

ADVENT and CHRISTMAS

Advent is the season of preparation before Christmas, and Christmas is the more enjoyable and perhaps more believable of the two most important Christian Holidays. Christmas celebrates the incarnation of the Divine in the baby Jesus as the manifestation of God's love and the Jewish expectation of the Messiah to deliver or save the chosen people. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew uses prophecies in the Old Testament books of Isaiah and Jeremiah to explain how Jesus fulfilled those Jewish Messianic Expectations, though his arguments stretch thin at many points. The Jews had expected a righteous warrior king in the line of David, not a theophany or manifestation of the divine. Early Christian writings do refer to Jesus as the Son of God and also the Son of Man, in the sense of representative man, such as Adam. It was not until the third century, that the theological formulation of God and Man or later Wholly God and Wholly Man appeared and was included in the most important Christian creedal statements about Jesus.

When Jesus was born, the more important issues apparently were finding a place for his birth and somewhat later keeping him alive. The two most important birth stories about Jesus, the ones in Matthew and Luke, were not written until decades later, years after his death. Both have many theological components and are far from what a historical report of even the birth of a king might normally include. Each one hits hard on the point that this was a special birth, even if no external sources noted it. Journalistic reporting was far different in those days, and hyperbole more the rule than the exception. Like many birth stories of Kings, Emperors, and other prominent people of that era, it included a divine element and a few miraculous occurrences. Historical veracity was far less important than religious and philosophical meaning in that era. The stories of Jesus' birth and life revealed universal truths unconstrained by historical truthiness.

In our time there are all too many accounts that lack in truthiness, but few that reveal anything of universal consequence. Interestingly, some of the same folks who ignore clear gaps of truthfulness in modern times expect everyone to take Biblical accounts as historically true and accurate in a literal manner. It seems more than a bit inconsistent if not hypocritical to me, but the way we each value things differs! But, as they say, back to our story!

The birth story of Jesus has long been a matter of legendary celebration, and why not? It is a story we want to believe, a story that answers a universal sense of longing. It is a story that answers everything in a sweet yet simple way. Well, perhaps not everything for cynics like us, but it is an amazing story, one that even the most cynical wishes were true! It does require a suspension of disbelief, a willingness to close our eyes and wish for the divine/human relationship and the harmony that such a birth could potentially bring. It is similar to the dream that Santa Claus will bring gifts to each of us every year, carried in his flying sleigh behind 8 tiny gravity challenging Reindeer!

The story passed down through Christian history that God became human to save humanity is pretty amazing. It is a story for the ages, for all times. It is a story of love and beauty, a story of acceptance and inclusion, a story for all people. Parts of Christianity long ago began to qualify the story, making it a story only for those willing to believe literally in the version in the early 17th Century King James Bible, ready to cast out non-believers. Somehow the story still reaches those who cannot so believe, at least as a legend and the source of some beautiful songs. The spirit of the season touches everyone in the countries that celebrate Christmas. The special foods and treats, the Christmas Carols playing, the decorations everywhere make it impossible to miss the message in the countries that celebrate. Christmas is not a subtle holiday here in the United States or throughout the Western World. It is also a commercial powerhouse, with gift-giving expected by everyone in every family. At least by the early 20th Century, Christmas gift-giving kept stores open, balancing the losses of the rest of the year.

The Advent Season of preparation for Christmas includes the 4 Sundays preceding Christmas, during which Candles of the Advent Wreath are lit, adding one each Sunday. Some churches then add a Christ Candle on Christmas or at the traditional Christmas Eve Service. The Purple Advent Wreath Candles are for Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The third candle for Joy may also be Pink. The Advent season is modelled on Lent and has been practiced since the 5th Century. The traditional liturgical color for Lent and Advent has been purple, but Blue has also been used in recent decades as an alternative for the Advent Season. The Shopping season for Christmas usually includes all of Advent, but often is thought to begin with Black Friday after Thanksgiving in the United States. Some people have been known to collect gifts at sales throughout the year! Gift-giving usually happens on Christmas Morning, but some families open gifts on Christmas Eve. The Christmas Tree, adapted from Pagan Custom by Martin Luther in the 16th Century, is often a center of decorations, with wrapped gifts being stacked around its base.

I have loved Christmas all through my life. I love singing the Christmas Carols, the Christmas Plays, the candle-lit Christmas Eve services. I also loved the Christmas Caroling, even when the snow was two feet deep. I loved decorating the tree and putting together the Creche for under the tree. When I was ten or twelve I made plaster casts of the Nativity people and animals, painting them and selling or giving several sets of them away. I built miniature stables to display the sets of figurines. The Camels were always the toughest to get out of the molds without breaking their long necks. I still have one or two sets wrapped up. I loved to put up the Christmas lights and then to drive around to see the light displays all over town.

