

Even in the Blurry Photo

Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 11:1-4a

Readings from the Gospel: Luke 2:6-7

“It just wouldn’t be Christmas without...” Without what? How would you fill in the blank? Traditions from the sacred to the senseless are faithfully re-enacted each year in your life. With what traditions would you fill in the blank? “It just wouldn’t be Christmas without...”

As I speak, a number of south Floridians are feeling a bit queasy, and it isn't because of Aunt Cathy's abhorrent fruitcake either. A number of years ago, Florida's well-known humorist Dave Barry highlighted a sacred Christmas tradition that continues to be alive and well, and I mean "well" in the sense of when someone asks if their family would enjoy it? "Well...

Barry asks, “Have you ever been to a county or state fair, the kind where the midway is lined with trailers selling, basically, globs of fried grease? Sometimes there’s dough in the grease glob; sometimes there’s a potato; sometimes there’s an old issue of National Geographic. It doesn’t matter. You’re at a fair, so you eat it.

[This, you discover, was not a good idea when you step on a ride called something like, ‘The Regurg-a-tator’], an insanely dangerous contraption operated by men whose total educational background consists of reading their own tattoos. Next thing you know, you’re being whirled violently around, and the air is filled with a festive mixture of laughter, screams, stomach contents, dentures, [etc.].

If you’ve ever experienced this brand of carnival fun, you’ve probably asked yourself: Where do these things go in the winter? The answer is: to Santa’s Enchanted Forest.

Barry says, “Santa’s Enchanted Forest is a bizarre mutant cross between a carnival midway and the world’s tackiest Christmas yard display. You have the carnival food and rides, but you also have 3 million - yes, MILLION - lights.”

I thought ol’ Dave was making this up until I looked up the website found out that it’s for real, sitting in all of its tacky glory off of a south Florida expressway, Hialeah to be specific. So, if you don't lose all your money at the racetrack, you can swing by Santa's Enchanted Forest. (Anyone here ever had the privilege?) Dave tells us that

“interspersed among the carnival attractions and food trailers are displays depicting traditional Christmas themes such as Santa Claus, Rudolph, Blues Clues, the Power Puff Girls, and of course, the Nativity. This can be disorienting,” he suggests. “You expect to see the Three Wise Men approaching the baby Jesus bearing gifts of corn dogs.” It all makes Myrtle Beach seem like the Metropolitan Museum.

Santa’s Enchanted Forest also has (Why not?) animal acts, including alligators and elephants. One year, Barry says they had an act called ‘Randall’s High-Diving Pigs,’ which features pigs that dive into water, “just as the Bible tells us that pigs did to celebrate the very first Christmas.”

Barry says, “We go to Santa’s Enchanted Forest every year to soak up the traditional holiday atmosphere - the lights, the smell of decades-old grease simmering in the South Florida humidity, the carols blaring from loudspeakers, the screams of Regurg-a-tator riders, the pigs soaring through the night air.” (Dave Barry, *The Washington Post Magazine*)

Well, Dave, we didn't make it this year. Yet, everyone has Christmas rituals that are important to them.

“It just wouldn’t be Christmas without...” Without what? How would you fill in the blank? Traditions from the sacred to the senseless are faithfully re-enacted each year in your life. With what traditions would you fill in the blank? “It just wouldn’t be Christmas without...”

Maybe you streamed “It’s a Wonderful Life”, sitting in tv room darkness and watching George Bailey’s heart-rending journey toward gratitude. Maybe you drove to McAdenville or had a Zoom call with family members strewn across the country. Can you believe Covid has been around long enough that family Zoom calls could already qualify as a tradition?

An elder in a church I once served, a preacher’s kid, told of the childhood experience of packing up the station wagon each year after the Christmas Eve services to begin the long trip from Florida toward Iowa. Her mom would set up a miniature artificial tree on the desk of their room at some roadside Holiday Inn. To her, Santa wasn’t as connected with chimneys as he was with room service. One of our elders here shared a similar experience, but due to a station wagon that broke down in WV.

I had one colleague, who as a child on Christmas morning sat with her siblings at the top of the stairs and were not allowed to come down until they heard the tune of *Joy to the World*. She just thought it was the coolest tradition even after she realized that, at least partially, it was a ploy to prevent the parents from having to stay up late to get the presents out of the closet.

I asked our elders and staff what tradition would come to mind when filling in the blank: It just wouldn't be Christmas without... what? Far and away, the number 1 response was being with family. It was such a joy on Friday night to see extended families gathered in pews together. Family, that's significant. But what if, say Thursday, I emailed the group again to ask: What tradition would you just as soon leave behind next year? How many, after the chaos, the disagreements, the rivalries, the tension over who did not assist with the food or clean-up, the torturous holiday travel circus would say, "time with family."

