

## Christmas 2002

Dear Family and Friends:

It began in early April. "I'm just Dad and I write from my heart to your heart. My voice is that of Chaucer's clerk, who gladly learned and gladly taught from his storehouse of lessons." It concluded in late October with the Brittany fishermen's prayer: "Keep us, O God! The sea is so big, and our boats are so little." The series of chats on marriage that I promised myself I would write to my daughter prior to her wedding day is finished and off to the publisher. Now I begin to really process it. Our little girl is graduating this month and getting married in February.

This is a life passage experience for us. On one hand, we fully understand that Jessi is an attractive 21-year-old in whom more than one young man has expressed interest. On the other hand, she is still our little "Bean". In my mind's eye, I hearken back to our bedtime stories when she was S-o-o-o B-i-g, and the Bible stories and the tales by Lewis, Tolkien, and others that delighted a little girl with a rich and wonderful imagination. Memories still bring smiles. At the time, it seemed that it would never end. Now, I'm tempted to wonder if I concocted a vaporous apparition.

Sorry for the sentimentality, but life has that ring to it, doesn't it? When you're in the moment, life is real, life is earnest. But in recounting its lessons, often the past gets misty, blurry, and out-of-focus—unreal, idealized, or both. I see that so plainly in twenty years with my daughter. That experience brings me with new eyes to the wonder of Christmas.

On the one hand, the holiday seems so utterly familiar and so very real. An animal shelter, that fresh country air, the pain, sweat, and blood of childbirth, and the wailing of new life on the wings of the night air. Cattle mull over a tiny intruder lying on their manger straw. A child slips into the world, born to poor parents living on a frontier outpost of a self-absorbed and far-flung empire.

On the other hand, supernatural stars appear, angelic hosts break into song, wise men seek a poor man's child, and shepherds are dumbfounded by a heavenly proclamation and hasten to see the wonder. They all gawk at a little babe, the mystery of whose birth theologians will ponder for centuries. How does it go? Fully God, fully human, two natures united in one person without commingling the attributes or confusing the person. It seems so unreal. It becomes a sweet, somewhat misty portrait with the passage of time. The nativity scene becomes stylized, almost a Byzantine apparition, and then expands in our day to encompass reindeer, elves, and hosts of other mongrel trespassers. A watered down, polyglot, secular symbol of peace and good cheer, one day each year.

February 8, 2003, will jolt one father's reminiscing to reality. May this December 25 jar all of us with a new appreciation for the Lord Jesus, Emmanuel with us, our Savior, Lord, and coming King. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!