

Black Ink Light A Candle

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December brings the winter solstice, the longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere. Across much of the country, frost is settling into the ground. Those inclined to analyze the economy say we are in the midst of some dark times fi-

nancially, too.

While cow-calf producers have had some good years in this decade, the overall trend has been a reduction in herd operators, down 25 percent in 20 years. You could worry about the dark side of erratically higher costs and unknown markets. A winter storm could wreak havoc next week.

But this is also the season of hope. People learned ages ago that this darkness gives way to light, springtime and multifaceted redemption. Yes, we are fewer, our herd smaller in number. But in the balance of supply and demand, that makes beef potentially more valuable as the world's population continues to grow.

We celebrate every birth, from the divine to the ordinary. The anticipation, waiting for these events brings thoughts of the unseen wonders in our lives. To focus, we prepare. We may purchase or craft gifts to welcome a newborn baby or commemorate a world-changing event. Children may even shake a few wrapped presents to gather data on what's inside.

It's up to adults to make sure the kids understand all the symbolism, but in many families, the exchange of gifts is preceded by hints or even lists. When we know the kids well enough, we can make their eyes light up when they open a gift, in a material-world parallel of the spiritual.

Amidst joyous screaming on a Christmas Eve in Kansas, one parent said to another, "I don't know what it is yet, but that's the reaction you want."

In the cattle world, we may palpate or use ultrasound to peek, and get a better idea of when to prepare for calving. Did we prepare for everything that will follow? Have we been good, followed the Golden Rule of win-win cattle dealings, built up relationships to give consumers what's on their list?

Beginning in the south and working its way north, any day now, the moment will arrive.

She will lay down in the natural shelter of an embankment, windbreak, your calving shed or a clean pasture and bear down for a few minutes to bring forth an everyday miracle – all the more so if it's her first.

Soon, she stands to encourage the newborn to nurse. It puts a smile on your face when you check her that morning. You don't know what it is yet, but that's the reaction you want.

A moment or two with the ear tagger and a few other formalities and you leave them to strengthen the bond that will last for half the year while you record the facts and go on with your day.

But you keep thinking about the great expectations you have for this year's calf crop. You're getting ready to make sure their next owner has only pleasant surprises. You don't know yet if they will bring less than a dollar or more than \$1.25 per pound when you sell, but you're determined to make them worth the top end bid.

Stocker and feedlot operators expect at least average genetics, health, growth. They drop all sorts of hints, sometimes publish lists and always bid accordingly. Keep their wish list in mind, and understand the ultimate wishes come from consumers. Light a candle for demand.

What have you got wrapped up in your herd? Do all you can to make sure those packages being delivered this season will exceed expectations for all customers down the line. The year starts with very few limits on the good things that can happen if we keep our focus. Δ

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