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Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-20

The Light of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love:
Freedom of Worship...Brings the Light of Christ



Golden Verse: Isaiah 9:2

*"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined."*

In Isaiah 9 the land of deep darkness was the looming Assyrian menace who destroyed the Northern Kingdom and exiled the people. Isaiah offers a promise – the end of military oppression and endless peace through the succession of a new king. Historically neither happened. New kings were toppled, oppression happened again and again and again...

After Rockwell had finished the *Four Freedoms* paintings, *Freedom of Worship*, *Freedom of Speech*, *Freedom from Want*, and *Freedom from Fear*, he saw a certain shortcoming in them as well. Despite the commercial success of these wonderful paintings, he knew something was missing from these works that clearly depicted a narrow swath of humanity. He envisioned something wider and broader and titled it *Do Unto Others*, after the words of a Nazarene from 2,000 years ago...

As we celebrate the birth of the most renowned Jew in the history of the world, I want to share a newsletter written by a colleague of mine from Alabama that recently appeared in my inbox.

The Ultimate Jewish Curse, by Rabbi Jonathan Miller:

...I assure you that no language is more expressive, clever, or snarky as Yiddish, the medieval Eastern European Jewish vernacular. I can speak a little Yiddish, understand a little more than I can speak and because I am genetically programmed as such, I think in Yiddish even if my mommeh loshen, my mother tongue is English.

I was thinking a lot about Yiddish curses, for reasons that will become clear if you read on.

Here are some juicy ones:

- *May you be so rich your widow's husband never has to work a day.*
- *May all your teeth fall out, but one, so that you may still get a toothache.*
- *May your bones be broken as often as the Ten Commandments.*

Clever and snarky, eh?

But the most direct Jewish curse that a person can utter against another is expressed in both Hebrew and Yiddish,

“Y’mach shmo, May his/her name be erased from memory.”

The most likely and predictable outcome would have been for this boy from small town Bethlehem from 2,000 years ago to be completely forgotten within a few years after His death.

Not only has Jesus’ name not been forgotten, but despite being from Nazareth – the nothing town – it is the most remembered, renowned and spoken name in all the world, and even more names like those from Isaiah nine have been added to His, *“Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!”*

His presence and influence have more sway over history than any other person...by far. And not just from those who call Him Lord.

As John said, this true light that *enlightens everyone*, has come into the world. There is no other figure in the history of the world more revered outside of his own religion; because His light is so bright and so strong that human belief systems cannot dim His light one bit! THAT IS THE PARK AVENUE CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTING!!! Thousands singing *Joy to the World* because His joy cannot be doused by our dim hearts!

Jesus truly is for the world. Thus, His presence in so many other religions. In Islam Jesus is considered a prophet, unique in all the history of the world. He is mentioned in the Quran even more than Mohammed. In the Sikh faith He is considered a Holy Man, a saint. And listen to this story from an English woman about a Hindu friend:

...When he was seven, he moved with his family from India to England, where he was enrolled at a new school. On his first day he was asked to speak to the class about a saint from his Hindu tradition. Enthusiastically he began to tell the story of the saint called Ishu, who was born in a cowshed, was visited by three holy men, performed many amazing miracles, walked on water, and spoke a wonderful sermon on a mountain. Of course, he was telling the story of Christ. But he was bewildered to hear that the teacher laid claim to Ishu for herself and her friends and she let him know that this was her Lord and her story, not his. He was very upset about this because Ishu’s tale was his favorite story.

One of the reasons Jesus has captured the adoration of many billions was the ability to speak to the universal hopes and challenges of the human spirit. Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount, *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”* reflects a near-universal sentiment across world religions.

It was this practice and phrase that inspired Norman Rockwell’s greatest painting which depicts people from all around the world arrayed in marvelous diversity. In my mind it reflects the glory we shall see in that heavenly banquet, when people from east and west, north and south will all sit at one table together, with our Lord presiding.

And this is what Jesus practiced in life, bringing together women and tax collectors, sinners and priests, people from every walk of

life, all together around one table as one humanity.

Today we realize there is much to celebrate in the commonality of world religions, but we must not let that cause us to fail to grasp their distinctive strengths.

For it is in sharing their unique contributions that we are all enriched. In Buddhism their devotion to harmony and inner peace is compelling. In Islam their devout daily prayer is inspiring. In Judaism, the profound wisdom of the Rabbis like my friend's is mesmerizingly beautiful, ancient, and deep.

Rockwell's *Do Unto Others* does not depict the sameness of the human tapestry, but the rich beauty of unique people and their cultures, including their dress, skin, and hairstyles. That is what makes it so compelling.

And Christianity is not made compelling by our doctrine! But by this child in a manger and His ability to – as John said, "*enlighten the whole world*". The power of Christ to pass religious, ethnic, and economic boundaries; it is Christ who does this! Not us! Not Christianity, but Jesus Himself! This humble child, and He is the joy we have to share with the world on this silent beautiful night.