

CHRISTMAS IS FOR ORDINARY DAYS

There's a fairly well-known Christmas poem written by Henry Van Dyke that's often pulled off the shelves and dusted off for the Sunday after Christmas. It's entitled, *Are You Willing?*

Are you willing . . .
 . . . to forget what you have done for other people, and to remember what other people have done for you;
 . . . to ignore what the world owes you, and to think what you owe the world;
 . . . to put your rights in the background, and your duties in the middle distance, and your chances to do a little more than your duty in the foreground;
 . . . to see that men and women are just as real as you are, and try to look behind their faces to their hearts, hungry for joy;
 . . . to own up to the fact that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life;
 . . . to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness?
Are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing . . .
 . . . to stoop down and consider the needs and desires of little children;
 . . . to remember the weakness and loneliness of people growing old;
 . . . to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough;
 . . . to [keep] in mind the things that other people have to bear in their hearts;
 . . . to try to understand what those who live in the same home with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you;
 . . . to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you;

. . . to make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open?

. . . Are you willing to do these things, even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing . . .

. . . to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world—stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death—

. . . and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem two thousand years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal Love?

Then you can keep Christmas.

And if you can keep it for a day, why not always? . . .

For many of us, even though there are still five more days of the season remaining, the end of the Christmas holiday is over, and has been for a while now. And perhaps you're thinking at this moment, just as a significant amount of people probably are, not, can I continue to keep Christmas but, "*Sayonara, Christmas! I'm glad it's finally over!*"

Call it the "Christmas letdown." After all the beautiful lights, uplifting carols and dazzling decorations we enjoyed during the Christmas season, now it's the season of crumpled wrapping paper, overstuffed recycle bins, and, if we haven't done so already, putting away the ornaments and adornments.

On this the sixth day after Christmas, we're still singing in church about the coming of Jesus into the world; but we're thinking about the coming of the MasterCard bill in January. Let's face it. Christmas is often draining; exhausting; taxing. Christmas is stressful. It's time to move on to the New Year, 2018, and to business as usual in the home, the office, school, and life in general.

Henry Van Dyke's poem, as touching and sentimental as it is, asks us to do something that I'm not sure many people have the energy or the inclination to do. If we can keep Christmas; if we can be peaceful, loving, generous and caring for that one day of the year, why not keep Christmas for the other 364?

Can't we make that our New Year's resolution—if you're into such things? Why not set as a goal for ourselves in 2018—right alongside the usual objectives of losing ten pounds, going to the gym at least three times a week, eating healthier, reading the Bible on a regular basis and deepening our prayer life—why don't we add to that list the goal of keeping Christmas every day?

If we can keep Christmas for one day, why not always?

I think we know why we can't. Because nobody can live like it's Christmas twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year. Christmas is wonderful, but part of the wonder and joy of Christmas is that the season takes us out of the ordinary, the routine and the expected. If

we kept Christmas every day and it became the routine of our lives, it wouldn't be as special as it now is.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, you know?

And besides, a never-ending Christmas means having to put on a never-ending facade of joy and happiness and good will towards everyone we meet that, unfortunately, just isn't sustainable in the real world. It takes a lot of work, a lot of energy, to do it.

And that's why, even though in one way we hate to give up Christmas, a part of us is glad and grateful that another December 25th has come and gone, and, after all the wrapping paper is collected, and we've had our umpteenth serving of turkey and fruitcake and made it through our annual awkward conversation with Aunt Mimi until next year, we're kind of looking forward to getting back to the usual, the routine and the expected.

So, it's fitting that this morning's Gospel reading from the lectionary is Luke's account of Mary, Joseph and their newborn child returning to their hometown of Nazareth. The holy family was going back to business as usual. After they heard angels singing, Mary's cousin Elizabeth singing, Mary herself singing, everybody singing about the strange and wonderful goings on that led up to Jesus' birth, Jesus' parents ran into old Simeon at the temple while they were there offering two turtledoves in thanks for their new baby. After that they went back home to resume their ordinary, not very exciting lives in the rinky dink village of Nazareth.

Let's be clear. Nazareth wasn't much of a place to go back to. It was a dusty little out-of-the-way sort of place. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" one of the disciples later asked when he first heard that it was Jesus hometown. Translation: no Messiah worth his salt would come from that place! God wouldn't allow it!