Even more than the other decorations, I loved to see trains going around under the Christmas tree. Christmas was a time to receive the gift of model railroad engines and cars and to set up the trains and watch them go. I remember several of my favorite Christmas gifts coming in the form of HO gauge model railroad sets or engines. The big Woolworths downtown had a big sale on trains around Christmas.

There were several hobby shops that had collections of trains that I enjoyed visiting year round, but especially around my birthday and Christmas. In the Christmas window displays at Fields and Carson's downtown, there were always at least a couple displays with trains of various sizes. When we went downtown to see the windows, we often took the commuter trains from Brookfield to Union Station and then walked around to see different displays. The best part of the day was to ride the train and to go see model trains. I tried to get my kids interested in trains, but they never got that excited. Fortunately my grandkids all like trains! Jane recently got me a shirt that says "Still Plays with Trains." On my birthday, we went and had lunch and looked at the trains at the Golden Ox. Nothing better than a Corned Beef on Rye surrounded by trains! That's soul food for me! I can do without steak and try not to eat much beef or pork at all, but every once in a while I need my Corned Beef sandwich fix!

The other part of the Holidays that has been so important all my life has been the gatherings of family. We didn't see my dad's brother or sister much, but when we did it was usually around the holidays. We always saw my mom's older sister Margaret, her husband Duane, and their adopted daughter Nancy over just about every holiday as well as several other times throughout the year. Although I have occasionally gone through the holidays without seeing any family, it has been a rare occurrence. Usually I will go out of my way to go see my kids for at least part of the holiday season. This year we will be having Christmas on the 27th at my step-daughter's house. I will fly down on Christmas Day and my daughter and her family are driving in from Phoenix on the 26th. My son probably won't make it, so I will have to find some time in the spring to see him and his family. Christmas is really about family!

There are many layers to our Christmas celebrations. There are the reasons for the season in the somewhat incomprehensible and unbelievable incarnation of the divine in a special child some 20 Centuries ago. There are the capitalism affirming consumer celebrating exchange of gifts. And there are the gatherings of family.

Whether we believe the story of Jesus, or just enjoy the Christmas Carols, the treats, and the spirit of the season or just want the opportunity to reconnect with family near or far, there is enough to celebrate. Throw in the opportunities for commerce, as well as for lighting designers, model railroaders, various artists and musicians and you have a holiday that offers something for everyone! Not a bad deal!

And then, there is the message, not the matter of simple faith, but the message of what Jesus' birth meant or could mean to a world that seems to regularly foster wars, economic disputes, religious and philosophical disagreements. The Jewish Messianic Expectation was not big enough, rooted as it was in the liberation for only the chosen people. The Christian answer, too, is lacking in its failure to live up to the possibilities of inclusion and acceptance in Jesus' teachings. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and all the other religions of the world each have their limitations, mostly in their tendency to see their own answers as the best or only answers to solving the world's problems.

The more moderate, inclusive and accepting branches of each of the traditions have the potential to find commonality with other religions. Unitarian Universalism has long found rich similarities and opportunities throughout the world's religions. Jesus welcomed all who came to him, women, children, men; without regard for color or ethnicity or disability. Mohammed, the Buddha, various Gurus and teachers and religious exemplars in other traditions also welcomed those who came. Hospitality and openness play a major role at the core of most religions.

Jesus didn't fit the business model for religious and political leaders. He was not driven to conquer or amass wealth or lands or followers. He walked to the beat of a different drummer. His humble birth in a manger did not fit the role of Kingly Messiah, his message was not aimed at gathering an army of followers or taking over the known world. He practiced a simple welcoming love available to all comers. His message really didn't fit the mega-churches and temples.

Jesus didn't become famous in his own time, but rather was unknown until Paul and others began sharing what they thought was his message. We really don't know much about Jesus or what he said because his story has been crafted by so many theologians with differing perspectives and beliefs. The Jesus Seminar has worked for decades to discern the most reliable stories and teachings of Jesus, but there is no certainty that they are correct. That there are many theological positions revealed in the New Testament and non-Canonical writings is the one certainty.

When I celebrate Christmas, I do so to reconnect with family, to sing Christmas Carols, and to enjoy all the lights and decorations and trains. When I think about Jesus, I can only imagine what message came into the world in that humble manger.

My best understanding of the goal of his teachings is that we each strive to become free, self-actualized, whole human beings, unencumbered by the trappings of power or stuff or even success. That we do our best to live in harmony with others by accepting them as they are, not lording it over others, not beating others down, not stepping on others to succeed. We are to be good neighbors to each other, helping others wherever and whenever there is a need, being our best selves at all times. And we are challenged to call to account those that fail to treat others well, who take advantage of others for their own gain, who amass wealth and power for their own sake. And in our own imperfections, we are called to do the best that we can in each moment. As we continue learning, as we continue acting on our best beliefs, we shape a better world one life at a time! So may it always be!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!