

Rev. Kate Byrd
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The Meaning of Christmas

What does Christmas mean to you? Does it mean gathering with friends and loved ones? Does it mean a big ham on the dinner table, sides loaded with butter and spices, maybe even a jello mold, or hopefully a pie? Does it mean presents under the glimmering light of a pristinely trimmed tree, full of passed down ornaments, handmade keepsakes, and shimmering tinsel? Or does it mean memories of those who are no longer with us, a reminder of what we once had but no longer hold? Or maybe more so, does it mean arriving at the end of what feels like the longest month of the year, between the anxiety of making a list and checking twice and the rush of decking your halls to the nines, still finding yourself wholly unprepared by the 24th night. Whatever it may mean I think we can all agree, Christmas holds a lot!!! It holds the beauty of family traditions and nostalgia of childhood memories. It holds the anxiety of present exchanges and holiday feast preparations. And, it holds the hope of God's love coming to dwell among us in the form of peace and joy that creates the Spirit of Christmas.

Christmas holds A LOT, because it means SO MUCH! It changes everything. As it turns a small town, poor to middle class, betrothed (that is unmarried) couple into the mother and father of the Savior of our world. And, a meager feeding trough into a cradle, and a strangers living quarters into the nursery for the Son of God. It even turns some lowly, quite possibly disheveled, most certainly pungent, shepherds into the first apostles (messengers of the good news). Let's face it, over 2,000 years later this seemingly regular occurrence, that is a baby being born, is now a worldwide phenomena, mass produced, and celebrated throughout centuries, cultures, and all four hemispheres. And while we could argue that Christmas has become too commercialized (which I wouldn't disagree with) or even too secularized (which I won't touch), we can agree that its spirit is undeniably infused into our culture, its joy into our traditions, it's love into our gatherings, and maybe even its hope into our world.

So much today, I hear people talking about the fact that our world is more dangerous than ever. And, it has lead to an overall sense of fear and distrust. Distrust in our news outlets, our governments, even our neighbors. And, this has allowed us to become more isolated, and insular, leading to our loneliness epidemic, now recognized by our surgeon general as a nationwide crisis. Because loneliness has a significant and highly negative effect on our overall health and even our mortality rates. Most of all what I notice though is that all around there seems to be a collective feeling of hopelessness in the air. Which, I fear if we are not careful could lay waste to our nation and world. Keeping us from actually living into the good news that is truly all around us, being born, brought up, and raised just like the Christ Child over 2,000 years ago. And, just like Jesus' birth, this good news all around us, could be so easily missed, as it happens in the most mundane of spaces, in the most ordinary occurrences, everyday all over the world.

A little over a month ago my husband, Drew, shared a heartwarming story with me. One he witnessed while out with our daughter, Libbie, for lunch (so this story in no way will show my

bias for our daughter, or allow me to brag on her in any way). As Libbie and Drew entered their favorite dining establishment (Zack's Chargrill) Libbie noticed two gentlemen sitting near the entrance, one of whom was in a wheelchair, and the other who was his twin brother. As Drew went to order, Libbie told him she wanted to go make a new friend. No sooner did she sit down with the two gentlemen and strike up a conversation, which they obliged to join in on. When Drew finally came back with their food, Libbie asked if they could eat lunch with her new friends, to which her new friends and Drew (hesitantly) of course said yes. It's such a small thing eating lunch with someone, but such a huge move, to sit down and share a meal with complete strangers. And, I have to tell you, now Libbie always wants to go to Zack's not just for their butter soaked grilled cheese and out of this world french fries, but to see her friends, to hug their necks, and to share a meal.

Christmas holds a lot because it is a lot! It's a lot of joy, it's a lot of hope, it's a lot of peace, and it's a lot of love. Because it is GOD the ALMIGHTY, coming down to live and move, to grow and struggle, to witness and take part in the human condition, on this night in the most intimate of ways, through a human birth, to an expectant mother and father, in a lowly stable, in a small town, in a seemingly insignificant manner, if we aren't paying attention that is. I can't deny that there is certainly reason for fear and distrust in a world fraught with war and violence. AT the same time I believe that there are ordinary miracles taking place within mundane spaces everyday all around us that speak to what incarnation truly means, which is the Divine being born within us, and dwelling amongst us. And, this is why Christmas, for me, is such a big deal (even more than the delectable treats, delightful decorations, and desirable presents under the tree), because it is a beautiful reminder and an invitation to lean into ALL the ways God is calling us like the shepherds to share this good news for all people. Or like the angels exclaiming, do not be afraid. Or even like Mary treasuring all these things, and pondering them in our hearts. Maybe even, like Libbie, it means reaching out to those around us to share the joy, or like Drew to witness the love. Whatever Christmas means to you, I hope you will embrace its spirit and keep an eye out for its miracles, not only today, but tomorrow, and the next!

Amen.