

Prophets at Christmastime



The lives of our 16 latter-day prophets exemplify the Christmas spirit, reminding us of that incomparable event that took place in the stable at Bethlehem over 20 centuries ago: the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We can never go wrong by following their example—especially at Christmas.

Gifts of Love

Giving gifts of love and service to those less fortunate has been a hallmark of the prophets' Christmas experiences. In 1931, during the Great Depression, President Harold B. Lee was president of a large stake in Salt Lake City, Utah. President Lee determined that he would know the needs of his stake members and do everything he could to alleviate their want. By survey he learned that more than half of his stake, almost 5,000 people, were dependent on others for help, including almost 1,000 children under the age of 10.

He mobilized members to collect toys and organized workshops to repair, paint, and clean old toys or make new ones so no child would be without on Christmas. He decided that every family in the stake should have a dinner for Christmas and solicited food donations to make that happen.¹ Later as an Apostle, Elder Lee was asked to organize the Church's welfare program based on similar principles of service, sacrifice, and work.

As a boy, President Thomas S. Monson was celebrating Christmas when his friend asked a startling question, "What does turkey taste like?" He responded that it tasted like chicken, but then he realized that his unfortunate friend had never tasted either. Not only that, but there was nothing in his friend's house with which to prepare a Christmas dinner. "I pondered a solution," said President

Monson. “I had no turkeys, no chickens, no money. Then I remembered I did have two pet rabbits. Immediately I took my friend by the hand and rushed to the rabbit hutch, placed the rabbits in a box, and handed the box to him with the comment, ‘Here, take these two rabbits. They’re good to eat—just like chicken.’ . . . Tears came easily to me as I closed the door to the empty rabbit hutch. But I was not sad. A warmth, a feeling of indescribable joy, filled my heart. It was a memorable Christmas.”²



Drawing Together as a Family

One of the sweetest Christmases President Ezra Taft Benson remembered occurred in 1923, when he returned home on Christmas Eve to the family farm in Whitney, Idaho, USA, after a two-and-a-half-year mission to England. This joyful reunion with his parents and 10 brothers and sisters was also filled with enthusiasm and excitement for Christmas. As a special treat, his parents allowed him to stay up to help with Christmas preparations after the other children were in bed. As he worked alongside his parents, he quietly shared his missionary experiences. He couldn’t hold back the tears during this “choice evening” in his childhood home.³

The prophets’ lives encourage us to draw close to our families at Christmastime. President Joseph F. Smith remembered one Christmas as a young father when he had no money—not even a penny—to buy gifts for his children. Just before Christmas he left his home and walked down the street, looking at all the wonderful things in the shop windows but knowing that he could buy none of them. Near despair he found a private place and “wept like a child” to relieve his aching heart. But, drying his eyes, he went home and played with his children all day, “grateful and happy only for them.”⁴ Despite his inability to provide a material Christmas for

his children, he had nevertheless given them the greatest gifts any father could—his love and his time.

The Prophet Joseph Smith spent the Christmas of 1838 imprisoned in Liberty Jail in Missouri. He and several companions were held in a small basement dungeon that was cold, dirty, and smoky from the open fire they were forced to use. The ceiling was so low they couldn’t stand up straight. But there was a bright moment that Christmas season. The Prophet’s wife, Emma, was able to visit Joseph shortly before Christmas for several days. What’s more, she had brought their son, Joseph Smith III. Feeling the love of his family, Joseph wrote words of encouragement to the Saints from the dungeon: “We glory in our tribulation, because we know that God is with us.”⁵

In 1937, President Joseph Fielding Smith was adjusting to life without his beloved wife Ethel, who had recently died. Ethel had asked that Jessie Evans, a single woman with a beautiful singing voice, perform at her funeral. Through that encounter, Jessie Evans and Joseph Fielding Smith became better acquainted and their mutual attraction blossomed into love. She accepted his proposal of marriage shortly after Christmas. In contemplating the gifts he had received the Christmas of 1937, President Smith wrote, “I have received [Jessie] as a Christmas present, for which I am grateful.”⁶ They were married the following April.



