

Christmas for a Real World

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I ended last week's column by noting that there are many different religious festivals of light at this time of year. I delight in knowing that Christians are not the only ones celebrating, but that there are diverse celebrations at this time of year. Indeed, as I noted in my very brief historical overview of where many of the Christmas traditions we treasure come from, much of what we do—trimming the tree, decorating houses, giving gifts, and feasting—have nothing to do with a Christian celebration of the birth of the Christ Child.

That's not a judgment. It's simply a statement of fact. I'm not a Grinch; at least, I try not to be. I love it all: the lights, the feasting, the decorating, the gifts and thinking about those special people for whom I buy gifts. I love smiling at people in the stores and on the streets and getting a smile back. I love wishing them Happy Holidays! We may all be busy and tired ... but there is an undercurrent of good will underneath it all.

Today, however, I want to focus on the Christian celebration of Christmas. For followers of Jesus, it's not primarily about family values or people getting together or even about celebrating a festival of joy.

For us, Christmas is about God's love crashing into our world in the form of an infant. For a moment, we dare to believe in the possibility of a world shining with the light of love and compassion. We hope that this world, dark as it may be, is not what God intended. God lights us with hope and joy so that we might commit ourselves to being beacons of light in the world and living with the same love and compassion.

Let me tell you a story. I've shared it before, but it's worth re-telling.

A grungy-looking young couple are hitchhiking on a lonely road. She looks to be about 15 or 16, and he is unshaven and disheveled. Maybe they're gypsies or street people or refugees. The young woman is very pregnant and in obvious distress; the young man holds her protectively as they trudge along the side of the road.

A long-haul trucker stops to pick them up. He's overweight, has a 4-day shadow on his face, and chomps on nuts and chips and other snacks as he drives. The young woman moans occasionally as the young man cradles her. The trucker is named Cioban, which means "shepherd" in Romanian. He looks at the young couple with some concern.

They pull into a rest stop at the side of the highway. The young man leads the girl to the washroom. Another truck pulls in. A hooker comes out to flirt with the younger truck driver, hoping for some business. The lights outside the washroom flicker and go out with a pop. Darkness envelopes the scene.

Something's going on ... but what? In the stillness of the night, we hear a baby's cry. Cioban peers in through the open door of the washroom, and his face is wreathed in a miraculous smile as he sees the young woman holding her newborn baby to her chest. He takes out his phone and snaps pictures. The other truck driver and hooker come in, staring in wonder at what has happened. The hooker covers the baby and shivering young mother with her warm parka.

They set up a small camp outside the washroom facility around a small fire pit. A couple of cops stop to check things out; Cioban shows them his phone with a goofy smile on his face, "It's a boy! It's a boy!" The lights on the washroom facility flicker on again.

That story is told in a beautiful video called "Real Christmas," prepared by the Reformed Church in Hungary and available online (www.theboy.eu). I encourage you not only to watch the short video, but to check further on the website for a series of interactive features.

The heart of the story is found in one of those interactive features, which shows the wall of the bathroom marked with graffiti: “‘Wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.’ He shows himself in a simple place free from pathos and romance. If God is present, even a restroom can be a church.”

There’s the heart of a Christian understanding. This story is meant not only for this time of year, but for our whole lives. When God is present, all of life is holy.

In this understanding, being a Christian does not mean that we are to become good people, or holy people, or moral people. To be a Christian is to become someone who is learning to see God in the ordinary moments of our days. To see God in homeless people. To know God embraces members of the LGBTQ community. To recognize God in the vacant eyes of those who are addicted. To discern God at work in every moment and movement of promote justice and peace, reconciliation, and hope. To see God at work all around us.

It also means to see that some moments and movements function as opponents of God’s movement towards justice and compassion ... and then to do something about it.

Christmas is not just a momentary stop in the history of the world to gorge ourselves. Christmas is a reminder to learn to see, to be mindful, to discern God in the lives of “the least of these, my brothers and sisters.” (Matthew 25)

This is Christmas for a real world. This is the Christmas I wish you, whether you are a follower of Jesus or not. This kind of Christmas is a reminder that we can all join hands to make life more whole, more complete, more just, more compassionate, more peaceful, and more loving.