

## A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

By Jeanne Alley

The word "Christmas" is all but lost around us this season as so many individuals now share a common greeting of "Happy Holidays" to all, mostly in order to avoid offending anyone who may not share in the same belief system as they do. I respect the fact that not everyone believes as I do; but respecting one's beliefs does not mean the compromising of my own. I refuse to concede the veracity of my beliefs, primarily concerning that which is at the central core of the American cultural celebration of Christmas. This day called "Christmas" that so many of us celebrate annually is about CHRIST; it is about the celebration of His birth and the vast effect of that birth *on all of creation* – past, present, and most importantly, *future*. Lest we forget that our lives, *our very existence*, would be *meaningless* without the birth of Jesus the Christ –

### Colossians 1:15-20

**15 And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created by Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. 19 For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him, 20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.**

Having said that, I also believe that I do not have the right to chase people down in order to force-feed them my beliefs about Christmas, nor do I have the right to chase people down to tell them that their beliefs are wrong and that they must change their views to accommodate my own. However, I don't have to change my speech in order to appease someone with differing views than my own. I respectfully wish others a "Merry Christmas," and I respectfully (and joyfully, in the spirit in which it was given) receive their "Happy Holidays," "Happy Hanukkah," "Happy Kwanzaa," etc. Differing beliefs is what makes (made?) America so great – and *free* – and I refuse to participate in any system that persecutes me for what I believe, or worse yet, any organization that chooses to water down all beliefs into one single common denominator of belief. In the case of what has happened to Christmas, it has all been choked down to a single expression, "Be Happy."

While I am reflecting on the American denigration of Christmas, I am drawn to the biblical account of the first Christmas and the persecution surrounding the One whose birthday I choose to celebrate every December 25<sup>th</sup>.

The Old Testament is essentially about one thing. It is about the coming of the Savior of man; it is about the Son of Man, the Son of God, God in the flesh, Jesus the Christ. All of the Old Testament Scriptures pointed to the coming of this One, when God would manifest Himself in the flesh through the seed of the woman, through a descendant of David, to institute a kingdom in which innumerable blessings would flow from God to mankind. The Coming One would

reconcile all things to Himself and redeem man from the curse that was beholden to him, that of bondage to death and sin.

The New Testament opens with the birth of the Anointed One.

**Matthew 1:1, 18**

**1 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. 18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows.**

But within two chapters of this re-opening of God's revelation (in which God speaks yet again to man, having been silent for over 400 years since the close of Malachi), we read this:

**Matthew 2:1-3**

**Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." 3 And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.**

**Matthew 2:13, 16**

**...for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him. 16 Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi.**

It is an absolute wonderment that a king of any time period could hold such hostility towards *one* individual; hostility that was brought to a crescendo with a massacre of perhaps hundreds of infant children in order to destroy the One who was so hated. What was it about this One that sent King Herod the Great into such frenzy? The answer is not so simple, but is somewhat summed up in this statement: The One born was to forever hold the title "King of the Jews," a title that Herod currently claimed.

King Herod didn't just hate the idea of One born King of the Jews, he loathed the idea to such a degree that he actively pursued the destruction of this one male Child. Herod was so troubled that he searched and searched for the Child, until he became so enraged at being unable to find him (after being tricked by those he had himself tricked), he ordered the deaths of any child who could even be remotely mistaken for Him. King Herod was a man obsessed.

One could look back at this historical account and rationalize Herod's actions as nothing but the world, in all its hate and violence, seeking to destroy anything of God, since the world has been most zealous (in the past and the present) to tear down that which is from God. But lo, King Herod identified himself as a Jew (though not a biological descendant of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob) and as such, we would have to view him in the same way as any other Jew mentioned in the Scriptures – a spiritually regenerate man with the capacity for spiritual understanding and thereby holding a position within the family of God. And seeing it as such casts a different light on the account of the atrocious persecution directed to kill the One born King of the Jews; Jesus was being sought after to be killed by one of His brothers, even before He spoke His first words.