One of President David O. McKay's annual family traditions was to take the grandchildren riding on a bobsleigh pulled by a fine team of horses, "bells a-jingle." The ride was one of their favorite traditions. President McKay continued it into his 80s. To stay warm, President McKay wore his long, thick raccoon coat and big gloves. The smaller grandchildren rode in the sleigh, but the older ones "whizzed along behind on their own sleds" tied to the back of the bobsleigh. These long-to-be-remembered Christmas celebrations sometimes ended with carols around the piano and singing "Love at Home."⁷

A Testimony of Jesus Christ

Perhaps most important, the Christmas experiences of the prophets teach us to increase our testimonies of Jesus Christ as we make Him the center of our celebrations. In 1876 the St. George Utah Temple was nearing completion. The dedication ceremony for the basement, main room, and sealing room was scheduled for January 1, 1877.⁸ With Christmas just seven days before the dedication, many in St. George worked frantically to help ensure the temple was completed in time.

President Wilford Woodruff, who served as the first president of the temple, recorded in his journal that on Christmas day the men were busy at work with buzz saws and that 40 women spent the whole day in the temple sewing carpets. They laid carpet and put up curtains.⁹

Although they nearly didn't finish in time, their offering that Christmas season was worth the effort. This work was their Christmas celebration. With 2,000 people present on January 1, President Woodruff gave the dedicatory prayer for portions of the temple—over 30 years after Latter-day Saints had been forced to abandon the Nauvoo Temple.

During World War II, many cities in the United States enforced nightly blackouts to conserve fuel. In Salt Lake City the floodlights on the Salt Lake Temple were turned off. The temple stood dark in a dark city for years. When the ceasefire was declared in Europe, President Heber J. Grant ordered the floodlights of the temple turned back on.

For Christmas 1945, President George Albert Smith planned an inspiring and meaningful Christmas card. On the front was a photograph of the three eastern spires of

the Salt Lake Temple beautifully lit against a dark blue background with the angel Moroni figure standing above. Across the bottom were the words “Christmas—1945” and the message “The lights are on again.”¹⁰ Nothing could have better reflected the joy felt by everyone after so many long years of death and destruction.

But this beautiful Christmas card was also President Smith’s way of bearing his testimony of Jesus Christ and the Restoration of the gospel. Just as the end of the war brought peace and light in dark places, the Restoration of the gospel following the centuries-long Apostasy turned the bright lights of truth “on again” for all the people of the world.

The examples of our latter-day prophets of love, service, faith, and sacrifice testify that true joy during the Christmas season comes through living as Christ lived. As President Howard W. Hunter said, “The real Christmas comes to him who has taken Christ into his life as a moving, dynamic, vitalizing force. The real spirit of Christmas lies in the life and mission of the Master.”¹¹ ■

NOTES

1. See Larry C. Porter, “Remembering Christmas Past,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2001): 94–96.
2. Thomas S. Monson, “Christmas Gifts, Christmas Blessings,” *New Era*, Dec. 1986, 7.
3. See Porter, “Remembering Christmas Past,” 104–5.
4. Joseph F. Smith, “Christmas and New Year,” *Improvement Era*, Jan. 1919, 267.
5. Joseph Smith, in Porter, “Remembering Christmas Past,” 53.
6. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Joseph Fielding Smith Jr. and John J. Stewart, *The Life of Joseph Fielding Smith* (1972), 255.
7. See David Lawrence McKay, *My Father, David O. McKay* (1989), 70–71.
8. Final dedication of the completed St. George Utah Temple was held four months later, on April 6–8, 1877.
9. See *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (1983–85), 7:297.
10. See Albert L. Zobell Jr., “It Being Christmas,” *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1949, 826–27.
11. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (1997), 269.

