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THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS?

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Luke 3.4-6; 15 & 16

As it is written in the book of the prophet Isiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning, John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

When we talk about Christmas, we usually refer to the two aspects of Christmas, namely the birth of Jesus and the annual celebration that ostensibly surrounds this story. And, ultimately in the midst of all the hubbub of the holiday as it has morphed into what we know today, we hear over and over again the sentiment about getting back to the true meaning of Christmas. While many of us find Christmas to be a delight, it also drives us crazy, and I will admit that much of what brings out the scrooge in me is the quest for the true meaning of Christmas when that quest means downplaying the tinsel and lights and overplaying the nativity.

The fact is Christmas as a holiday has few roots in the biblical tradition. There is no Christmas in the bible, there was no Christmas in the church for the first 350 years, and ultimately the trappings of the Christmas celebration—the December date, the decorations, the parties, the gift-giving and ultimately the nativity story—are the result of centuries of incorporating various religious and non-religious traditions into the season that is known as Christmas. When concerned Christians mount campaigns to “Keep Christ in Christmas” or to remind people that “Jesus is the Reason for the Season,” it is often with an underlying desire to return to the pure spiritual holiday that they believe Christmas once was, before later cultural interference and commercialization ruined it. But if we look carefully and honestly at the history of this holiday, it is clear that Christmas never was the pure spiritual holiday we imagine. From the beginning, Christmas was a fusion of preexisting winter festivals and a Christian theme.

If we consider the biblical text that comes after the nativity story we will notice this very important text that is context for the birth narrative, namely the words of John the Baptizer whose message of “prepare the way of the Lord” is the foundation and foretelling of the message of the Messiah. This preparation for God’s coming into the world is one of making straight the crooked way, raising up the valleys, and leveling the playing field in society so everyone has an equal chance for finding their way in life.

There is no innately true meaning of Christmas other than what we make of it, for as creatures of the God who came in the form of a baby, we are called to exhibit the qualities of this Christ Child to give birth to God each day. So loving unconditionally, working for justice on behalf of those who are unjustly treated, is the reason we give to the season, as John tells it through words of Isaiah.

While the nostalgic nativity scenes we create include a sweet, contented baby lying in a bed of clean straw while a serene Joseph and Mary looking calmly on, and clean, white-robed shepherds with pure-white lambs stand beside three regal magi while a bright star blazes overhead, none of this is described in this fashion in the bible. The purpose of the biblical story is to witness the coming of God into the world in all the unexpected places—through the womb of a 15-year-old girl who isn't married, to the motley shepherds who were despised by society because they were unclean, to non-Jewish Zoroastrian astrologers and a star that is described as an astrological sign under which a great child would be born. The players in the nativity story in Matthew and Luke portend a Messiah who will shatter accepted protocol and society's privileged in favor of love, justice, and inclusion of the whole world with whom God is besotted.

The shepherds in those days were as disposed by society as the immigrants and refugees today struggling to find a place to call home. The magi, whose number is not listed in the Bible, were strangers, foreigners, astrologers who consulted the stars, not God, for their information. These are the people in the story who are symbols of the mountains that divide being brought low, and the pits of societal prejudice that were raised to level ground. The crooked ways that humans create to keep the underprivileged and poor from any chance of advancement for their own well-being are straightened so that everyone—rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged—can know the pathway to God. This is the meaning of Christmas as portrayed in the nativity story.

Poet Ann Weems glimpses the overlay of the biblical story and culture when she writes in her book *Kneeling at Bethlehem*:

Each year about this time I try to be sophisticated
and pretend I understand the bored expressions
relating to the "Christmas Spirit."
I nod when they say "Put the Christ back in Christmas,"
I say yes, yes, when they shout "Commercial" and
"Hectic, hectic, hectic..."
But somehow a fa-la-la keeps creeping out...
So I'll say it:
I love Christmas tinsel
and angel voices that come from the [kids'] beds upstairs.
And I say three cheers for Santa Claus
and the Salvation Army bucket
and all the wrappings and festivities and special warm feelings...
So hooray for Christmas trees
and candlelight...
I rejoice for the carnival of Christmas!...
I want to dance in the streets of Bethlehem...
For those of us who believe,
the whole world is decorated in love!

(‘O Lord You Were Born’ from *Kneeling at Bethlehem*)

The essence of the Christmas story as it is played out in the life of the Christ Child is one of unconditional love for even the enemy; it is one of inclusion of even the people we hate; it is one of an extravagant generosity that gives out of the depths of our faith to those who most need it. Instead of decrying the tinsel and bauble of what seems like a holiday gone mad with too much stuff, let's make the tinsel glitter for the kids who are most affected by social injustice a brighter Christmas with gifts we can give, which you have done through our Angel Tree. And let's not talk about a religious meaning of Christmas and a secular view of Christmas; let the wise men and the shepherds stand alongside Santa and Rudolph as symbols of love and giving. Let's not worship a star over our prettied-up crèches without also standing in awe of all the stars in the winter nighttime sky; let us not sing of angels we have heard on high without being angels here on earth.

There are all kinds of things wrong with the way we celebrate Christmas, reminds Barbara Brown Taylor: we eat too much, we spend too much, we sentimentalize too much, and we worry too much. These are the dark side of our best intentions. Those excesses, however, cannot douse the holy spark that lies within each activity. We really do want to give and receive. We really do want to feel deeply, live peaceably, and to love faithfully in the spirit of the child Mary bore to the world, Emmanuel, God with Us. There are some of us who believe that we may do more good by wading more intentionally and mindfully into the culture of the season than by separating ourselves from it. That's why we can sing about Jesus and Santa at the same time. For God is in the midst of it all, still hunting new flesh in which to be born. And because of this, we can deck our halls and our souls with the colors and lights, with the sacred and the secular, making the crooked straight and the rough places smooth in a joyous display of the true meaning of the season.

(Barbara Brown Taylor, 'Holy Instincts,' *The Christian Century*, December 15, 1999).

—Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, who comes to us in the person of a child born in Bethlehem many years ago and who comes to us today in the children and the people around us, meet us in this place today in your spirit.. The season is resplendent with color and bright lights, of holly and Christmas trees, and festive parties with friends and family. Meet us in the excited energy of the children who, like the Christ Child, are made in your image, whose faces reflect your face and whose voices echo your voice of joy. We have seen the first snow of the season causing us to pause for moments of quiet reflection on the beauty of your world. In the peaceful falling of the flakes, may we put aside our concern for shoveling in order to hear your still, small voice.

We pray not only for ourselves, but as a community in worship ought, we pray for the welfare of others. May those who are grieving the loss of a loved one recognize your voice in the comforting words of a friend. May those who are reeling from the loss of senseless, violent shootings find some semblance of peace. May those rebuilding from the massive fires out west find hope. May those who are stressed by the pressures and hubbub of the season find moments of joyful serenity between activities. May those who are unable to spend the holiday with family find your presence in the memories of the past and hope for the future.

Come to us in the bright adornment of Christmas red and green, in the tasty morsels of special sweets, in the elevated spirits of the holiday punch, in the gifts given and the gifts received, in the flickering flame of candles, and in the tension between heightened activity and peaceful moments of reflection and prayer. In this season of the child, may we find you in a childlike anticipation of

whatever experiences may be ours in the weeks ahead, that the season may empower us toward peace and hope for the new year. Amen.

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