

Christmas 2025

Dear family and friends:

I begin this Yuletide in my mind's eye at a Christmas Eve service. As the service concludes, the lights dim and slowly extinguish while the congregation sings the hymn "Silent Night". Millions will sing this carol this season, as countless others have before. It was over two centuries ago that it was first heard by Austrian villagers attending Christmas Eve mass at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf. The lyrics were written by a young priest not long after the Napoleonic wars had taken their horrific toll. The backstory is that the priest went for a walk before he wrote it. He was inspired as he looked out over a quiet, winter-laden scene; the town was genuinely at peace. His words, set to the simple melody written by the choir director of his church, have given voice to the praise of God and of comfort to countless pilgrims through the years.

The carols of our Lord's nativity dial all the way back to that first Christmas. Luke 1-2 records the Christmas story, with the actual birth account appearing in the first part of Luke 2. But those chapters also record the first Christmas carols of a sort. Mary's response to the angel's visitation that she would bear the Savior. Zechariah's reply to his infant son's mission of being the forerunner of Messiah. The angels appearing to a group of humble shepherds and singing God's praises. An old man, waiting for the Lord's deliverance, and thanking God that he lived to see its dawning. I grew up knowing them by a descriptive Latin phrase at the beginning of each piece. *Magnificat* for Mary's prayer beginning with "My soul glorifies God". *Benedictus* for Zechariah's initial phrase "Praise be to the Lord". *Gloria* for "Glory to God in the highest" sung by angels for shepherds who were quite taken aback. *Nunc dimittis* for the opening words of Simeon's prayer in the temple "Now dismiss your servant in peace". I enjoy going back to Luke 1 and 2 and reading again those wonderful stanzas. One in Zechariah's hymn stood out this year:

*In the tender compassion of our God,
The dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness ...
And to guide our feet unto the way of peace.*

In the tender compassion of our God ... The boundary lines in retirement have fallen to us in pleasant places. We are blessed indeed! With family at a distance, our annual highlights will always be family gatherings. How we cherish them! Dottie continues a familiar path—that unique combination of musician-artiste, teacher, seamstress, and farmer D. She plays and leads music for a large Bible Study Fellowship group, sings in our church choir, gives piano lessons to our grandchildren via Microsoft Teams (a particular delight!), is always engaged on some sewing project, and assiduously attends her babies—various plants and flowers outside our home. RV has found an initial retirement rhythm in continuing to teach in our church's Adult Nurture program and on developing a website. He has taught for more than forty years in various church and parachurch settings and has generated voluminous notes. He is making those available to whoever is interested at www.rvseep.com.

He came to shine on those who dwell in darkness ... Amid Christmas cheer, many come to the holiday season with heavy hearts. They feel alone or alienated from family or burdened with the issues of life. Poignant memories linger. Health concerns weigh them down. The world situation burdens us all. Such heaviness and sorrow can make Christmas cheer annoying. But it is the crucible that provides an opportunity to know God better.

'Cause what if Your blessings come through raindrops?
What if Your healing comes through tears?

And what if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near?
What if my greatest disappointments
Or the aching of this life
Is the revealing of a greater thirst
This world can't satisfy?

And what if trials of this life
The rain, the storms, the hardest nights
Are Your mercies in disguise?

(From "Blessings" by Laura Mixon Storey)

The early chapters of Luke invite us to sing in the dark like the first recipients of the dawn from on high. Emanuel is with us, visiting our space to guide our feet unto the way of peace. In due time we certainly will receive a blessed kingdom that cannot be shaken and will remain unto the ages. This Christmas, let us give thanks and worship God in spirit and truth with reverence and awe.

Our family and friends, may God's grace surround you this season and be your bountiful measure throughout the upcoming year. From our home to yours—Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

RV and Dottie Seep