

The Artist's Almanac December 2008

*He will not be like an ant which has foreseen everything in advance,
But like a child in a forest, or on Christmas Eve;
One who is always rightly astonished by events,
By the encounters and experiences which overtake him.*

Karl Barth

Ghosts of Christmas Past and Now

It is 4AM and I have a long night of wakefulness ahead. Surely Santa has come by now, but if I go downstairs to the tree I risk bumping into him in the dark, or worse, a parent.

Christmas only came at Mama's in Kentucky, surrounded by cousins, aunts and uncles, until the year I got sick with Rheumatic Fever and had to spend it propped up on pillows so I could see the twinkling lights of the tree in the dining room at home in Gallatin. I learned then that Christmas is not always spent at home but home is where Christmas is spent.

The shining green bicycle at Western Auto drew me back several times until one day it was gone. By then I knew Santa could not get it into his pack, much less transport it to my grandmother's big white house in Kentucky. During the War daddy saved his precious gas rationing coupons so we could make the 75 mile trip there, where Mama let us set up and play ping-pong on her dining room table.

I remember those days during another war when on the other side of the world I and a few buddies from the South shared slices of precious Tennessee country ham and fruitcake sent as a token of love by the folks back home. Christmas reached even unto Japan where in the narrow lantern-lit streets of Sasebo shoppers bustled and sang out *Chrisimasa-Omedito!*

A few days later I was stuffing everything I owned into my own pack and headed across the China Sea to face an enemy that did not celebrate Christmas. I, like a homeless person, learned that home was where my duffel bag was, and that I could stay warm sleeping over an exhaust port on the deck of a ship bound for the darkest, coldest winter I ever knew.

It was Christmas of 1955 before I returned from Korea for the last Christmas in Kentucky. I brought my young bride to introduce her to my family there. As we drove through the frozen

moonlit landscape towards a joyous homecoming the radio played my favorite Christmas music – *O Holy Night – The Stars are brightly shining ...*

In old Howard Elementary School I once played the role of Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens's *Christmas Carol*. Marley's Ghost made a lasting impression on me. Here comes he, a wraith of no hope, dragging his clanking chains from his netherworld, yet with charity enough to come warn his business partner of the horrors of a world without Love. Who of us does not remember the heartwarming scene of old Scrooge bringing the Christmas feast to the Cratchitt family and hoisting crippled Tiny Tim to his shoulders? *God Bless Us Every One!*

And so He does. How else to account for the burst of warmth that suffuses the wintry city streets and sends Rotarians and Exchangites into the most desolate quarters of widows and orphans at this season. One of my sons tells of manning a Big Brothers kettle on a busy street in downtown Nashville. Some paused to give, while others passed by on the other side without even a nod. A homeless man approached in a ragged overcoat, seeking, Dan thought, a handout. Instead he paused, and reaching deep into his pack drew out a handful of coins and dropped them into the kettle.

Christmas always has been the hinge of our year. Good wife has been up since 3 AM cooking turkey and ham for slicing before twenty family members begin drifting home at midday, arms laden with presents. Homemade yeast rolls, green salad, sage dressing with cranberries, casseroles of sweet potatoes, and asparagus, green peas, and fruit tea will be the main courses, followed in the afternoon by boiled custard, cocoanut cake, ambrosia, dark Kentucky fruitcake and strong black coffee. Grandchildren will group by age at tables throughout the house, and there will be beanbag toss and perhaps a riotous round of Fictionary. Conversations will cover politics this year, with a heavy dose of economics. Late in the afternoon there will be some opening of presents, with more to follow tomorrow, after a staggering Kentucky style breakfast of hog, hominy, scrambled eggs and hot buttered biscuits with blackberry jam.

