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# The Touch of Peace (Work Station Two)

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## Work Station

# TWO

Gary B. Swanson

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## The Touch of Peace

Legends of the origin of the Christmas tree go back to Estonia and Germany. The Catholic St. Boniface and the Protestant Martin Luther are most often mentioned as originators of the Christmas tree tradition.

St. Boniface, a Christian missionary to the Frankish Empire in the eighth century, is said to have cut down the sacred tree of Thor in Geismar, in today's Germany, replacing it with a fir tree, which some believe to be the first Christmas tree.

In another account, Martin Luther was on his way home late one evening when he noticed how beautifully the stars shone through the trees. To share this vision of beauty with his wife, he brought a small evergreen tree into the house. Placing small, lighted candles in its branches, he declared that the tree would make a fitting emblem for the Christmas season.

Holiday legends, whether they have any historical basis, often bring a richness of their own to the traditions that inform our lives. When it comes right down to it, does it truly matter whether these old stories actually happened? Do they not complement one another and deepen our appreciation for the

spirit of the holiday season?

The Christmas tree, in fact, whatever its origin, is only one of many symbols and ceremonies that have sprung up in far-flung world cultures to celebrate Jesus' birth. And every one of these provides a unique insight into the cosmically astonishing gift of God's grace as it was revealed by the Incarnation.

In Christian churches in some areas of the Congo, for example, celebrants gather for a "March Around Offering." After carols are sung, all form a procession around an altar on a raised platform, on which each lays a birthday gift for the Christ child. Those who cannot bestow money bring gifts from the work of their hands.

In some places in southern India, Christians place small clay lamps with cotton wicks along the edges of their low, flat-roofed houses. When non-Christians inquire about the significance of the twinkling lamps, it provides an opportunity to share the beautiful story of Jesus' birth with neighbors and passersby.

Even in a country as hostile to Christianity as Iraq has been, Jesus' birth has been celebrated in a profoundly simple way. At a quiet Christmas gathering, a church leader blesses one member with a touch. This member touches someone nearby, who, in turn, passes the blessing on to another, until all in attendance have received the "touch of peace" on Christmas Day.

Jesus said: "'Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid'" (John 14:27).<sup>1</sup>

This is a promise that is surely needed now as much as it could ever have been in the past. Earthquakes, hurricanes, cyclones, floods, forest fires, typhoons, tsunamis, drought—and these are frightening conditions we face that are only in the "acts of God" category. There is also poverty, starvation, pandemic, oppression, injustice, terrorism, violence, recession, and other uncertainties that the sinful condition of humanity has produced.

Furthermore, conditions are looking darker even over things imagined. George Gerbner, of the School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, has coined the term “mean world syndrome.” From his research on television violence, he describes not so much a connection between violence on television and violence in real life, as a connection between violence on television—and fearfulness.

Author Barry Glassner sums up Gerbner’s findings in this way: “People who watch a lot of TV are more likely than others to believe their neighborhoods are unsafe, to assume that crime rates are rising, and to overestimate their own odds of becoming a victim.”<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, this sense of fearfulness comes at a time when several scholars are saying that humanity has never been safer. In a new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Harvard Psychologist Steven Pinker makes the case that, statistically speaking, death and brutality are actually diminishing in the context of human history. “As we get smarter, we try to think up better ways of getting everyone to turn their swords into plowshares at the same time,” Pinker says. “Human life has become more precious than it used to be.”<sup>3</sup>

Even the acts of non-state terrorist groups does not affect the statistics as much as one might think. “Terrorism doesn’t account for many deaths,” Pinker says. “September 11 was just off the scale. There was never a terrorist attack before or after that had as many deaths. What [terrorism] does is generate fear.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet it should be recognized that, in a world of sin, fear in itself is—at its most elemental—a kind of gift. A proper measure of fear is a form of protection. “Our response to living in a dangerous world,” says Christian author Scott Bader-Saye, “ought not to be an attempt at fearlessness but an attempt to feel fear in the right way, at the right time, and to the right

extent.”<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Bader-Saye even suggests that a measure of proper fear may actually be a requisite for a more meaningful relationship with God. “I used to think,” he writes, “that the angels in the Bible began their messages with ‘Do not be afraid’ because their appearance was so frightening. But I have come to think differently. I suspect that they begin this way because the quieting of fear is required in order to hear and do what God asks of us.”<sup>6</sup>

This “quieting of fear” is probably another way of saying “revere” or “show reverence for,” which are more accurate interpretations of the word “fear” in such scriptural references as “Fear God and give glory to Him” (Rev. 14:7) or “Fear God and keep His commandments” (Eccl. 12:13) or “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10).

This “quieting of fear” also sounds as if it could be very similar to the “touch of peace” shared by Christians in Iraq during the Christmas holiday time. There are at least two kinds of peace that are most familiar to us. The one most commonly assumed is the formal cessation of hostilities between or among warring parties. But there is also peace of a personal nature: the sense of spiritual joy and well-being that comes from knowing Jesus as our Savior. In Jesus’ words: “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Here again is the clear connection between peace and the expulsion of fear. Our wish should always be—in whatever culture we find ourselves—to receive the touch of peace during the holiday season and to be guided by the Holy Spirit to pass it on to the desperately fearful among us.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All Scripture references are quoted from *The New King James Version* of the Bible.
2. Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 44.
3. See <http://news.yahoo.com/bombings-beheadings-stats-show-peaceful-world-134625326.html>.
4. Ibid.
5. Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2007), p. 40.
6. Ibid., p. 59.