

Christmas Eve, Year A (Vigil Service Readings for both 5:30 PM and 11:00 PM)
The Very Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
December 24, 2022
Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

Parties in the Dark

Once upon a time, there was no Christmas. Not just once upon a time before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but also once upon a time for more than 300 years in the history of the Church, the Jesus movement.

There was no Christmas; not because of some big meany somewhere or some sinister something, but rather because Christmas hadn't been invented yet.

The major feast, the primary festival for the early Christians was Easter, the feast of the Resurrection. It was celebrated with great devotion and joy. But there was no feast, no festival celebrating the birth of Jesus the Christ. There was no Christmas.

What changed? A few things, actually. In the fourth century the status of the religion called Christianity changed a few times with respect to the Roman Empire. It went from persecuted minority religious group to legally tolerated religion to the personal religion of the emperor to the official religion of the empire. A lot of change in a short time.

Christian merchants and Christian missionaries traveled all over the Roman Empire and beyond taking Christianity with them.

In all the areas north of the Alps, these Roman Christians encountered the Celtic world, which extended from Ireland to northern Turkey.

People living in those more northern places of the Celtic world paid a lot of attention to the sun. As summer turned to fall and then winter started to come on, they passed through longer and longer and colder and colder nights.

The time nearest to the winter solstice was the most difficult and dangerous part of the year, the time farthest away both from the autumnal harvest and from the beginning of spring. The sun was invisible for many long hours out of every twenty-four. They knew the cold and dark were necessary for the earth to be

renewed. But even though eventually the nights would get shorter and the weather would get warmer every year, they were always anxious that one year the sun might not return.

The many different Celtic tribes and nations, each in their own way, developed lots of ritual practices for this time of year around the winter solstice, invitations for the sun to return. They decorated oak trees bare of their leaves. They hung dried fruits in the bare branches. They ate lots of the kinds of food that would keep them warm through this coldest, darkest time. Those that were hale and healthy took food and other supplies to the sick, the shut in, the elderly, the widows, and the orphans to make sure they would make it through until spring. There was a lot of eating and drinking and sharing and giving stuff to one another. Sound familiar?

When Christians encountered these Celtic peoples, they observed all these practices. They understood that for the Celts the winter solstice was hugely important. They didn't try to talk them out of it. They saw the goodness of God in the care people showed one another. They saw as the Celts did themselves divine revelation in the first incarnation of God which is in the creation, the cosmos.

And they said, we know this truth, too. And we have something to add. You are waiting for the sun to be reborn, and we are telling you that the sun of righteousness has been born; a baby has been born who changes everything. Even more direct, even more personal than the incarnation in creation, in the cosmos is the incarnation of God in human form, Jesus the Christ. Because the divine became human, we humans can experience the divine intimately.

Over time these Christians and Celts created the feast of Christmas, the festival of the Nativity. They didn't try to stomp out the solstice practices and customs. They added to them.

And the keeping of the feast of Christmas spread all over. And many varieties of Christians all over the place celebrated Christmas in this both/and way: many of the older feasting, gifting, celebrating customs developed in observing the solstice partnered with this new understanding, this new dimension of the joy brought to the world by the arrival of the babe of Bethlehem. Different cultures developed and shared different Christmas traditions. And there was a lot of Christmas goodness for a long, long time.

And then in the seventeenth century, the Puritans, a minority group of Anglicans—and we're Episcopalians, and we're Anglicans, but this was not us—the Puritans took power in England. And these folks really gave the Grinch a run for his money. They cancelled Christmas in England for almost twenty years starting in 1647. And you know what happened? The people rioted. The Christmas ban led to a rebellion and ultimately to a second English civil war. People wanted Christmas.

The Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony on our side of the Atlantic did the same thing. They banned Christmas in Massachusetts from 1659 until 1681. *Stop having fun and get back to work*, was basically the message. When Massachusetts joined other colonies in the Confederation of New England, the presence of European immigrants from all over the place led to a return of Christmas. But it wasn't really a thing in New England for a long time.

In the Great Revival that swept the South at the turn of the nineteenth century, a renewed interest in Christmas welled up among Protestants and Catholics as well. The Southland is where Christmas in our country really got going. Over time, folks farther north began to get their Christmas on as well.

In 1822, the year Key West was founded, up in New York City, an Episcopal priest named Clement Moore who was a professor at the General Seminary of the Episcopal Church, wrote a Christmas poem for his children describing a visit from St Nicolas. The next year it was published. We know it most often as “The Night Before Christmas.”

And in 1843, inspired by the horrible conditions faced by so many English children living in poverty, Charles Dickens wrote and published his classic Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol*. And 179 years later, Dickens, through the voice of Ebenezer Scrooge, continues to urge us to honor Christmas in our hearts and try to keep it all the year round.

And in between Clement Moore's poem in 1822 and Charles Dickens' story about Mr Scrooge in 1843, on Christmas Day of 1832, 190 years ago tomorrow, at the Monroe County Courthouse, the first-ever service of this congregation was held. Christmas Day. Later that day, the congregation signed the papers that created and named this St Paul's Episcopal Church of Key West. So happy birthday, St Paul's! So, you can rest assured that Christmas will never be canceled here. No hurricane, fire, war, economic depression or recession has stopped this congregation from gathering, and not even worldwide pandemics have prevented the people of St

Paul's from somehow keeping Christmas together and sharing it with everyone who wants to join us.

Reaching all the way back to the beginnings of the feast of Christmas, we can still see that communities need to come together to take care of one another, not only at the winter solstice but all year round. And the value-add of the Christian message is this: we don't have to take care of one another only on our own power; the divine power at work in the creation, in the cosmos, is also at work in us. And even more, the power and love of the Creator abide with us forever because of the coming of Jesus the Christ, God in human form; Emmanuel: God with us.

At St Paul's, not only do we celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we celebrate all the days of this feast right up until the Day of Epiphany on January 6. And beyond these twelve or thirteen days of Christmas, depending on how you count, we celebrate and seek to do the work of Christmas all year round. And what is that? In the words of the mystic Howard Thurman, the work of Christmas is—

“To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.”

If you are local and you're looking for a place to do that work, come join us. There's room for you here. If you are visiting and you're looking for a place to plug in, try an Episcopal congregation near where you live.

And if tonight you're not sure about all that, but you know you could use some good tidings of comfort and joy, you've come to the right place.

Christmas points not backward to a day in the past but forward to today and tomorrow and all the days to come, reminding us that life itself is a nativity play. Most likely, each of us will wind up playing every part sooner or later. In every age and every community there are people barely getting by like the shepherds. There are people in all kinds of compromising and preposterous circumstances not necessarily of their own making like Mary and Joseph. There are newborns like Jesus who need proper care. There are people like the holy family without

adequate shelter. There are people who are tired of the long nights and hard times that come to all of us eventually in this life.

And Christmas Day, three days past the longest night, is the first day past the solstice when the human eye can first detect a lengthening of day, an increase of light. And on this day, even amidst hardship and ongoing struggle, loss and trauma, unmet goals and misunderstandings, and even amidst war among nations, we are invited by angels to a party in the dark where we are reminded that the deepest dark is the place where fresh radiance begins. Always. Here we can remember that goodwill, love, and beauty not only have their place, they also have lifegiving, life-altering power. And ultimately, goodwill, beauty, and love will always, always win.