Christmas at night, 2020

St. Mary’s in Riverside

While I am usually a bit behind on things technological

During this past year I have figured out pandora,

The free music streaming app,

And have built up quite a library of preferred stations

From Bernstein, to Bach, to the Beatles

With a touch of Lady Gaga for good measure.

Of course, I have multiple holiday stations on there as well

And very often I simply shuffle all the stations

Which means that while running to the store in July

Or raking the leaves in October

Christmas songs accompany my work or travel.

This seems perfectly natural to me

As I have consistently taught and preached over the years

That the gift of incarnation is not seasonal

And while we give special emphasis to this enduring mystery

During the Christmas season

The grace of birthing God into the world

Is not hermetically sealed in December

But must illuminate every season.

At the same time, I try not to communicate to others

That I am completely mad

And so, when Jingle Bells is blasting away

On the car radio in August and I come to a stop light

I do roll up the car windows

Which reduces the number of odd glances coming my way.

While the random holiday tune does brighten my day

And give me theological pause

They also are a source of some vexation even sadness.

Song after upbeat song proclaims this to be

The most wonderful time of the year

A time of magic and joy and gifts and mirth.

And while there are assuredly some wistful tunes

And many nostalgic ones

Few if any speak to the reality of many people’s lives

Especially during this pandemic Christmas.

I am of an age where I can remember parental stories

Of Christmases during a world war,

A time of separation and deep anxiety.

Stories that strike me as particularly apropos

in these times of different but equally challenging

social and personal crises.

One might be inclined to believe

That Christmas worship

Is a welcome moment of spiritual escape

From the economic, political and health challenges

That currently plague our country and our world.

There is certainly evidence of that happening

In other segments of our muted festivities,

With dramatic increases in sales of household decorations,

Christmas tree lots emptying out in record time,

And a run on champagne and cheaper forms of bubbly.

As the song rightly notes, people “need a little Christmas,”

some happy distraction from this unwelcomed abnormality

That we are currently living through.

But while Christian worship,

And particularly a beloved liturgy like the one

Unfolding before us tonight,

Does provide a momentary respite

from the craziness that surrounds

and sometimes engulfs us

it is pointedly not about escape but renewal,

not about avoidance but mission,

not about retreat but true rebirth.

Such is apparent in the familiar texts we proclaim

Throughout this night and into tomorrow.

Prophets announcing light and liberation and hope

To a people living in darkness, oppression and desolation,

Tales of a birth touched by scandal

A challenging journey in the final days of pregnancy

apparent inhospitality for the expectant couple,

And then a humble birth marked with omens

Of anticipated suffering before any future glory.

What is revealed here is more than nativity

More than historical documentation of a pivotal birth,

But holy solace, even sacred empathy

for us who today experience our own forms of darkness

Our own shades of desolation.

When we look closely at the gospel texts that unfold before us,

We discover a child is placed in a manger, a feeding trough

A harbinger that Jesus would offer his life

As nourishment for others.

That manger is often imagined as constructed from wood,

And medieval folk tales suggested

that such a trough for animals

Would have enough wood to construct

A fair size cross

One large enough for a sacred task on Calvary.

The first worshippers were shepherds

Not the scrubbed and coifed versions

That populate our own nativity scenes

But ruffians … tough guys living on the land

Equivalent to 1st century Palestinian cowboys

Whose worship signals Jesus own ministry

Of reconciliation and inclusion

To those living on the margins.

And the last visitors Luke records are the 3 wise men

Who bring gifts that signal Jesus divinity - gold

his priestly role - incense

But also gifts myrrh used for anointing the dead -

Anticipating the salvific death of this new born.

Recovering the true spirit of the season

Entering into an authentic Christmas spirituality,

As most of you know,

Is not about jingle bells and jolliness

Or a fleeting good cheer that quickly evaporates in the new year.

Rather, it is about crafting deep joy

About building a sustainable peace

About a giftedness that pours itself out for others

No matter what the cost.

There is a true story that captures some of this rich revelation

Written by Nancy Gavin in 1982

And published as the winner of a

“My most moving Holiday Tradition” contest.[[1]](#endnote-1)

She writes: It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas--oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it--overspending... the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma---the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.

Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears.

It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat.

Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." Mike loved kids - all kids - and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition--one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before

Christmas, and on and on.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents.

As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there.

You see, we lost Mike last year due to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more.

Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing to take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.

On this incarnational feast

on this dawning of a new creation

we recall that we too received a gift on a tree:

the son of God ... once born in a manger

all too soon sacrificed on the jib of a tree

that we might know the love of a deity

not only willing to enter deeply into the mess of creation

but to give the most precious gift of all:

his own life that we might have life eternal.

Touched by a muted joy this season

Equally mindful of the radiance of the crèche

and the reverence of the cross

we embrace an adult Christ this Christmas

who invites us to a mature Christianity

a Christianity that not only allows us to pray

but more importantly cajoles us

to live these ancient words:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace

where there is hatred let me sow love

where there is injury, pardon

where there is doubt, faith

where there is despair, hope

where there is darkness, light

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master

grant that I might not so much seek to be consoled

as to console

to be understood, as to understand

to be loved, as to love

For it is in giving that we receive

it is pardoning that we are pardoned

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life

through Christ our Lord.

1. https://www.womansday.com/life/real-women/a4472/for-the-man-who-hated-christmas-100079/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)