"It just wouldn't be Christmas without..." David Wooley said it wouldn't be Christmas without Johnny Mathis singing his version of The Christmas Song! Dave, I disagree. Nat King Cole, there can be no debate. Elders Nancy and Courtney Parrish said, Silent Night as a

family at the end of an SMPC Christmas Eve service. Oh, I'm hoping they went to the 7:00pm service and not the 5:00pm. Someone said it just wouldn't be the yuletide without stressing over the wrapping of gifts on Christmas Eve. Others mentioned mom's orange slice cake or breakfast biscuits, eggnog, lights, seeing all the church family together (a true blessing this year), and the multiple uses of cream cheese. Andrew Brown said church and giving ... I was so overcome with emotion, I had to stop reading. I love you, Andrew. Doug Rhodes' contribution is priceless: It just wouldn't be Christmas without a relative sleeping in an armchair with drool running down their chin

Finally, I have to totally agree with Zach, it just wouldn't be Christmas without: The Christmas chord!! (The amazing B half diminished 7 chord on "Word" in the last stanza of the Willcocks reharmonization of ADESTE FIDELES). Now that may sound obtuse, but he is spot on. You could call it the Holy Spirit chord, because I know how my spirit opens with it.

I love hearing the stories of your traditions, traditions that can open the door, bringing the message of Emmanuel to their hearts.

Why are our rituals so important to us at this time of year? Some of you here are exhausted, having worked yourselves into a dither trying to pull everything together for, if not the perfect, at least a pretty good Christmas celebration. In pursuing a Christmas worthy of a Hallmark special, you've managed to become stressed to the point of saying more than once under your breath, "Just let me get through Christmas." Thus, in preparing for Christmas, we miss the point of Christmas.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggested that Christmas is the moment we measure all time against. Everything that happened prior is before Christ and everything that happens subsequently is after him. At Christmas, "we are living in the eternal now of God's coming among us. His name is Emmanuel - the God who is with us - who is made out the same stuff we are and who is made out the same stuff God is and who will not let either of us go."

Maybe that's what all our rituals and traditions are about. Maybe it's our attempt to create at least a Kodak moment of what our lives should be like once God has been born into them.

As a child I remember eating Christmas dinner with family friends, or maybe I should say a big family of friends. It was a family also named Brown, only they were populated with eight children, and they lived in this grand Victorian brick house on the main street of town.

But with eight children, the atmosphere inside was anything but Victorian. No, it was loud, always loud. I don't think they could ever sing Silent Night with a straight face. Seldom would ten minutes pass without at least two of the siblings finding something to argue about. And so, throughout that Christmas day I saw an exasperated mother frowning at her children saying things like, "Don't talk like that on Christmas Day." "Be nice to your brother, it's Christmas." "Can't we have one day without arguing?"

Like so many of us, she became so anxious about creating the perfect Christmas family portrait that, in all honesty, was far from the truth of life. Maybe, we think, if we try a little harder, this will be the Christmas that we get it right.

Do you recall the idyllic calendar art of Currier and Ives depicting perfect Christmas celebrations, the kind we all strive for but never quite meet?

If the gravy is not spilled, a few tears inevitably are as old family wounds open. Or maybe someone's missing from the table, their absence creating a huge whole in everyone's heart.

Truth be told, while we enjoy many holiday traditions and find ourselves stressed out by others, we are never able to create the perfect Kodak moment of what our lives should be like once God has been born into them.

But, in the end, that is not the point of Christmas. The message of the manger is that God will be where God will be and our half-hearted attempts at holiday holiness will not speed or impede him. The amazing grace of the holiday is that God finds us and joins us where we are, even when our lives don't quite match the Christmas cards we mail out.

The point of Christmas is not about cleaning up our family portrait to meet heaven's standard. No, the point of Christmas is that

God came down to meet us where we are and how we are - in spite of all our limitations and sin; in spite of all our quirks, hang-ups, idiosyncrasies, and faults. "For God so loved the world..."

It's amazing when you think about it. God chooses to reveal God self to the world as one who is incomparably vulnerable. Many here remember that feeling of total inadequacy when you had your first child. That first time someone placed that child in my arms I was so afraid that I would break it.

Do you remember when you were young and received that special gift for which you had longed? You were so excited. You wanted to take it to school to show off to everyone. And what did your parents say? "Are you sure you want to do that? That may not be a good idea." You see, every parent knows that every class at school has some goober who is always grabbing carelessly for anything that is new and shiny, and you can't stand the thought of the look on your child's face when that special treasure is broken.

We have all known the dis-ease of putting something we cherish in the hands of another. Maybe it's a car or a guitar or a new pair of

glasses. Come on, you know how you feel when someone asks, “Let me try those on.”

Can you imagine then, a God who chooses to reveal his love for us in the form of a vulnerable infant? “Here is my love for you. Take care of it.” I can just hear the heavenly host stopping in the middle of their angel songs and asking, “Are you sure you want to do that.” The truth is that we have never done a very good job with the gift we celebrate this night. The people in his hometown rejected it. The disciples never really understood it. And the religious people wanted to get rid of it. In our own lives we have so often ignored it or been utterly confused by it. And yet, the gift still comes.

The point of Christmas is not about cleaning up our family portrait to meet heaven’s standard. No, the point of Christmas is that God came down to meet us where we are and how we are - in spite of all our limitations and sin; in spite of all our quirks, hang-ups, idiosyncrasies, and faults; in spite of the way throughout history we have fumbled his love. “For God so loved the world...” Even in the blurry holiday photo, grace can be discerned.

So, let us celebrate, let us revel in our traditions, not to paint a picture that never was, but to rejoice in a love that evermore shall be.

Jesus Christ is born today. Glory to God in the highest. Amen.