



Iowa News for December 2022

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GRAND PRELATE'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2022 Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of Iowa

Several years ago, I was privileged to deliver the sermon at the Knights Templar Easter Sunrise Service in Kansas City. The Grand Commander of Iowa at the time, our dear friend Gene Hatfield (may he rest in peace) somehow hornswoggled the Midwestern powers-that-be to allow me to preach on that cold, snowy Easter Sunday. Given the weather, we met inside, rather than at the Kansas City Veteran's Memorial.

I warned Gene in advance that my Easter message might not follow normal Easter forms, and that he might want to think twice about my delivering the message. He told me to say whatever I wanted to say. So, I did. The result was that a brother and Sir Knight in the second row of the congregation stood up and cried, "*HERESY!*" about three paragraphs into my remarks. He remained standing, and I kept talking. If he'd have listened to what I said—a strong, Christian affirmation of the meaning of Easter—he might have been placated. But he refused to listen. Bear that in mind as I think with you about Christmas.

So, it's Christmas time.

Christmas 2022, to be more precise

Now, Christmas was nothing but a religious observance for Christians until about 200 years ago. Easter was the major festival of the Christian religion.

There was one exception: the numbering of years themselves. This is the year 2022 of the "Common Era," often referred to as "A.D.," or "Anno Domini." And "Anno Domini" is simply Latin for "The Year of the Lord." In other words, our system of numbering years, a system used throughout almost all the world, is based on the time when, according to the early church, Jesus was born.

That doesn't mean those early church scholars were very good historians. They did their research, to be sure, but here's the problem: more than 2,000 years ago there were no records kept of births and deaths, except for people of the very highest social stature—rulers, or famous military leaders, or members of the top aristocracy. And Jesus was scarcely of that social stature. He was, at least socially, a lower-class peasant.

The last 150 years or so has seen the rise of a whole branch of scholarship dedicated to trying to discover an accurate record of Jesus' life. As it turns out, there actually *is* some contemporaneous evidence of the existence of the man we know today as Jesus, and there is a fair amount of second-hand evidence of his life and influence during the first century A.D.

But the notion that Jesus was born in the midwinter? Probably absolute balderdash. Among other arguments against December 25 as the date for Jesus' birth is the fact that winter births in Israel of the time were very rare, and very dangerous, with almost no survivors. Shepherds abiding in the fields by night, and a visit by angels. Zero evidence. Three wise men from the east following a star. Again, no evidence, not even evidence based in astronomical history. The manger, and no room in the inn? Nope. All inventions of the first century and the gospel writers (there's not even any real evidence in gospels that didn't make it into the Bible, and there are a bunch of those).

Where did we get the idea that Jesus was born in the winter?

Well, as it turns out, there are some good reasons indeed. Before the early Christian church, there were plenty of celebrations and holidays in what we now know as late December. Perhaps the most important one, and one celebrated throughout almost the whole northern hemisphere at the alleged time of Jesus' birth, is the Winter Solstice. This was a natural time for pre-Christian people in the northern hemisphere to have a festival, often a religious one. The shortest day of the year, the day with the least daylight of an entire year, occurs on what we now know as December 21. As the days grew shorter and shorter—and then, after the solstice, became longer and longer—it was an ideal time to reflect on light and darkness, good and evil, truth and untruth. And the pre-Christian religions, almost all of them, took full advantage of the occasion.

Specifically, in the religious structure of the Roman Empire, the winter solstice saw major celebrations dedicated to the powerful god Saturn, the god of time, generation, dissolution, abundance, wealth, agriculture, periodic renewal, and liberation. Those divine attributes can be associated directly with the solstices, of course. The celebration of Saturn's power was called *Saturnalia*, and it was one of the most prominent religious celebrations of the ancient Roman year.

The early church, of course, saw the celebrations of the solstice and of Saturnalia as pagan, and thus opposed to Christianity. At the same time, these pre-Christian festivals were so much a part of first-century society that the church stood little if any chance of supplanting them without the institution of an even *more* important Christian occasion.