But in hindsight this doesn't surprise us. We know how the events unfolded for Jesus when He reached the ~ age of 33; He was indeed killed by His brothers for the very same reason. And when we look back at Matthew 2:3 we see a most incredible statement, "[Herod] was troubled [by the birth of the King of the Jews], *and all Jerusalem with him.*"

The word "troubled" means to *be agitated in a negative way*; which is most alarming. How could all of Jerusalem be troubled by the news of the birth of their King? Did they not know the Scriptures foretelling that His birth would bring about their salvation from their enemies? Did they not hope for the reconciliation of Israel and the blessings of the covenants, both Abraham's through David, and that of Moses? Why would they be troubled? Could it be that they feared the upheaval of the status quo? That they feared and were concerned about their hundreds-of-years-old traditions being changed?

Let's take careful note of who presented the most danger to the Christ. As Jesus began His ministry of proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God to His brothers and sisters, He was not immediately accepted by those who should have received Him (those with spiritual understanding). Rather, He was tested and questioned in the hopes of tripping Him up, so that those who were in power could show the querying masses that this Man was *not* who they thought He was, that this Man Jesus was not the Promised Son of David, that this Man Jesus was not performing signs by the power of the Spirit but by the power of the evil one. If they were to succeed in this, the masses would continue to follow these incumbent leaders and their power and influence would be preserved. The leaders were intent on destroying the message regarding the Kingdom of God by destroying the Messenger. Astonishingly we read this:

**Matthew 12:14**

**But the Pharisees went out, and counseled together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.**

**Mark 11:18**

**And the chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for all the multitude was astonished at His teaching.**

**Mark 8:15**

**And He was giving orders to them, saying, "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of [King] Herod."**

**Luke 19:47**

**And He was teaching daily in the temple; but the chief priests and the scribes and the leading men among the people were trying to destroy Him,**

**Matthew 26:3-4**

**Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; 4 and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth, and kill Him.**

**Mark 12:1-13**

**1** And He began to speak to them in parables: "A man PLANTED A VINEYARD, AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT, AND DUG A VAT UNDER THE WINE PRESS, AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. **2** "And at the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. **3** "And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. **4** "And again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. **5** "And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some, and killing others. **6** "He had one more to send, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' **7** "But those vine-growers said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!' **8** "And they took him, and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. **9** "What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others. **10** "Have you not even read this Scripture: 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER [stone]; **11** THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES?'"

**12** And they were seeking to seize Him; and yet they feared the multitude; for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him, and went away.

**13** And they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him, in order to trap Him in a statement.

These leaders of Israel should have recognized the truth being spoken by the One sent from God. They should have heeded his words and acted accordingly, but instead they sought to destroy Him. And not only did they want His message stopped, they wanted the Messenger killed, and they followed Him, held counsel together against Him in order to trap Him, and actively turned the masses against Him... all in order to silent the opposing message He taught.

So let's contemplate the message that Jesus brought that was, in the leaders' opinion, so inflammatory that it needed silencing, no matter what the cost.

**Matthew 4:17**

**From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."**

That doesn't seem so dangerous... what else did He say?

**Mark 1:15**

**...and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."**

I still don't see the big deal. Repent and believe in the gospel regarding the coming kingdom of God. Okay...

**Matthew 12:10**

**10 And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they questioned Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" --in order that they might accuse Him. 11 And He said to them, "What man shall there be among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out? 12 "Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." 13 Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" And he stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. 14 But the Pharisees went out, and counseled together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.**

Perhaps it was His blatant dislike of their man-made customs that were loosely based on the Law as they understood it? Could that be what inflamed the religious leaders? But v. 10 states that by this time they were already trying to accuse Him, so it must have been something He did prior to this event. But all He did was...

...Insult the religious leadership and consequently, the religious establishment -

**Matthew 5:20**

**"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

... Completely change the current, commonly-accepted interpretation of the Scriptures -

**Matthew 5:21-22**

**21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.**

**Matthew 5:27-28**

**"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 28 but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.**

**Matthew 5:31-35**

**31 "And it was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33 "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' 34 "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING.**

...Claim that His authority was comparable to that of God -

**Matthew 7:21**

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

**Mark 2:5-11**

5 And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." 6 But there were some of the scribes sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 And immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? 9 "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Arise, and take up your pallet and walk'? 10 "But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" --He said to the paralytic-- 11 "I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home."

