

Nativity of the Lord / Mass at Dawn

Is 62:11-12

Ps 97:1, 6, 11-12

Titus 3:4-7

Lk 2:15-20

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There are two types of Christmas activities: ones that become traditions, and others you try only once. Most of us have our favorite traditional foods, like turkey, chocolate chips, and egg nog. There are special decorations we bring out of storage, television shows and movies we look forward to, a schedule of customary visits to neighbors, friends, and family, and, of course, all those special Christmas songs. We know which friend makes the best cookies, and we are sure to visit her. We know who puts up the most elaborate lights, and we make it a point to drive by his house. We know where good Christmas trees can be bought, and we get them early in the season. These are some of the traditions we repeat year after year. Christmas wouldn't feel right without them.

On the other hand, there are some holiday experiments you only attempt once, and then you never want to try them again. For most of us, shopping on Christmas Eve is a one-time experiment. The parking lot alone is enough to make you lose your religion; and if you step inside the mall, you soon abandon all hope of a happy Christmas. You try to cut down your own Christmas tree - once. You try to get into the post office on Christmas Eve - once. And if you are a husband, you give your wife the gift of a frying pan *once*. My father did this, and somehow lived to tell the tale. He intended it as a joke. And my mother did have a great sense of humor. But on that Christmas morning, the look on her face said it all. We thought she was considering divorce. In fact, she was contemplating murder. After that, we all agreed on a new Christmas tradition: no joke gifts.

And if you are wise, you give your two-year-old nephew a drum for Christmas only once. This time I was the culprit. As I walked through the toy store, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to get my nephew, Matthew, a drum. I loved drums when I was a child. What young boy doesn't love a drum? The answer, of course, is that every boy loves a drum. But the parents of young boys are less enthusiastic. On this particular Christmas, my nephew's delighted face was in stark contrast to the face of my sister, who, in what I guess is a family tradition, was clearly giving serious thoughts to killing me. My brother-in-law offered to block her while I escaped out the back, but the door was locked and my sister caught me and...

Well, I still wince when I hear about "twelve drummers drumming."

Along with the one-time experiments and the time-tested traditions, there is another class of Christmas observance: possibilities we haven't yet tried. Traditions are wonderful, but one of the biggest mistakes we can make is to try to freeze the holidays, to try to recreate everything exactly as it was at some past celebration. Traditions help us enter into the spirit of Christmas, but the spirit of Christmas also seeks to enter into us. Today, God did something for the first time, something absolutely new. And so Christmas always asks us, "What will you do new this year?"

Today we celebrate so many things that never happened before. No one dreamed God

would become one of us, but He did. No one imagined that a virgin would conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus, but Mary did. No one expected glorious angels and lowly shepherds would come together, but they did. No one could have made up a story about the Messiah in a manger, yet there he lay. No one counted on the light of salvation bursting forth from Bethlehem, yet there it shone. At Christmas, God does new things, dimly hinted by the prophets and now wondrous in our eyes. So while we observe all the customs of the season, we should act like God and do something new.

This year, can we add the reading of Scripture to our Christmas traditions? Can we take some part of this day and open the Bible and let the Word of God be heard in our homes?

This year, can we start to make generosity to the poor a new holiday custom? Not as an aside, or an accident, or an afterthought, but as an intention, a plan, a mission? In the twelve days of Christmas that lie before us, will anyone hungry and cold benefit from our celebration of Christmas?

Will this year find us visiting the cemetery, laying flowers upon the graves of those delivered from death by the coming of Christ? Can we extend our celebration of this season to include the dead?

Will this year and next find us doing what God wants most, and what we, perhaps, have done least - forgiving as we have been forgiven, showing mercy as mercy was poured out of heaven and into a stable? We all have someone who needs our peace: a brother or sister with whom we are locked in a long-running fight; the parent, or the child, with whom we have repeatedly exchanged harsh words; the friend who has constantly disappointed us; the husband or wife who has often let us down. Whether by phone or foot, email or letter, let us go to them, as Mary went to Elizabeth, as the angels came to earth, as the shepherds hastened to Bethlehem, as the magi journeyed to the holy land, as God Himself came to earth.

Let us bear in mind the words St. Paul gives us on this holy day: "God our savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done, but because of his mercy..." God was not born among us because we deserved His mercy, but because we needed His mercy. This day does not exist because we are good, but because we are sinners, and because God is Love. And so, at this time of year, to forgive someone who has trespassed against us it is to do nothing less than imitate God. The way a nativity scene replicates that first Bethlehem, the way the words of Scripture echo that holy night, the way the simplest Christmas present is a small mirror of the grace of God, so a word of forgiveness brings forth Christ once more, lets the Son of God be born anew. That is a tradition worth starting today.