbled Himself, a young couple who clung to one another, a motley group of lowly shepherds. All this, and more. *Angels who sang in the heavens, wise men who followed a star, and the humble babe lying in a manger from which animals normally ate.*

What more could we ask from a story? Not a thing. And it reminds us, in the shallowness of the materialism and glitter of our times, **of those things that really matter. God, family, our responsibility for others. Christmas.** Can any word be more beautiful than that one?

CHRISTMAS-- a celebration of LOVE—love for family, love for friends, love for neighbor, love for stranger, love for the homeless, love for the hungry, love for...YOU FILL IN THE BLANK.

Yes, Christmas is a Celebration of LOVE FOR ALL!!!

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!

AMEN.