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Kirk Irwin & Sarah Kennedy Irwin
birdandkey@gmail.com
k (646) 261-2847
s (321) 287-4507

Christmas Reflection

www.birdandkey.com

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lowed by the horns, horns, horns - signaling the arrival of aid - the beginning of the end of the dark army that had just broken the walls of Minas Tirith.

What will it be like to hear the final blow of the trumpets heralding the return of Jesus? To see the sky rolled back "like a scroll" similar to the riders of the Rohirrim as they rode toward the enemy and "rolled" them up in victory?



The Spirit of Christmas

I lingered on these images for a while longer as we continued down the road to Dallas, allowing them to do their mysterious work. All the while gratitude grew in my heart - stirring the emotions that caught in my throat.

But the gratefulness spanned the stories connecting to the one behind each one of them.

Lucy hugging Aslan - resurrection; death destroyed

Sam seeing a star - holiness; ultimate, pure truth & goodness

A rooster greeting the dawn - rescue & triumph; hope in the face of darkness

These good stories exist because of the "Greatest Story", the one we celebrate every December where God became human - "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us". These stories assist us in "bearing our crosses", because we know the One who bore the most important cross.

There would be no resurrection without the birth of Christ and death would still prevail. We would not know what ultimate holiness is had He not been embodied. And we would not know victory over darkness if Jesus had not been one of us and succeeded on our behalf.

"And a little child shall lead them."

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men!"

Merry Christmas.

"You know we didn't bring any of our Christmas movies."

After some moments my wife replied, "I know. I just haven't gotten into the Christmas spirit this year. I've tried. But it has been difficult this year."

I was silent, because she was right. I was feeling it too, even with the Christmas music playing as we drove west on I-20 entering Texas. This is a "Texas Christmas" year. Every other year we pack our car up and make the two-day drive to Dallas where my wife's family lives. This year we were also returning my mother-in-law back to Texas after she had spent 14 months with us in South Carolina.

My wife's family, like many families this time of year, loves to watch Christmas movies as the days proceed to December 25th. We bring our copies of our favorites like "It's A Wonderful Life", "Scrooge" (the musical version), "Elf", and the family favorite "White Christmas".

As we continued barreling down the interstate through East Texas I said, "I feel that too, babe. Maybe we need to focus on the Christmas story? Let that be the root of generating the spirit." I was saying that more for myself than I was for my wife, like a football player getting psyched up in preps for a game.

It had been a difficult year, but I wasn't so prideful to think ours was the worst of all other's years - it hasn't been an easy one for many. Our year seemed par for the course, and it was ours to face. Jesus said, "take up your cross", and so we do.

There was nothing else really to say as I concentrated on the road and the rhythm of driving past cars and exits with many more hours to go. In such moments your mind can entertain thoughts in the hum of the driving "white noise". And my mind did exactly that - but then I began to suffer "invaders".

My pastor when I lived in New York City, Tim Keller would say from time to time, "Every good story points to the greatest story." I am not sure that sentiment is original to him, but a truth like that is nevertheless, original and real.

What invaded my thoughts were images from the good stories I have enjoyed, that make me think of the greatest story - a little girl hugging a lion, a servant seeing a star break through the clouds, and the sound of a rooster welcoming the dawn.



A Little Girl Hugs a Lion

The first image was of Lucy Pevensie hugging Aslan and plunging her head in his mane, I wondered what that smelled like? This moment comes toward the end of CS Lewis' "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." After the White Witch and her minions mercilessly kill Aslan they leave his dead body on the Stone Table still bound. Lucy, and her sister Susan try to remove the ropes because they wish to return some honor to Aslan's lifeless body.

Unable to remove the tightly fitted cords they give up discouraged. Just then they notice a small army of mice begin to rush all over Aslan's corpse, and thinking this "beastly" Susan goes to shoo them away, only to be halted by Lucy because she sees the mice are nibbling the ropes apart. When the mice retreat with their job done, Lucy and Susan remove the pieces and restore the little honor they could to Aslan.

Later they walk to the top of the hill to watch the coming dawn, when they hear a noise behind them, "...a great cracking, deafening noise as if a giant had broken a giant's plate", Lewis writes. The sisters turn around to see the great Stone Table broken in two and no sign of Aslan's body. As they begin to lose themselves in despair they hear a voice behind them, it is Aslan living again - larger than life.

The girls rush to him:

"You're not—not a—?" asked Susan in a shaky voice. She couldn't bring herself to say the word ghost. Aslan stooped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her. "Do I look it?" he said. "Oh, you're real, you're real! Oh, Aslan!" cried Lucy, and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses.



A Servant Sees a Star

The next image takes place in JRR Tolkien's world of Middle-Earth, in one of the loneliest moments, while Samwise accompanies Frodo to destroy the ring.

It happens late in the story. Frodo and Sam have made it into the dark lands of Mordor in their excruciating journey to Mount Doom. After Sam soothes Frodo while he slept he crawls from the cave they are hiding in and looks up into the gray, dark sky.

Far above the Ephel Dúath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep.



A Rooster Greets the Dawn

The final image that entered my mind was also in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings.

The darkness seems to be on the verge of victory as the siege of the good "White City" Minas Tirith proceeds. The leader of the orc and troll army, the Nazgul King enters the gate after it is breeched, and the new White Wizard, Gandalf, is there to greet him.

'You cannot enter here,' said Gandalf, and the huge shadow halted. 'Go back to the abyss prepared for you! Go back! Fall into the nothingness that awaits you and your Master. Go!' The Black Rider flung back his hood, and behold! he had a kingly crown; and yet upon no head visible was it set. The red fires shone between it and the mantled shoulders vast and dark. From a mouth unseen there came a deadly laughter. 'Old fool!' he said. 'Old fool! This is my hour. Do you not know Death when you see it? Die now and curse in vain!' And with that he lifted high his sword and flames ran down the blade.

Gandalf did not move. And in that very moment, away behind in some courtyard of the City, a cock crowed. Shrill and clear he crowed, recking nothing of wizardry or war, welcoming only the morning that in the sky far above the shadows of death was coming with the dawn. And as if in answer there came from far away

another note. Horns, horns, horns. In dark Mindolluin's sides they dimly echoed. Great horns of the North wildly blowing. Rohan had come at last.



Good Stories Because of the Great Story

As each one of these images played out in my mind, tightness grew in my throat as the emotion of those powerful moments rose, and the reality of these "truths" hit me. I tried to curb them since I was driving at a high speed down the highway.

I thought about Lucy hugging Aslan in joy and the lingering smell of Aslan's mane. I wondered what it will be like to hug our Lord? What will his hair smell like? Will it have a tinge of 1st Century spices or the masculine musk of someone who has spent time outside or near live fires? Maybe it will be an aroma beyond imagining now that He is in His transformed body?

The servant Sam looking up into the sky to see that flash of the heavenly star struck me with the same message. Darkness was all around Sam and Frodo, it must have crushed them with an unseen weight. And yet that star told him otherwise. There are places even in our dark world where that weight is just a "passing thing". Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Then the rooster's crow. Like the star, the rooster had no care for the machinations of human beings. He was simply greeting the dawn. But the call was fol-