...Cast out demons (which apparently was not uncommon at that time, "And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Consequently they shall be your judges [Matt. 12:27].) -

**Matthew 8:32-34**

32 And He said to them, "Begone!" And they came out, and went into the swine, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. 33 And the herdsmen ran away, and went to the city, and reported everything, including the incident of the demoniacs. 34 And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw Him, they entreated Him to depart from their region.

...Cause people to be amazed at His teaching, even though He had no obvious credentials to show -

**Matthew 7:28-29**

28 The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; 29 for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

...And entreated others to do the same as He was doing (and suffer the same persecution that He was suffering)-

**Matthew 10: 7-8, 14, 20-22**

7 "And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' 8 "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give. 14 "And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet.

**20 "For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. 21 "And brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents, and cause them to be put to death. 22 "And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.**

Oh yeah, there was the little thing that John the Baptist said at the very introduction of the message of the kingdom, as he got people ready to meet the One born King of the Jews. Perhaps this is what set the leaders off –

### **Matthew 3:4-12**

**3 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 "Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 "And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 "And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

Basically, John told the leaders in no uncertain terms that they were a “brood of vipers,” that they needed to “produce fruit” because the Coming One would judge and then separate the fruit producers from the non-fruit producers and then throw the “chaff” into a fire. Essentially, the leaders needed to submit to the message of this crazy locust & honey-eating freak from the wilderness. I don’t know about you, but if someone were to approach me like this, with this type of message as the introduction to a “new” way of thinking about the Word of God... I would probably stay far, far away, discredit the messengers, and tell others to avoid these people at all cost. ...Oh wait, isn’t that what the leaders did?

Clearly, all Jesus did was speak out concerning the Law and the Prophets in a manner that was divergent to the way the leaders believed. Jesus spoke with obvious authority and claimed His authority was from God, yet His actions went counter-culture to the religious establishment’s beliefs of that day. The Pharisees thought and claimed that *they* held authority from God, yet Jesus spoke contrary to them at every turn. Ultimately, Jesus did verbally claim that He was indeed One with the Father – actually *was the Father* – which in the leaders’ eyes amounted to straight-up blasphemy. This constituted the “last straw” in a long list of malfeasances attributed to this “Prophet.”

Jesus, His predecessors, and His followers spoke unkindly about the present religious leaders, and they did so in order to effect a change in their hearts and attitude. And as the final nail in

the coffin of these leaders, not only did Jesus speak the truth concerning what God had indeed said, He showed the leaders miraculous signs (such as healing and casting out demons) in order to show that *He was indeed sent by God*. They absolutely had no reason to disbelieve Him or reject Him. None. But they did. They just didn't like what He was saying.

Perhaps they were offended.

By the time Jesus utters the heinous accusations to the leaders in chapter 23 of the Gospel of Matthew, their intent had already been made crystal clear. Jesus was not speaking to them in this manner to purposefully inflame them, or rile them, or belittle them, or even to puff Himself up. Jesus spoke the truth to these leaders for two reasons: first, to alert those who were following them to open their eyes and ears concerning their leaders' so-called righteousness; and second, in order to effect repentance from the leaders of Israel. *If the leaders had repented*, the people would have followed suit.

Jesus spoke the truth *clearly* concerning their actions and He did so *accurately*, but oh-so **un**-politically correctly. And, may I venture, oh-so **un**-Christian-like.

First He speaks to the multitude, the Jews who were listening to His message –

**Matthew 23:1-39**

**1 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, 2 saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; 3 therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them.**

Translation: Your leaders are your leaders so respect them, for they have authority. However, do as they say, *not as they do* because they may speak the Scriptures, *but they do not obey the Scriptures*.

