

Around About By Justine Weatherford

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1: 4,5)

The Jewish Sabbath observance begins with a ritual lighting of candles by the woman of the house, a reminder that light was one of the first acts of creation. The Sabbath ends with the father saying a prayer, his hands spread towards a lighted candle as if longing for its light.

No people, no nation large or small, has affected the history of the world as have the Jews, who for many generations waited for the Messiah, who was to give meaning to their long history of wandering and striving.

When the light of the first Christmas came, however, its glory shone not, as the Jews had long expected, over all Israel, but around a few simple workmen in the watches of the night, when most people are asleep. It led these shepherds, curious as all simple people are, to see for themselves if those extraordinary words that had been told to them from the sky were true.

The shepherds took their lanterns and held them up to see the "sign" — a baby, a newborn, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying where longed-for babies are not expected to lie—in a manger. This was the Child of whom Zechariah, priest of the Temple, had sung: "The dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Light has always been the symbol of good, of knowledge and understanding, and darkness the symbol of ignorance and evil. For generations the Jews heard prophets tell of the Messiah's birth. The Christian Church has always seen in the Jewish Messiah an image, dim at first, of a Christ who was not to restore the kingdom of Israel but to make a new Israel, a people of God with no limit of nation or race.

Every 14 years the Romans organized a census through their whole empire so that, by a poll tax, they could levy the money that paid for their armies, their luxuries—and the people's "bread and circuses" which kept their many unemployed content. It is probable that the particular census told of in Luke's Gospel was held between 10 B.C. and 7 B.C., under the emperor Augustus which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem.

Centuries later a Roman monk, Dionysius Exiguus, had the idea of dividing history into two eras separated by Christ's birth, but we now know that the calendar year 1 A.D. could not have been the time of Jesus' birth, because He was born in Herod's reign, and Herod died in 4 B.C. So probably the Child was born about 7 B.C., which also coincides with one, perhaps, two, of the astronomers' attempted explanations of the great Christmas star.

The story of Jesus' birth in the stable-cave should be well-known. The presence of the ox and the ass fulfilled prophecy. In the East, a manger was made of clay, or was, perhaps, a stone trough, and although Mary and Joseph would have filled it with hay, it must have been cold. The traditional story is that the ox and the ass kept the infant warm with their breaths.

No one knows where the Wise Men came from, but by the richness of their gifts and the respect they were given at Herod's court, they were certainly illustrious; in popular tradition they were kings. It is obvious they had traveled a long way; if, as is probable, they had to cross deserts, they would have traveled on camels. Following the miraculous star, they would have done most of their traveling at night.

To Mary, the homage paid to her baby by these great visitors from countries far beyond her ken must have been most surprising. And they brought unusual gifts to the babe: one brought gold for His royalty; one brought frankincense for His divinity and the third brought myrrh, predicting His bitter death and sorrow.

The very early Christian Church did not celebrate Christ's birthday. However, most early peoples had winter festivals and the early heads of the church were astute enough to know, or perhaps had learned the hard way, that rather than fight some beloved pagan customs, it was often better to accept them and to subtly transform them, especially the long-established festivals. As early as 130-135 A.D., it had been ordained that "In the Holy Night of the Nativity the people should solemnly sing the angels' hymn" meaning the angels' words to the shepherds. However, as soon as Christmas began to be well established as a feast, priests and monks began writing their own Christmas hymns. Many of these are still sung in cathedrals and monasteries, especially during Advent. Some very beautiful, modern carols have been introduced as the years pass by.

Was it when a date was permanently fixed for Christmas that its spirit began to be lost? Jesus Himself seems purposely to have been elusive—his disciples were often having to find Him—and it seems ironic that He who left no material traces at all, who seemingly owned nothing except the coat "without a seam" and a simple pair of sandals—should have His birthday turned into a great annual world trade fair. Old Father Christmas, or Saint Nicholas, has become like one of the great red balloon figures seen in parades, filling our horizon and blotting out the Star, the Light of the World.

Today many children actually think of Santa Claus as a god. Some of them are never taught the facts of Christmas, and they never learn of the great traditions surrounding this great Festival of Love.

(The facts used in this column have been taken from reading I have done in the Bible (Revised Standard Version) and on the history of Christmas in various accounts by several authors. Two contemporary sources I have mainly used are my "World Book" and the "History of Christmas" by Rumer Godden, which was loaned to me by Florence Green.)

School district to go to court from p. 1

"If there aren't any other problems."

In other business, the board:

— heard from career education teacher John Sporsen of Heppner High School. Sporsen gave a report on the cooperative work experience program, where students take jobs in the community and receive credit and practical education. He said there are difficulties with the program because of the recession, and tax breaks which have been eliminated by the Federal Government.

— voted to adopt a comprehensive conflict of interest policy governing hiring of personnel in the district. Persons on advisory boards, and the school board would be affected by the policy.

— voted to add a second baseball and football team, and a third basketball and volleyball team at Columbia Jr. High in Irrigon. Principal Vic Marehek told the board that 81 students turned out for basketball this year, and 50 were out for football. The board okayed the extra teams, but stipulated the teams could go no farther than 25 miles to games, unless accompanying the school's varsity team.

— applied for a \$1,372 federal grant to purchase teaching aids for handicapped students. The money would be spent to purchase computer software and a computer printer at lone.

— learned that because new census figures showing increased population in the

county, the district will receive about \$30,000 more in federal grant money next year. Some of the money will be used to hire a new teacher's aid at Riverside High School for educationally deprived students.

— voted to hire Sharon Dunlop as a temporary teacher at Sam Boardman Elementary School, to replace Virginia Tollenaere who has resigned.

— voted to hire Barbara Gutierrez as a P.E. aide to replace Marjean Seel who resigned at Columbia Junior High.

— voted to hire Jim Ackley and Debbie McCoy as assistant basketball coaches at Columbia Junior High.

— voted to hire Delores

Shelton as an aide at Heppner High to replace Tera Adams.

— gave district Superintendent Matt Doherty, and Assistant John Edmondson one year extensions on their contracts. Both work on two-year continuing contracts.

— okayed the purchase of a baseball backstop for \$1,500 at Columbia Jr. High. Labor to erect the backstop will be donated.

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