

# The light of compassion is kindled in peacefulness



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Special to Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

As a jail chaplain I was privileged to be locked in with women and men during the winter holiday season. Separated from their loved ones, it was very difficult. Yet I say it was a privilege because I think that together we found a deeper understanding of Hanukkah, Christmas and the solstice in those shadowed places at the darkest time of year.

One Christmas I brought in sheets of multicolored paper to hand out in that dull and drab jail with a story I printed from the local newspaper. It told of a young couple in town who had a baby while they were staying in an abandoned car. When the police arrived, the baby was found wrapped in old rags, cold and crying, but well.

The young couple, Maria and Jose, were detained as undocumented immigrants. No one knew what to do with the child.

Inmates were full of questions. What happened to the family? Where did this happen? Didn't a social worker or local congregation help them?

With a smile I confessed this was not from the newspaper — I made up the story. This led to a lively conversation about what the original "Christmas story" was really about and what it would sound like if told today.

That still seems relevant. If the story was told today, would anyone believe it? Even if it sounded something like this:

Unmarried Middle-Eastern teenagers were found huddled in a barn holding a newborn with a dark complexion whose real father was unknown. That freezing night, under a starry sky,



Chris Highland titled this photo "Natural Light for the World."

COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

the wind sounded like singing. Philosophy professors from Iran appeared with food, diapers and cash; ranch hands milled around, irritated to find the homeless family using valuable straw in a rented stall.

For some reason the governor felt so threatened by the birth of the child he ordered soldiers to go through neighborhoods and mercilessly kill all the small children. The young family, barely more than children themselves, escaped as refugees into Egypt.

Anyone believe that? Maybe part of it?

I've often thought these ancient stories should be retold for today in a manner we can relate to, but also think about, struggle with.

Did the story really happen? Did it happen as told? Or is it a legend with a moral lesson?

Literalists have to answer some tough questions — about teen pregnan-

cy, whether Mary gave consent to her pregnancy, how much to believe dreams, how Persian philosophers could "follow a star" (astronomy or astrology?), why a divine plan would include the murder of many children (and why that is never mentioned in pageants) and how anyone could know whether an immigrant family was carrying a special child.

Reasonable responses are welcome.

As a child, I was happy the world celebrated my birthday — December 25. It was all about me, and I enjoyed being the center of attention on that day. Then I heard that Christmas wasn't just about me but about another baby boy.

As I grew I discovered the Nativity story wasn't just about my family but the whole world. Then I learned it wasn't just an American holiday, that the season wasn't just for Christians and the story wasn't just about one faith or faith at all.

So what is it, this story born out of tradition trimmed in creed and ceremony? Does it have any meaning for us, even for nonbelievers?

In my opinion it does hold meaning for us, spiritual and secular. We can reimagine the story in a way that honors the ancient intent, reflects the cultural context and asks the hard questions leading to enlightened understanding.

Maybe that's the point anyway: Light. Light in the darkest time of the year. Light in the most hidden places. Light that cannot be contained. Light that shines beyond any packaging, any box, any tradition, any faith, any religion. A light that cannot be contained, even in a poor Palestinian Jewish baby.

What is that light? Freethinkers (like Jesus?) know it. Perhaps it begins with love wrapped in strings of glowing connections and relationships, topped with the star of wonder — of awe and reverence, delight and joy. The light of reason. The light of compassion kindled in peacefulness and lovingkindness.

For many in the secular community (and even among the faithful), Christmas has been lost under the trappings and wrappings of children's tales and winter sales — as people have sought and bought the theology and the narrative as told and sold.

Yet, if a group of prisoners, in cold, hidden corners of our communities — outcasts pushed to the unstable margins of our minds — if they can find goodness and hope in the Story of Light, it is still worth the telling.

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com).*