

## PREFACE

In December 2006, I was invited to give a Christmas lesson in a church meeting. I decided to focus on how we can remember Christ during the Christmas season.

A common way to remember Christ at Christmas is to remember the first Christmas. In our family, we set up a small nativity scene and display some paintings of the nativity. We see nativity scenes as we visit homes, businesses, churches, and Temple Square. We see Christmas programs or plays at church. On Christmas Eve, we read Luke's account and the Book of Mormon account of the first Christmas.

For the lesson, I decided to share several different versions of the nativity story. As I prepared the lesson, I found other versions of the story that were quite interesting and different from the familiar nativity story. These stories are based on different interpretations of the scriptural accounts and on different understandings of linguistic and historical evidence from oral traditions, ancient manuscripts, Jewish traditions, and archaeology. These stories helped me better understand and appreciate the nativity story. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie said, "unless or until some of the saints ... see in a dream or a vision the inn where Joseph and Mary and Jesus spent that awesome night, we can only *speculate* as to the details" (McConkie, I:344; italics added). In the lesson, I

also wanted to share some of the ways I had learned to use common Christmas traditions and symbols as mnemonics (memory helps) to remind me of Christ and the true meaning of Christmas. This allowed me to learn and share some fascinating things about the language of scriptural symbolism as it relates to the symbolism of Christmas traditions.

I prepared a PowerPoint presentation with pictures to illustrate the ideas. After I gave the presentation, quite a few people asked for copies to share with their families. Later I shared the same lesson with my adult children and their families. They also wanted copies. I decided to prepare an extended version that I could share with family and friends. During this process, I found more information that has helped me better understand the nativity and the language of symbolism.

Last summer I attended two BYU Education Week classes by Donna B. Nielsen. She talked about some oral traditions of Christian peasants in Palestine that she shares in her audio CD called *Holy Child Jesus*. I have included some of these oral traditions that relate to the nativity. Donna also talked about advent trees or calendars. My wife reminded me that we used advent calendars when our children were small. I have added some ideas for advent trees based on common outdoor nature symbols that can remind us of Christ at Christmas and throughout the year. This allowed me to share more about the language of scriptural symbolism with my family and friends. As we observe, reflect on, and more fully appreciate the wonders of nature, we can share scriptural events and symbolism that help us remember Christ at Christmas and throughout the year.