

Christmas One, Dec 26, 2010

We have journeyed through the Season of Advent, a time of hope and expectation. We have arrived at Christmas, which for most of us in our culture is a time of celebration with family and friends and of giving and receiving gifts.

For many children, the time leading up to Christmas is literally one of hope and of expectation. They had some time ago submitted their Wish List, and began counting the days and hours for when their favorite toys and gifts would appear under the tree. In the sense of what Christmas is culturally, hopes and expectations have been met for many. Our credit cards may have taken a hit but we have been able to express love and appreciation for our loved ones and gotten for them that something special they have been longing for.

Sometimes you will hear parents and grandparents say that Christmas is really about the children, and what a joy it is to see the delight on their faces Christmas morning, as they open their packages and find their hoped for and expected gifts.

There is something very true and worthy about this aspect of Christmas and we should not disparage it as just overblown commercialism.

It is a frenzy of giving and receiving, all topped off with family gatherings around the table to share together in food and conversation.

We are all aware, though, that this excitingly warm event, placed at a time of year associated with shorter, darker and colder days, is mostly a reprieve, a bit of a break, an interlude, with feasting and festivity, before we enter the darkest and coldest days of the year.

Our stockings are full so that we might be well stocked up for the challenging days ahead.

Not far beneath the surface of our celebrations, we are aware of the real issues and concerns of life. Problems exist such as difficult marriages, addiction issues, illnesses, trouble in the workplace, struggling economies, a threatened environment and complex geopolitics. All are still there and soon enough will be back onto our plates demanding our attention and action.

We wish we could linger longer in this Christmas oasis but we will soon enough be nudged, or indeed, like the Holy Family in today's Gospel reading, forced into the reality that is difficult.

In the urgency and intensity of real life, we might be tempted to throw out, with the tree and the tinsel, the good news of Christmas. We might miss that it really is about addressing the problems beneath the surface. That in the Christmas story there is light to overcome the darkness and warmth to protect us from the cold.

Christmas is really a religious thing. It is a cultural thing too but its deepest truth is religious and spiritual.

When I was 7 or 8 years old, my mother asked me to climb up into the attic of our home and hand her down a box with the Christmas decorations. I hurried up there and with great haste and excitement handed down to my mother a box. That year, my Wish List included some neat toys and I was so excited with the possibility of finding these under the tree. And at this moment of climbing up into the attic, I was ecstatic that Christmas was now close enough that the decorations and tree could go up.

When I climbed down the ladder and reached where my mother was with the box, I was suddenly stopped in my tracks. My mother was looking into the box but no longer with her earlier

happy face. She was now sad and crying. The box I handed her was not the one with the Christmas decorations. It was a box that held the special belongings of my 5 year old brother, who had died tragically a few years prior.

My mother's excitement had turned to sorrow. The pain and loss of a child came rushing back to her. Guilt flooded me.

However, that year the seeds of the deeper religious and spiritual meaning of Christmas began to sprout in my mother and in me. We would come to understand that while Christmas was about happy and joyous celebrations, it was also about God, whose love could address the broken, dark and cold realities of life.

Christmas has in it a Word made flesh, as we heard in today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. It is a word that could speak directly to my mother, and, respectfully, to all who have suffered the loss of a loved one, that death is not the final word and that in the holy babe born to us that first Christmas, death is destroyed.

Today's scripture readings therefore, while seeming to rush us away from the tree and table of our celebrations, from the joyful good news of just a few hours ago, are actually addressing what is below the surface of our lives and therefore offer us gifts of eternal worth and value.

God has been born into time, into the muck and yuck of human life, with all the vulnerabilities and chances that come with being flesh and blood, but God is able to transcend humanity's condition and gift us with new life, a life now accompanied with the Holy, filling us with light and love and on a path toward a celebration from which we will not be rushed away.

The world has many Herods. The innocent still suffer. People still need to escape into another country to find security and safety. We live in a real world with real threats.

In dreams, God visited Joseph, told him to not be afraid, and to provide for the child who would provide for the world.

In this refugee family, God is at work bringing about the salvation of all the peoples of the earth.

This humble and powerless man is entrusted with the Holy. While monarchs and armies are raging about him, he carries the holy child from one place to another, all along bringing into fruition the incarnate life of God into the world. The power of light and love take hold and ultimately defeat the forces of hate and of fear, even that greatest of enemies, death itself.

The prophet Isaiah, standing amidst the ruins of his nation, nonetheless affirmed his faith in God and God's steadfast and faithful love:

⁷I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. Isaiah 63:7

And with the Psalmist we can say:

Psalm 148

¹Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in

the heights!

²Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

³Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

⁵Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.

⁶He established them forever and ever;”

As the season of Advent began, our rector said that the season invited us to set out on a spiritual journey. We would not know exactly how the journey would unfold, but that in all its twists and turns, we would discover Immanuel, God With Us.

The Season of Advent and the Season of Christmas are rich gifts the Church in her wisdom gives to us. They call to mind that we are on a journey and that God is the destination we are headed toward and indeed the companion along the way.

These seasons are blessed gifts that include hope, expectation and celebration. Included as well is the power of God, active in our lives, to transform and raise us up. To connect us to being made in God’s image and to know that the ultimate enemy of life is defeated. We can face whatever is before us, confident that the final word is with God and it is GOOD NEWS!!