

After the Celebration

Isaiah 63: 7-9; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-18; Psalm 148; 12-30-07

A few days before Christmas, when I was picking up a few things at the grocery store, a young woman pushing a loaded cart in front of her said, to no one in particular, "I am just so tired." And, a few days later a young mother told me that when her children asked her what she wanted for Christmas her response had been, "December 26th."

Both of these women were wishing the celebration of Christmas and the craziness that surrounded it would just go away. All they wanted to do was survive and get it over with.

In this season, that should be one of light and love and joy, I find this terribly sad. We have imposed upon ourselves such a picture of perfection for this holiday that it has grown far beyond a simple manger scene promoting peace and goodwill. I am sure there were many snappy exchanges in many households before December 25th and even on that day. We try to do too much from planning one huge meal after another to trying to find the right present for someone special, hoping we will receive something of an equal nature in return. And, when we are at our wit's end, everything seems to come apart and everything gets out of balance.

I remember well the years of entertaining my in-laws Christmas Eve and my family Christmas Day. While there was great joy in having everyone together, there was also great stress. I remember the cleaning and the decorating and the cooking and the delicate balance maintained to ensure my guests were well received and that they had a pleasant experience. It was exhausting. Now I revel in the freedom of just putting lights on my little Christmas tree and nothing else if I so choose. No wonder many can't wait for the time after the celebration, a time when we believe everything will return to normal and all will be well.

What we do not seem to remember is that often by some of our actions and reactions, we have put a little dent in the time of celebration, one that will stay with us and color our future Christmases for a long time to come. When we become aware of this and our roles in it, we can move to make things better for the years that follow--by shifting the emphasis from one that makes our lives stressful to one that helps us find peace.

As our story goes on after the birth of Jesus we find his family facing some stress of its own. After the angels and shepherds came, and after the wise men found the child and his mother, when he might have been as old as two years, instead of being able to settle down, the family members found themselves to be refugees fleeing into Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. After Herod died, the family returned to Nazareth where life seems to have taken on a normal pattern. There are some "infancy narratives," some of which are very sensational, that tell about Jesus' early years but we do not know much about him until he resurfaces at the age of 12 in the temple. After that he is absent again until he appears at the beginning of his ministry at the age of 30. No one knows just where he was or what he was doing during those missing years.

Long after his birth and even after his death, people began to write down just what they knew of him. While two of our gospels tell us about his birth, Matthew and Luke,

the two others make no mention of it preferring to focus on his ministry and his teachings. As beautiful as the birth narratives are, the true message that comes from his life story lies in what he sought to teach us that would help us live lives that are rich and fulfilling and that draw us closer to God.

The little Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus was one of us. He was human and he knew what it was we have to struggle with in life. But he also understood how to handle life with intelligence, kindness, love and mercy. These are the essential lessons he left for us. This is the pathway he encouraged us to follow.

I hope for us, this year, that as we take down the decorations in our homes and pack them away for another year, we can do it with thoughtfulness and mindfulness. We can reflect on the ornaments we have on the tree and their significance for us. Many have been collected over the years, crafted by little hands and treasured by us. Many have stories of their own and have come as gifts from others. As we think about those bright decorations we should recall the people and times that they represent. And we should take a little time to think about the people near to us, and those who are far away, who mean so much to us. Our faith is one of relationships—with one another and with God. The time of celebration may be over but the time of reflection on our need of one another should go on.

Then when we get to taking off those lights, our minds should think about the light of the world that came to help us find the way. Jesus always shows us the doors that we need to go through to have successful rewarding lives. It is up to us to take the responsibility to open those doors into new areas and dimensions of life. There is always more for us. Always. We need only open our eyes that we may see.

As we enter 2008 and ponder whether to make New Year's resolutions or not, let's hope and pray for a year in which our world begins to work its way out of the complex mess it is in to less troubled and stressful times. Let's hope that those who lead us look to people of wisdom and goodwill and discover the common goals we all have as humans. Let's hope that we begin to discover the intelligence, kindness, love and mercy that are within us and that we begin to reveal more fully these qualities of God to all we encounter. Amen