Thus, the early church determined that the birth of Jesus the Christ should be celebrated at the same time as the winter solstice and Saturnalia. After all, it really made little difference when the *actual* birth of Jesus occurred. Nor, in fact, did the actual *year* of His birth

make a lot of difference. “Pick a year, as close as the time we can determine,” they decided, “and then set up a festival celebrating the birth of Jesus at the same time of year as the winter solstice and Saturnalia.”

And, of course, it worked. There are rare regional solstice celebrations today, but very few people celebrate Saturnalia. **CHRISTMAS**—the festival of the Savior’s birth, on the other hand—is celebrated even among some non-Christians today.

Now, consider this: when the early church set the date to celebrate Jesus’ birth, most church leaders understood that the actual date of Jesus’ birth was far less important than the *symbolic* date of the celebration. And so, although it appears likely that Jesus’s birth occurred in the mid- to late spring sometime between 10 and 3 BEFORE the Common Era, that, in the final analysis, is of very little importance. It is the **SYMBOLIC** celebration of His birth that is of far greater importance.

We, as Freemasons, and as Masonic Knights Templar dedicated to the Christian religion, can understand that sort of symbolism far better than most people. After all, we began to study *symbolic* Masonry in a *Symbolic* Lodge of Masons. Did the Hiram Abiff we know from the Third Degree serve as one of three Grand Master of Early Freemasonry? Of course not! Is the **SYMBOLIC** Hiram an effective teacher? You BET he is!

Do the wondrous Degrees of the Chapter, Council, and Commandery teach from actual historic events, and do they present historic reality? They do not. Are they important in using theater and symbolism to teach significant, even life changing lessons? They most certainly do! How about the lessons of the Scottish Rite? Are they anymore “real?” But my brother and Sir Knight, those symbolic lessons, learned and followed, can, in fact, make good men better, and better men still better.

“What’s the point of all of this lecture?” you may well ask.

It’s a simple point, really. It’s as simple of the birth of a baby more than two-thousand years ago. It could as easily be about the birth of your own child, or your grandchild, or the newest baby in your neighborhood, or the baby born recently somewhere in the world who, according to statisticians, became the eight-billionth person on this globe.

But, simple as that birth two-thousand years ago must have seemed at the time, it was an event that changed the world— and changed it, we believe, for the better,

Freemasonry requires a belief in a Supreme Being. But becoming a Masonic Knight Templar requires more: it means swearing to defend the Christian religion, and to defend it by the sword, if necessary. While that oath is as rich in symbolism as any other part of our beloved Fraternity, it nonetheless recognizes that we, as Knights Templar, are *Christian* Knights.

That baby, born so long ago, was Jesus the Christ, a child not only of this earth, but also Son of God Himself. His earthly mother was likely an unmarried teenager, traveling with her fiancé. That baby became Our Savior, whether there were angels present, or shepherds, or wise men from the east, or a whole choir of the heavenly host is, finally, of little importance. When the birth occurred is equally insignificant. The **IMPORTANT** thing is the birth itself, the appearance among us of the Emmanuel, “God with us,” the Long-Awaited.

The message of Christmas, then, is the birth of this child, the human birth of our Salvation, Jesus the Christ, who is with us now, and remains with us forever. Do we know this through history? No, we do not, and we cannot. We know this by experience and by faith, and those are more binding than fact.

So, my brethren, celebrate with great joy! Be at peace within yourselves and with those around you. Celebrate Christmas in the best ways you know. Seek not historical authenticity, but rather the more real and more important truth of Christmas. Let the meaning of the living Christ remain with each of us today, as it appeared and was present in the first century, and as it had been foreseen for a millennium before.

This can be, and should be, a blessed time as we celebrate **Christ with Us**, and as we use this time of reflection to become better, more compassionate, more responsive Knights of the Cross as a result.

Merry Christmas, my brothers and Sir Knights. Merry Christmas to you and to those you love. May Christ live with you, in you, and through you, that the world might become a better place because of our magnanimous order. Celebrate His birth with all joy and generosity. Share the joy with those you know and love. Jesus the Christ is born, and lives in and through each of us. The Living Lord be with you, now and forever.

Pause now and give thanks to the God who has loved you from before the beginning of all that is. God bless us, everyone.

Amen.

John M. Klaus

Grand Prelate
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