

Sermon for Christmas Eve 2022 5:30 p.m.
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico
December 24, 2022

Isaiah 62:6-12
Psalm 97
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

Once upon a time in New York City on Christmas Eve,
St. George's Episcopal Church prepared for the annual celebration.
It was always a glorious event, and included carols, instrumentalists, dancers and a living Nativity
– Joseph, Mary and the Child in swaddling clothes.
Like many churches in the city, the homeless often congregated
along the street seeking help from those who made their way to services.
That Christmas, as people arrived,
they were greeted by street people on the front steps:
A man and woman with a shopping cart and a bundle of rags.
Several people stopped to offer help
and some invited them in out of the cold.
They politely declined all offers.
Eventually, one of the ushers approached the Rector and said,
“We've got a problem.”
He had called the police to have the street people removed.
Police officers arrived and the people were asked to move across the street
where they wouldn't disturb the worshipers.
The service was beautifully conducted
to a standing-room-only gathering of the faithful.
Carol after carol was sung until finally
the climactic Nativity moment arrived:
Dancers dressed in angelic white entered from the narthex
to accompany the holy family down the center aisle.

As the holy family made their way down the center aisle
There were gasps of recognition.
The holy family was the homeless couple from the front steps.
The baby Jesus was the bundle of rags they had held in their arms.
As the angels escorted the holy family toward the altar the dancers wept,
as did most of the congregation as they sang the offertory hymn.

Amidst the ceremonies of Christmas and our family celebrations,
It easy to forget Jesus entered the world as a homeless child,
in utter humility and poverty.

Those were never my thoughts as a child at Christmas.

Back then, long ago,
seventy years in the past, when television was black and white;
Back then, before there were such things as cell phones or video games;
Back when, your grandparents bought things on lay away;
Your parents probably cashed in their Christmas Club to buy gifts,
because there were no such things as credit cards;
Back in those days, when folks actually saved their nickels, dimes
and even pennies.
Way back then – I remember Christmas Eve.

My mother would bundle up my sister, and brother and I
and my father would drive us to Mamma's and Pappa's,
the home of my mother's parents.
We'd make a beeline for the bottom drawer of the china cabinet
where the board games were kept and we'd play
– because they didn't have a television –
and wait for supper and then open presents.
Then after all the dishes were done and put away,
Mom and Dad would bundle us back up,
get us into the car,
and we'd yell a seemingly unending goodbye to my grandparents
as we drove off for the half hour drive to Mam and Pap's house.

That's the home of my father's parents,
where all the 4 families of the Raney clan gathered.
The adults played cards and we kids watched TV until bedtime.
In that house, we didn't open presents until Christmas morning.
And bedtime was mandatory because if you did not go to sleep,
Santa would never come.
I remember one Christmas struggling to go to sleep –
I was so excited – then I heard sleigh bells,
and I squeezed my eyes shut
so Santa wouldn't be able to tell I was still awake.

Pap, my grandfather, would be the first up –
he was as much a kid as we were –
and shaking everyone out of bed
so we could gather round the living room to open presents.
Everyone in pajamas, and the youngest uncle passed out presents.
The wrapping paper and ribbons flew in all directions,
and by the end, nobody really knew who had given what to whom.

Christmas was about family.
There were no services at the church my folks attended.
Looking back, that practice probably had its roots in the Reformation.

After all, the birth of Jesus has been celebrated
from the early centuries of the church,

and the observances waxed and waned over the centuries. As the Reformation took hold in the 1600s in England, the Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas as a “Catholic invention” and brought their disdain for the holiday with them to America. In Massachusetts, folks were fined if they celebrated Christmas.

Christmas observances also had fallen away in England until the celebration was revived in 1843 by the publication of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

The popularity of *A Christmas Carol* transformed Christmas into a season of celebration and refocused the observance as a family-centered festival of generosity in Britain and the United States.

That story was nicely depicted in the movie *The Man Who Created Christmas* from a couple of years back. I highly recommend it.

Christmas remained a mostly religious and family celebration until the second world war. By the second Christmas of the war, separated from their families, those in the Armed Forces anticipated receiving packages from home.

Back in the States, Merchants realized that to be able to get packages to service men and women they needed to urge families to shop early. From that time, the merchandizing of Christmas became a reality.

The fall of that year, Bing Crosby recorded a song that captured the feelings of those serving overseas, *I'll be home for Christmas*. The song was sung as if by a soldier stationed overseas writing a letter to his family to tell them he will be home and to prepare for the holiday with “snow, and mistletoe and presents under the tree.” The song ends on a sad note, with the soldier saying, "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams".

The song became an instant hit among American service personnel and with their families at home. The song and the shopping intertwined to turn what had been a family and church observance to a secular celebration for people of all faiths and persuasions.

At least Christmas became a holiday devoted to kindness and gift giving, though more often than not,

it had little to do with the birth of a Middle Eastern child
in a ramshackle stable to a couple trying their best to pay their taxes.

We now work hard to remind folks of the reason for Christmas:
so long ago, so far away, and yet we must remember
the Most High Almighty chose to show forth God's love
by being born in poverty and shining forth in the face of a child.

We see that love in the face of every child born to us.
Perhaps we can remember and realize, Christmas comes every day.
If we can see the light of Christ in our children, we can remember we were children once and our
smiles reflected the unconditional love of God
Maybe then, just maybe,
We all can be nicer to each other all the days of the year.

I'll end with a Christmas prayer written by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Loving Father, Help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear
hearts.

May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children,
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

So I end this sermon with a blessing you each of you:
May the stars above give you pause as you travel to your homes tonight
To envision a world in which each child born
Is heralded by a star declaring God's blessing on their lives.

Amen.