**4 "And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. 5 "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. 6 "And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi.**

Translation: Your religious leaders lay a heavy yoke on you but are unwilling to humble themselves to help or serve you. Their main objective is to get the accolades of men, for they love to be honored by their peers. They seek man's approval and not God's approval.

**8 "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 "And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 "And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11 "But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 "And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.**

Translation: None of you knows it all, and none of you is better than the other. You are all children of God, having the same Father who is in Heaven. Submit yourselves fully to Christ and serve one another, humbling yourselves to one another. Your Father will exalt you in due time.

And to the Pharisee and scribes, the religious leaders of the day, He says -

**13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. 14 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you shall receive greater condemnation.**

Translation: By your actions, Leaders, you are setting the wrong example to the sheep that you are supposed to be shepherding. By the mere fact that they follow *what you do*, they will not enter into the kingdom... and neither will you. It is because of YOU and your influence that they will not enter.

**15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. 16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.' 17 "You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18 "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.' 19 "You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 20 "Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 21 "And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 22 "And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.**

**23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 24 "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!**

**25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26 "You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 "Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.**

**29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in**

shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 "Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 "Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers.

33 "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?

34 "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, 35 that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 "Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation.

37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 38 "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! 39 "For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'"

Translation: You Leaders – You think you are righteous before the Lord, doing His word and speaking His truths, but you neglect the weightier matters *of the heart*. The inside is what counts. And because of your self-righteous indignation, you will not receive the reward which you so arrogantly speak of and seek, for it is awarded only to those who humbly seek the face of the Lord.

(And lest anyone think that these scribes and Pharisees are simply lost individuals who don't know any better, I ask you this: Is it possible to judge one's spiritual/regenerate state ["unsaved" vs. "saved"] by their actions alone? Is it possible to deduce that because Jesus calls these men "brood of vipers" that they must have NOT been saved? If you truly believe that one's actions dictate one's spiritual state, then you have some serious theological inconsistencies to work through. It is primarily *because of* these harsh accusations that we can tell that these leaders were spiritually alive people, for God reserves His harshest judgments for those who have the ability to know the right thing to do and have the ability to do it in faith, *but choose not to.*)

As we know, the message did not end when the Jewish leaders killed Jesus, their Messiah; their devices did not work. Jesus not only defeated them and the sentence of death (oh so gloriously!), but He commissioned His Church to continue His ministry in the same manner as He –

**Luke 24:44-48**

**44 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; 47 and that repentance for**

**forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 "You are witnesses of these things."**

**Matthew 28:19-20**

**19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."**

May we never get to the point in this country that by the very use of the phrase "Merry Christmas," one would be subjected to harsh, retaliatory persecution. Could you even imagine a time when those who were against Christmas would seek to destroy the message of Christmas by slandering those who spoke of it? Could you even imagine a time when persecution runs so amok that individuals are told not to believe in Christmas in their own homes or gather together to celebrate it? Sounds ridiculous now, but the end result of arrogant individuals thinking that they know what is right and what is wrong for every individual would result in scenarios resembling those mentioned above.

May we never lose the freedoms bestowed upon each one of us, individually, by the Constitution of the United States. If ever we do lose the right to speak freely, *and worship freely*, then what will follow would be a domino effect of lost liberties. And if that ever be the case, well then I suppose that I'll just rest peacefully in the fact that I am but a pilgrim and sojourner here and my citizenship rests not in this land called the U.S. of A, but it is in the heavenlies, awaiting Christ's return.

And so, the point to be driven home here is that there is indeed much persecution to be found in the outside world regarding any number of things—I chose Christmas because "'Tis the season"; however, be forewarned that the persecution most often comes from those we are closely associated with, whether it be the Jews seeking to destroy fellow Jews, Christians seeking to destroy fellow Christians, or Americans seeking to destroy fellow Americans.

So if you don't like hearing me say, "Merry Christmas," then please don't stand within earshot, and I will respectfully not pursue you with my Christmas message. Furthermore, I will gladly refrain from sending you a Merry Christmas card.

This does not constitute hate; *this constitutes freedom*; freedom in this country and freedom in Christ.

Merry Christmas.