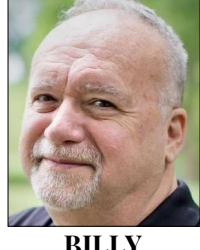


A divided heart lives in denial, fraud, deception

I'm reminded again of the quote from Scott Fitzgerald, "You do not write because you want to say something; you write because you have something to say." I can relate to those who are called to express the burdens in their hearts, and I am thankful for the opportunity to share mine. These freedoms may not always be with us, as the world is becoming aggressively opposed to God and His disciples. I write for many secular publications around the country, and I'm often warned about toning it down with Jesus, as it might offend those who disagree. I'm an editor and contributor for a couple of magazines, and was told the other day that my Christmas article was not family-friendly. Too much Jesus. I often wonder if compromising would be better than having no platform at all, but at what point do we draw the line?

The Living on Purpose column is recognized as a source of encouragement and faith;

nevertheless, as a watchman, I must never ignore His warnings. Pastors and teachers will agree it's easier to talk about doctrines and Biblical history, but it's a solemn responsibility and personal sacrifice to deliver a specific and urgent message from God Himself. In the Bible, when He would choose a servant that He could trust, often their obedience brought persecution, and for some, it cost them their lives. This is happening right now. I'm referring to those few individuals who are not afraid to speak divine truth about sin, even if they are silenced with force. The religious "fluff" will continue adapting and ignoring as a part of their self-preservation, but sadly, this fear of offending is causing many churches to reconsider their



BILLY HOLLAND

stand against sin as a solution to maintaining financial success.

Along with most modern assemblies reinventing themselves, we notice a decline in the promotion of prayer. Why is this? Because the masses would rather be cozy and comfortable, to be entertained, and listen to short "feel good" devotions that are non-threatening. Spiritual warfare and serious prayer do not fit into this format, even though intercession generates the power of the Holy Spirit's presence in the services and increases discernment, anointing, and maturity. When prayer was removed from the public education system, the enemy won a major battle, but why do we not hear more about how the absence of a praying church has caused a spiritually powerless nation? One reason is the average religious person only calls for prayer is when they need something. If prayer was a top priority of Christians, it would change the world.

How often are we desperate for God? Do we anticipate Him whispering for us to go somewhere private and seek Him? I realize I talk about surrendering our will all the time, but I do not apologize, as it is the key to accomplishing His. Our free will is the command center within the human experience that has everything to do with our spiritual connection with our Creator. Until the word of God convicts our will and mind, and then we obey His demands, how can we become transformed into His image? If we choose to fill our minds with the distractions of the world, we will not be convicted to pray or have a passion to walk in the awareness of His presence. So, why is the reverential fear of the Lord hardly mentioned anymore? Because the masses do not want to hear that lukewarmness is a result of being filled with more of the world than the Holy Spirit. We are what we think, and when we refuse to protect our conscience, it becomes contami-

nated. When pleasure becomes more important than pleasing God, our dirty heart separates us from Him.

However, if we allow God to purify us with His refining fire, there is no way we can continue being a hypocritical facade. We have two choices: continue pledging allegiance to the darkness, or become a living sacrifice for Christ. We can't love two masters at the same time, and being neutral is automatically serving the darkness. Beyond the motivational talks and inspirational stories, we must own all aspects of truth; we must demonstrate what we confess. If we really want to be holy, the only person stopping us is us. We've heard about being born-again, but when a person accepts Christ as their Savior and Lord, they no longer live for themselves. All control has been given over to their new Master, and to continue living exactly the same "after" we make our holy vow to Jesus is a fraud, denial, and a deception.

Visions of sugarplums dance only in my head

By ANN CARMICHAEL
Columnist

We all have that fantasy of what Christmas is supposed to be like in our heads. There's a Norman Rockwell painting of a lovely little snow-covered village with town folk who care deeply for each other. They are gathered in the town square, singing Christmas carols around a bonfire, sipping cups of hot cocoa, and wishing each other Merry Christmas, peace, joy, health, wealth, and all things bright and wonderful in the coming year.

As the holiday approaches, we reinforce our vision of the perfect Christmas by watching hours of Hallmark movies and striving mightily to create the version that lives in our dream world. We try to stick to traditions put in place generations ago, which may or may not be feasible in our present-day lives. Just like a jigsaw puzzle that has been passed down from one generation to the next and transitioned from one house to another during moves, there are lost pieces and a jumble of pieces and Christmases no longer fit the way we think they should.

There never was a truer quote than that which I repeat

frequently ... "Life is what happens when you're busy making plans." At no time is this truer than the prequel to the Christmas holiday season.

Life doesn't wait for Christmas to end before it steals those we love in the middle of the night. Life doesn't care that the loss of a loved one or a critical illness will leave an empty chair at your carefully arranged holiday dinner table ... as well as a massive hole in your heart.

Likewise, the acts of others can impact your life. Divorces, family arguments and estrangements, moves to far-away places, and financial stress can impact your mood and how you perceive the Christmas holiday.

Sometimes it's Mother Nature who unleashes forces that damage your property, regardless of the time of year.

These and other unplanned and unexpected events may affect your ability to deal appropriately and effectively with family and friends at the holiday. These factors can cause mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and even substance abuse.

But thankfully, the human spirit is innately resilient. When life gives us lemons, we

instinctively start making lemonade. Oh sure, we have to wallow a bit and cycle through all the stages of anger, sadness, and hopelessness. But eventually, we usually persevere. We dig deep and discover just one ounce of pride and we become independent.

