

Season's greetings

April 8 (Luke 19:28-40)

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

On the day after Christmas, my family and I moved from New Jersey to Georgia. In order to set up housekeeping as swiftly and smoothly as possible, we had carefully marked the packing boxes holding our more urgently needed belongings with such labels as “coffee maker!!!,” “linens,” “clock radio” and “kitchen utensils.” These we opened quickly, but it was many weeks before we got around to the last few boxes, those inscribed as “stuff from the den closet” and “miscellaneous/guest room.”

Out of one of these last boxes tumbled a surprise—a stack of Christmas cards received from friends just before we moved. On top of the stack was a lovely blue card showing the night sky over Bethlehem ablaze with stars and angels. Inside were the familiar words from Luke: “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!”

Abruptly confronted by these words deep into the season of Lent, I realized how fleeting much of our religious language is. For a brief season we sing, “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled,” but then the carols fall silent, we stuff the hopeful cards into a drawer and turn again to the wearying march of days. “Glory to God! Good will to all people!” Like pebbles slung across a pond, vows of faith and love skip across the surface of life for a moment before sinking out of sight and memory.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. tells a story about Philip Gourevich, who has written about genocide in Rwanda. One day Gourevich was standing in front of the Holocaust Museum in Washington reading a newspaper. On the front page were photographs of murdered Tutsis, their swollen bodies floating down a river. And as he stood there, Gourevich noted, “People were walking by me on the way to work wearing buttons saying ‘Remember’ and ‘Never Again.’”

Remember . . . Never Again . . . Peace on Earth . . . Good Will to All People. . . . If these are to be more than easy expressions of cheer and fleeting good intentions,

they must be seen not as sentiments but as commands, words that summon not just a mood but a steady and faithful obedience. This is why Luke tells us that a nearly forgotten Christmas card fell across the path of Jesus as he rode down from the Mount of Olives. “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” cried the disciples. Luke wants us to know that these words we so cheerily send to each other at Christmas come with a Good Friday price. The words sung at Jesus’ birth are now marking his path to Calvary. The angels’ cry of “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!” was not merely a birth announcement but a set of marching orders to which Jesus was obedient throughout his life.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he did so as a king, but his royalty was not pomp and power but humble obedience. In obedience he set his face to Jerusalem, knowing that violence awaited him at journey’s end. In obedience he traveled along the way, eating and drinking with sinners, and remaining faithful to God’s desire to gather the rejected and the lost. Then he entered the city to make peace with the offering of his own life.

To live the Christian life is to assume the pattern of Jesus’ obedience, to allow “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!” to become a drumbeat marking our own steps along the pilgrim way. For Jesus, obedience meant carrying the cross; for most of us, it means lifting a thousand little and daily crosses in the complexities and demands of our many relationships.

That is surely one of the reasons we are given the rather odd account of the disciples being sent to fetch a colt for Jesus. Strange, isn’t it, how in the midst of the great and suspenseful drama of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, Luke devotes part of the narrative to fussing about this rather peripheral matter of Jesus’ transportation? Yet what we have is the story of the disciples’ small obedience performed under the canopy of Jesus’ great obedience. In the securing of the colt, they do as they are told and in so doing, the small and tattered strands of their lives are woven into the great story of redemption. Maintaining hope, claims Glenn Tinder in *The Fabric of Hope*, is largely a matter of obedience. “People who strive, without pride, to meet the responsibilities they encounter in their historical and personal situations will . . . encounter Christ.”

In Saul Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Sammler gazes at the face of his dead friend Elya Gruner as he prays, “Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who as willingly as possible and as well as he was able, and even to an intolerable point, and even in

suffocation and even as death was coming was eager . . . to do what was required of him. . . . He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life . . . the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows . . . For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God. . . .”

Because Jesus “even as death was coming” knew what was required of him and did what he was called to do, the whole of creation can now sing confidently, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!”