

Christmas in America: the Crucible of Freedom

by Joseph Healy

Christmas in America... Is it Santa Claus and toys for little girls and boys, and mistletoe and holly and all that? Don't forget the eggnog and the gingerbread cookies and tasty treats and dinner feasts! Or perhaps it is the comfort and security of home and loved ones, blazing hearth and yuletide carols, frosted windows and snow-covered landscapes?

Let's investigate...

The Acts

It was early December, 1620, when a rather unseemly group of pioneers anchored at Cape Cod Bay, sea-weary, unprepared for a frozen welcome to a strange land. They were religious dissenters, bucking the ecclesiastical authority of the Church of England, and refusing to acknowledge the King of England as head of the Church. According to them, Jesus Christ alone could make that claim. So after enduring much persecution at the hands of church and state authorities and much hardship in their daily rigor to live in the midst of 17th Century England and Holland, they left for America to start from scratch.

Their first Christmas in America they enjoyed freezing hands (cold enough to make difficult holding an axe with which they had to chop wood to erect a common house for shelter), meager rations, general sickness including scurvy, fever, consumption, and pneumonia. Six of them died in December. In January, many lay sick in the common house when the roof caught fire and burned. The building was spared, but much of their needed clothing was consumed. Eight more died that month. In February, they were dying at a rate of 2, sometimes 3, per day; and at one point there remained only 5 men well enough to care for all the sick, and attend to the other duties as well--cleaning, cooking, chopping wood, and manning the palisade. Seventeen more died. In all that winter 47 died--early half their original number. But they didn't knuckle under and they didn't go back!

Such was the first Christmas of our fore bearers in America (the next year would test them severely once again when they would be reduced to a ration of 5 kernels of corn per day), and such was the resolve of those who laid the foundation of American liberty. Their aim was that "the churches of God revert to their ancient purity and recover their

primitive order, liberty, and beauty." (William Bradford, *Of Plimouth Plantation*) And in this simplicity of devotion to the Savior--preaching, teaching, singing, and free praying--they were faithful, even in their distress. For to them the Christ of Bethlehem was a very real Savior, for Whom they would risk everything, including their lives, and upon Whom they would depend for everything, including their survival. And in this He was faithful to provide!

The General sat atop his grey horse and watched the somber procession of soldiers file past him. It was cold and dismal, and the prospects for the winter ahead of them none could have borne had they known. In six days it would be Christmas at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1777. There they would set up their winter quarters. There they would be tested in the *crucible of freedom*.

What was left of the American army trod quietly, without complaint, through the ice and snow, leaving a bloody path behind them from their frozen feet wrapped with strips of cloth for footwear; some were just barefoot. They were without food, without clothing, without beds, without supplies, and for every external reason without hope. Their eventual defeat seemed all but inevitable. Their chance of surviving the onslaught of the might of Great Britain seemed at that moment very remote indeed. The cold was already so severe that the rivers had frozen over. The snowdrifts were high, and they got higher. They chopped and burned wood, huddled in their crude huts which they assembled over the month of December and into January, and tried to thaw their frozen limbs. They bunked 12 men per hut, which were Smokey, dark, and drafty; but it was the best they could do with the resources available to them. They ate "fire-cake" meal after meal (wheat or corn-meal mixed with water, baked on a stone slab over the fire), only occasionally getting a piece of salt park or dried fish when a wagon with supplies managed to get through. Sickness set in: influenza, smallpox, typhus, and exposure took a toll of one of every four men. Death, starvation, nakedness, and frostbite were overwhelming what remained of the whole American army. And yet withal they did not leave, they did not mutiny, they did not surrender, and they bore their sufferings with remarkable patience.

Washington wrote,

"No history now extant can furnish an instance of an army's suffering such uncommon hardships as ours has done and bearing them with the same patience and fortitude. To see men without clothes to cover their nakedness, without blankets to lie on, without shoes (for the want of

which their marches might be traced by the blood from their feet)...and submitting without murmur, is proof of a patience and obedience which in my opinion can scarce be paralleled."

But it even got worse. In February he wrote,

"I am now convinced beyond a doubt that unless some great and capital change suddenly take place...this army must inevitably be reduced to one or the other of these three things: starve, dissolve or disperse, in order to obtain subsistence."

One civilian eye-witness, John Joseph Stoudt, wrote in his diary,

"For some days there has been little less than a famine in the camp...Naked and starving as they are, we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery, that they have not been excited ere this by their suffering, to a general mutiny and dispersion. Indeed, the distress of this army for want of provisions is perhaps beyond anything you can conceive..."