Not to say that the memories of Christmases past and thoughts of what might have been aren't always lurking in the shadows, trying to steal whatever happiness we've found on our journey, but we fight back by making new traditions. Somehow, we manage to find a dream that we never planned or even wanted and it puts us on an even better path than we originally envisioned.

Whereas you used to make lists of things you wanted for Christmas, you find happiness in giving and watching others' joy at receiving your gifts. Finding just that perfect gift for someone else fulfills you.

Instead of letting memories engulf you and drag you down into the mire of sadness, you share the stories of Christmases past with younger generations, and they in turn will share them for generations to come.

The saving grace in aging is

that humans are wired to LIVE. That's why ambulances race with lights and sirens blaring and EMTs and paramedics provide lifesaving techniques until they reach the help of doctors and surgeons who make personal sacrifices on holidays to ensure that you have more time with your own loved ones.

Neonatal units give newborns a chance to experience long and happy Christmases for many more years.

Agencies such as police, firefighters, air traffic controllers, food and drug safety, suicide prevention, and health centers and gyms are all in place to protect our lives and to ensure that we LIVE them to the best of our ability.

So, while it is unlikely that this Christmas will ever meet up to your expectations 100%, regardless what life has dealt you, you have it within your power to make it the best it can be.

At first, you may need to set reasonable goals. If you have just recently lost a loved one, don't expect to feel up to parties and big family get togethers. But don't isolate yourself completely and sit home and dwell on what might have been.

Commit to one-on-one time with a friend or family member. Maybe just spend Christmas morning watching a beloved grandchild's wonder and magic as they open gifts and see their joy when they realize Santa and the reindeer ate all the cookies and carrots they left for them.

No one will expect you to have shopped this year and most will be very understanding if you are overwhelmed and need to cut the visit short.

There are so many platitudes about Christmas (It is better to give than to receive, 'tis the season to be jolly, 'time with family and friends is the best gift'), but I will not bore you with all those seasonal quotes, because they may not be true for you this year. I have lived through many of life's ups and downs and learned many accidental lessons. I won't tell you that Christmas is a stocking full of sugary goodness.

What I do want to leave you with this holiday season is HOPE and RESILIENCE, and the promise that no matter what life has thrown your way, you will get through it, and it may just be far better than any Christmas you had in mind.

Merry Christmas to all!

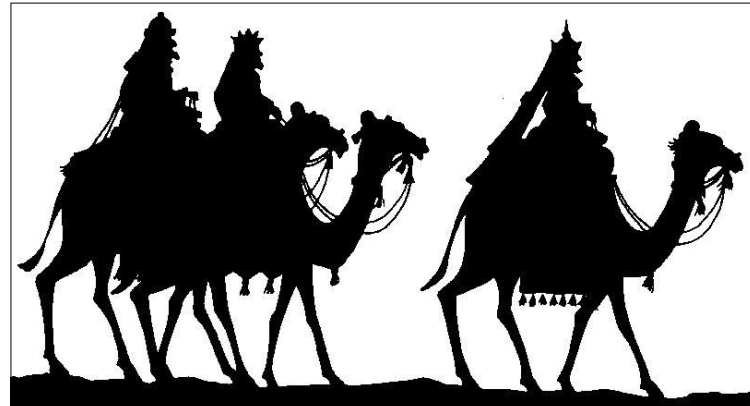
Wise men wisdom: How does today's legend translate?

By STEVE ROARK
Columnist

While it is a popular Christmas card manger scene to put wise men in the picture along with shepherds and angels, they actually showed up at an unknown time and place after Jesus' birth. But 'tis the season, as they say, so here is an overview of these mysterious fellows.

Let's start with a Biblical review: Matthew is the only one of the gospel writers to mention men he refers to as magi coming out of the east seeking a Jewish king to worship (Matthew 2:1-12).

"Magi" is one of several titles they were given, along with "wise men" and "kings." So who were they exactly? The book of Matthew was originally written



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in Greek, and the Greek word used was "magoi," which in English is translated as "magi." People called magi first appear in history around the 7th century B.C in the Median empire.

They were an ancient priestly caste dwelling somewhere in the Parthian empire and practiced astrology, which at

the time was a mixture of scientific observation of the heavens mixed in with using those observations to interpret future events.

They were also known for their ability to interpret dreams.

At the time of Jesus' birth, magi were councilors in the

Parthian empire. And since they also dived in science, it is easy to see why they were also termed "wise men."

But were they kings? Part of their duties as government councilors included the election of new kings to the empire. So while they were pretty high up on the societal peg, they were likely not kings, but instead king makers.

Matthew describes them as "from the east," which fits just fine with their being from the Parthian empire, which was beyond the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Matthew does not state how many men there were, so why three was adopted as their number is unknown.

Matthew did use a plural name, so there were at least

two, and the debate varies from two to as many as eight.

So now we come to when did they find Jesus? Matthew states that the magi entered a house (2:11) and does not reference a manger, so it's likely that they came at another time and place. The leading argument is that Jesus was between 41 days (after Jesus was presented to the Temple in Jerusalem), and two years since they had traveled a long way since seeing the star.

The day of Epiphany (January 6) is also in the mix, known as Three King's Day, which celebrates the wise men's visit to the baby Jesus.

Whatever the facts are, God revealed the identity of Jesus to scholars who were gentiles, a sign that he came for all people.