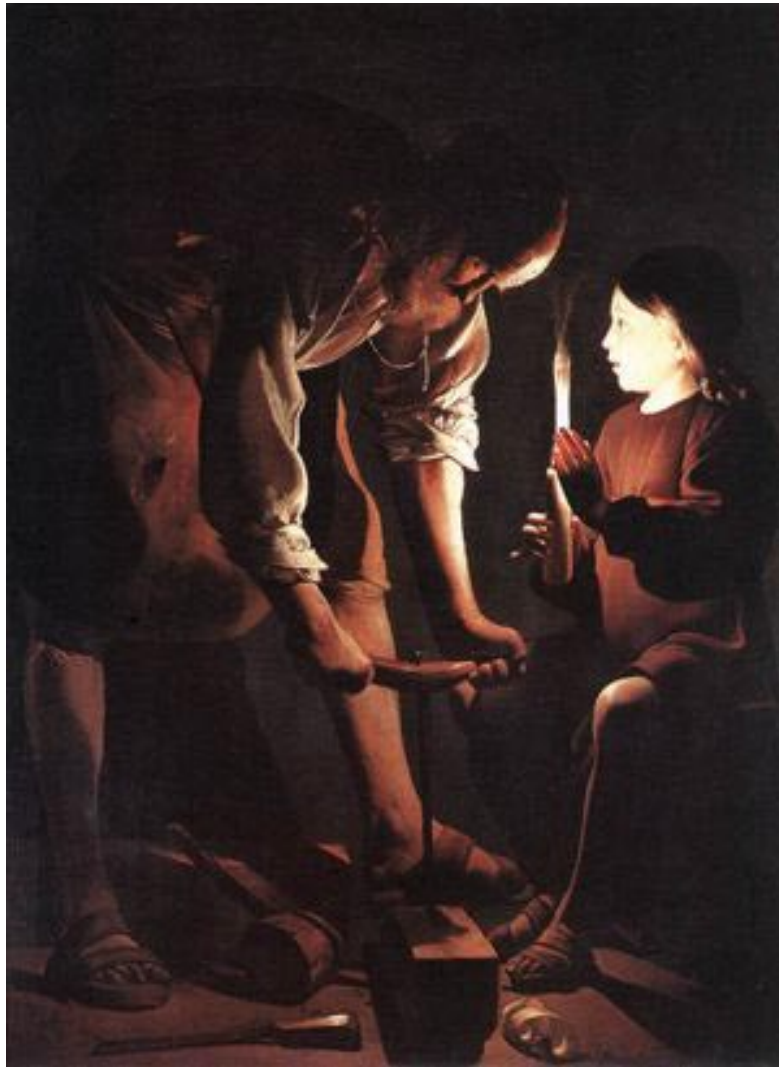
Shopping, feasting with family and watching little ones tear the wrappings from their gifts are expressions of only one face of our love. If the true light shines in our hearts only during this darkest season of the year, we still are able to see others – real Saints, they are - in whom it never seems to dim. They are like the giant star that shines in the darkness from the top of Pilots Knob throughout the Christmas Season, guiding us home. Wherever we are we can lift our eyes to their shining example and strive to be more like them.

I love music and can never get enough of it at Christmastide. To me it is the most exalted form of praise and worship, because it is unbounded by space and time, reaching high to the heavens, across the ages, to our eternal home. That the finest composers and artists of the ages have devoted their best and most joyous works of art to it is proof enough of its compelling message to us today. I play it in my car and in my home 24/7. During the day it suffuses the wintry landscape with light and warmth - at night with meaning and mystery.

The meanest drab shack by the side of the road, bedecked by twinkling Christmas lights, becomes a testimony to faith and hope. *Be Not Afraid*

Once, returning home from Midnight Mass, I saw the quiet subdivisions asleep along Lock Four Road. Above them, twined in the bare limbs of the tall hackberry trees, shone clusters of white lights, a vast glittering forest, like choirs of heavenly hosts, singing, *For Behold We Bring You Tidings of Great Joy.*

The Light came into the darkness and the darkness has not put it out.



St. Joseph – Georges de La Tour - 1642