But somehow, by Providence they survived. And Washington was on his knees amid the snow and the trees in fervent supplication to an unseen Being whom he claimed presided over the destinies of nations. Where was He now? These men, a couple of years earlier, full of spunk and spit, boldly proclaimed they would have "No king but king Jesus!" Now they sat freezing, starving, exhausted, all but broken for Christmas in America, Valley Forge, 1777. There was a king seeking their subjugation. How comfortable it would be to become his subjects once again! But like the magi long ago who bowed low and worshipped the Babe born in a stable in Bethlehem, these men bowed and paid homage to the same Savior, preferring the reproach of Christ to the treasures of Egypt. Those ancient travelers from the East defied Herod, the king from below, and his fury, to pay heed to a King from above. Those Americans stood fast and retained their cry, "No king but king Jesus," and incurred the wrath of earthly kings. It was not idly that the men of Marlborough, Massachusetts declared,

"Death is more eligible than slavery. A free-born people are not required by the religion of Jesus Christ to submit to tyranny, but may make use of such power as God has given them to recover and support their laws and liberties...[we] implore the Ruler above the skies that He would make bare His arm in defense of His church and people, and let Israel go."

Isaac Potts, a Pennsylvania Quaker, resided near the Valley Forge encampment. As a pacifist, and thus a non-combatant, he was a Christian not inclined to favor either side; yet he permitted General Washington to use his home for a headquarters. One day he saw the General's horse tethered to a tree in the nearby woods. As he quietly edged closer he observed and overheard the General in prayer amongst the trees. Slipping away unnoticed, he ran home to his wife and reported, "If George Washington be not a Christian I am greatly deceived; and I shall be more greatly deceived if God do not by him effect a great deliverance for America!"

As Spring ebbed closer, and provisions continued to trickle in, the surviving soldiery gradually gained strength. Washington brought in a Prussian Captain, one Baron Von Steuben, an experienced military drillmaster with extensive combat experience. He proceeded to drill, train, and forge this young rag-tag army into a disciplined fighting force. Through *the Crucible of Freedom* came out an army forged of steel. As they emerged from this fiery ordeal with fresh hope, hardened resolve, and a bounce in their step, new life was infused into the American Cause.

The slaves of a plantation in the Carolina countryside were granted a brief respite from their endless toil for Christmas, though they were permitted to know little about the One for whom the day existed, other than He was Master of masters and the central figure of a religion that taught, "Slaves, be obedient to your masters." They huddled in their shack around the fireplace to keep warm and share their moment of relief and perhaps a meal a degree above normal, and rest. Oh, rest!--a pleasure seldom enjoyed. But some were too excited to rest. Neither the cold nor the whippings with which they were threatened could keep them from stealing away to the woods to meet with other slaves; there they would sing, pray, and learn of a Savior who had come for the poor, the downtrodden, the prisoners, and the slaves--and the poor sinners and meek souls who saw their need. It is somehow difficult for the rich and the well-born sinner to see himself or herself as a sinner at all. But these were the meek and the suffering; and nothing for them was easier than seeing they were sinners who needed a loving Savior who could himself relate to their poverty, who suffered unjustly at the hands of oppressive authorities, but who would lead them to freedom, to joy, and to everlasting life. There may have even been one in their midst who, against the common practices of slaveholders, somehow had managed to learn to read. It may have been one of the master's daughters (and there are recorded accounts of this) who, being a true believer, and overcome with compassion for the lot of the slaves, secretly taught one of them to read, and may have even supplied him with a Bible.

The gatherers sat spellbound as the literate one read to them of the Lord Jesus Christ, born in a Bethlehem stable amidst brute beasts; whose only visitors were "certain poor shepherds" who received an angelic invitation, and a group eccentric star-gazers from far away lands. But this Baby born into obscurity would be the same One who would preach the gospel of salvation to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, bind up the broken-hearted, set free those who are downtrodden--to proclaim the favorable year of Jehovah. He is the God who hears the cry of the unfortunate and contrite, for "Jehovah is near to the broken-hearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit," as they read in the psalms. Distortions of man-made religion and hypocrisy notwithstanding, this One's birth is worthy of a celebration, and this One's message worthy of joyful acceptance—so worthy, these slaves risked beatings to draw near to Him.