So, for Mary and Joseph, "Christmas" was over. The real world had come crashing down on them. The heavenly messengers God sent had gone away. Their singing that had once filled the air was over. I can imagine Mary and Joseph thinking, "Great! Just our luck! You can never get an angel when you really need one. They've disappeared on us now that we have a newborn son to raise, bills to pay, and religious obligations to keep."

All of this is to say, Christmas isn't just about warm and fuzzy feelings welling up inside us, or about miracles that astonish our imaginations and overwhelm us with their strangeness. No, I believe Christmas is mostly about keeping the faith, like Simeon and Anna did, during the long days and nights of their ordinary lives.

Christmas is about strengthening our prayer life and our Bible reading

habits and deepening our trust in God even without the presence of a manger crib, a brightly shining star or mysterious magi travelers bearing gifts, while our recollections of the Christmas miracle encourage us as we do what we ordinarily do and have been doing for most our lives now.

Christmas is about growing old while practicing the kind of quiet waiting and hoping and trusting in the Lord that Anna and Simeon did, as they continually hung out in the temple in faithful expectation that God would ultimately act and do what God had promised.

Christmas is about coming to church on the first Sunday after Christmas, like you've done this morning, even though you realize it's much more likely that you're going to hear a preacher talking than angel choirs singing.

No offense intended, *Singers and Stringers!*

Yes, today, six days after Christmas, the ordinary is beginning to return after having experienced the extraordinary, and everyday life is resuming. But the Gospel reading this morning declares to us, if we read between the lines, that that's exactly where God is with us today: in the midst of all the ordinary, everyday moments of our lives.

If we listen to it carefully enough, this morning's reading from Luke affirms that the same Emmanuel—God with us—who was present at the Nativity is still present in our lives here and now, while we're going to church and doing what we're supposed to do: obeying the rules; returning home after the holidays; vacuuming up the pine needles on the living room rug; dragging a de-ornamented tree to the curb; struggling to get back into the swing of things at work; doing the dishes and putting in a load of wash, snow blowing the driveway and shoveling the walkway.

On their way back to Nazareth, silently traveling down the road, I wonder if Mary and Joseph asked to themselves, "What does all this mean? And will this amazing Christmas experience go the way of other short-lived, momentary religious eruptions? In the midst of our everyday life back home in Nazareth, will all the splendor, joy and glory of our child's birth be swallowed up in the ordinary? Will there come a time when we look back wistfully and say, 'If only we were back in Bethlehem, experiencing the mystery and wonder of Jesus' birth again. Those were the days!'"

Imagine this post-Christmas scene. A few days after arriving home from Bethlehem, Mary is standing over her sink, washing baby bottles. After she's finished with that chore, a pile of dirty diapers await her. She looks out the window. It's a gray, end of December morning as the baby takes his morning nap. Joseph has returned to his carpenter shop and is working hard, the way he always has, to support his family—a family that has now grown by one.

All in all, it's a typical, ordinary, somewhat boring day back in Nazareth. Normal life has returned, and it seems, for all intents and purposes, as though nothing has really changed.

Everything is typical and routine. It's business as usual. Birth of Savior or no birth of Savior, there's work to be done, a child to be raised, and an uncertain future to get ready for.

But as Mary works, she's humming a tune. Is it a Christmas carol, a song from the angels she has suddenly remembered? No, it's an ancient song that has taken on a new meaning because of the events of the past few days. It's a tune she picked up from Simeon, the old man she had encountered at the temple when she and Joseph brought Jesus there to be dedicated to God.

The song intrudes into Mary's present, familiar life, reminding her of the divine promise that Christmas is for ordinary days, too, and the wonder and glory of it will continue long after Jesus' birth into the world.

Listen to these words, my friends. Perhaps this song of Simeon can become our own post-Christmas and pre-New Year melody:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, let your servant go in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of every nation: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

That song points to the future, my friends: to the ordinary days to come and the usual events of our lives, as that light of God's revelation Simeon sang about continues to shine in the world, through Christ's church and through us.

So this morning, may God dismiss us in peace, as well, so that we can live in the hope and promise of Christmas throughout our ordinary days. Amen.