The Testimony

And so here we have another Christmas in America--an America that will have no king, but Christ; an America where there be no nobility, but the nobility of the righteous, by the recognition of their good works and uprightness of their character (these would be selected by the people as their representatives); an America where all men are created equal, possessing inalienable rights--life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; an America where all men will be judged equally before the laws, and have the protections of trial by jury and many others to safeguard their sacred rights given them by God; an America where a man can work to prosper himself and care for his own and keep the fruits of his labor; an America abounding with charity, goodwill, and benevolence one towards his neighbor. These are the results of *Christmas in America*. As Noah Webster would observe,

"The religion which has introduced civil liberty is the religion of Christ and His Apostles... to this we owe our free constitutions of government."

And as Thomas Jefferson would exclaim,

"My God! How little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy!"

And John Adams, quite the visionary, would see what not many others could see. Writing to his wife concerning the birth of the nation, he said,

"It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore.

You will think me transported with enthusiasm, but I am not. I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure that it will cost to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these states. Yet through all the gloom I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory. I can see that the end is worth all the means!"

This is the faith of our fathers, and this is the true soul of America. The numerous Christmas's of suffering by our forbearers have laid the foundation for the liberties we possess and have paid the price for the blessings we enjoy. It began 2000 years ago when the Savior born in a Bethlehem stable would some 30 years later hang on a cross to "bear the sins of many," and rise again from the dead. The suffering and the sacrifice yielded life and liberty. The Pilgrims at Plymouth, Washington and his men at Valley Forge, to the true brethren amongst the African slaves in the face of oppression from the false and corrupted brethren holding to an outward form of religion that could only boast to have usurped the name Christian: these paid the price. And shall we be their worthy heirs? John Quincy Adams once spoke to futurity, that is, to us:

Posterity--you will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it.

George Washington knelt at Valley Forge, no doubt in great anguish, and cried for deliverance, a very real deliverance, from death, from slavery, from starvation. Yet his admonition to his men remained to put away wickedness, to practice the Christian virtues, to dutifully attend to the divine services:

To the distinguished character of a patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of a christian. How can we expect the blessings of heaven upon our arms if we offend the God of heaven by our conduct?

He saw the works of God on behalf of his country. As Benjamin Franklin (who modern detractors and stone-throwers have claimed was not a Christian himself) would remind his fellow delegates years later,

"In the beginning of our contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for the Divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor... And have we now forgotten this powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance?"

But it was Washington, more than any other, who by his personal ordeal could remind his countrymen,

"No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which we have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency."

The Exhortation

This is our American history and this is the faith of our fathers: faith in the God of the Bible, and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind--not the religion of formalism and ritual, of lavish structures and gilded trimmings, of affluence and avarice, of pompous ecclesiastical establishments and regimented ignorance, but the pure and undefiled Christianity of heart-felt devotion, of truth, honor, courage, and sincere acts of charity toward one's fellow man. The Supreme Court of the United States did a careful inquiry of the history of America and the influence of Jesus Christ upon it and gave the following assessment: (*Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 1892)

Our laws and institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it should be otherwise; and in this sense and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian... This is a religious people. This is historically true. From the discovery of this continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation... we find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth... These, and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation.

It is for this reason, the Christian character of America, that there is freedom for all, that multitudes from remote parts of the earth have flocked here, that we have been a "city

set upon a hill" and "a light to the nations." We are a chosen people, a redeemer nation, and like Israel of old, we are Providentially assigned a commission and a destiny to fulfill. It is incumbent upon us then, who have been entrusted with so great a legacy and so vital a mission to take heed to the admonition of our forefathers, such as this one given by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 declaring a National Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer:

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and pray for clemency and forgiveness.

America was not built on cornucopia, and plenteous harvests; nor burgeoning economies, and industrial might. It was not her vast military establishments or the intellectual prowess of her sages; it was not her business savvy or political institutions. ***America was built on 5 kernels of corn a day, cloth strips wrapped around frozen, bleeding soldiers' feet, willing acceptance of lashes by slaves for prohibited Bible-reading and acts of devotion to God Almighty, who hears the prayer of the humble, and stern-faced men who defied bullet and bomb with the relentless cry "Don't give up the ship!"*** America was built on **DEFIANCE**--the defiance of earthly authorities to obey a heavenly one; the defiance of evil and the tyrant's tread, to make a way for the good and the righteous to flourish, and that the poor and the helpless may breathe free:

"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she

With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

(Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, at the Statue of Liberty)

Let us remember then, this Christmas, that little town of Bethlehem, in whose "dark streets shineth the Everlasting Light." Let us be as those shepherds who went to see "Him whose birth the angels sing." Let us appreciate those who have gone before us and suffered greatly in the holy cause of Liberty. And may we come to understand,

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv'n!

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav'n.

No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive Him still,

The dear Christ enters in."

And have a very merry Christmas in America!

Joseph and Alicia Healy and family

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