

SAVING CHRISTMAS

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I always kinda thought *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* – which is our closing hymn – was one of the dippier Christmas carols. Repetitive and, well, sappy. I never knew what figgy pudding was and why I wouldn't leave until I got some. I had no idea that it is a vestige of ancient traditions and the tensions between upper and lower classes. Even as it wishes good tidings to all, it contains a not all that subtle a threat.

Every Christmas season, the complaints begin again about over-commercialization and the great stress of all that holiday cheer. I actually heard Christmas carols playing in a store in early October – or was it late September? There are those who cry out that Jesus is the reason for the season. All seem to harken back to traditions of yesteryear, when Christmas was sweeter and really meant something. Yet we don't usually mean that we should return to the days when marauding bands of revelers went from door to door of the wealthy demanding their best food and drink and threatening to trash their homes if they didn't get it. Yet that is a far older Christmas tradition than Santa Claus, decorated trees and oodles of gifts.

Indeed, Christmas did not exist for the first four centuries of Christianity. Yes, there was the stunningly tender birth story in the gospel of Luke, probably written about 50 years after Jesus died. But there is nothing in the Gospels or the Letters to the early Christian communities that indicates any celebration of that miraculous birth.

The church established Christmas in the 4th century, placing it on Dec. 25, the birthday of Mithras, a Christ-like figure from Roman mythology. The Solstice was on Dec. 25 on the Roman calendar, a traditional time of feasting and celebrating that the Christian church wanted to incorporate, some would say usurp.

Our modern version of Christmas is less than 200 years old, so when we talk about reclaiming the "Spirit of Christmas," it makes little sense in a historical context. But I am getting ahead of my story.

Pagan religions were tied more closely to the cycling seasons, and feasts fell in December for good reason, writes Daniel Nissenbaum in *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America's Most Cherished Holiday*. "In northern agricultural societies, December was the major 'punctuation mark' in the rhythmic cycle of work.... The deep freeze of midwinter had not yet set in; the work of gathering the harvest and preparing for winter was done; and there was plenty of newly fermented beer or wine as well as meat from freshly slaughtered animals – meat that had to be consumed before it spoiled." St. Nicholas is associated with this season because his name-day, Dec. 6, coincided with this slaughter season. (*TBFC*, p. 5)

Fast forward to northern Europe in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Christmas continued to be a time for people, particularly the lower classes, to "let off steam – and to gorge," writes Nissenbaum. Fueled by alcohol, "Christmas was a season of 'misrule,' a time when ordinary behavioral restraints could be violated with impunity...." In short, people went a little wild.

(*TBFC*, pp. 5-6)

But this wasn't mere chaos; it was a ritual in the context of stratified class hierarchy. Christmas revelry overturned not just class structures, but gender and age distinctions as well. "During the Christmas season those near the bottom of the social order acted high and mighty. Men might dress like women and women might dress (and act) like men." The Lord of Misrule was usually a young man who deliberately tweaked his elders. (*TBFC*, 8)

In the tradition of wassailing, the lower classes would go from house to house among the wealthy and sing for food and wine. The Lord of the Manor held what amounted to an Open House, letting the peasants in for food and drink. In turn, the peasant offered their good will, which was a great value in this hierarchical and paternalistic society. (*TBFC*, p. 9)

Sometimes this was a gracious offering and good will on all sides – part of what we would now call the true Christmas spirit of charity and love – and sometimes it grew hostile. Most wassail songs had at least a hint of a threat.

There was usually a demand for the finest food and drink. The Gloucester Wassail, one of the most familiar to us today begins,

"Wassail, wassail all over the town! Our toast it is white, and our ale it is brown."
For in those days the best bread was white and the best ale was brown.

Some wassails were decidedly ominous.

We've come here to claim our right....
And if you don't open up your door,
We'll lay you flat upon the floor.

Come, butler, draw us a bowl of the best
Then we hope your soul in heaven shall rest.
But if you draw us a bowl of the small,
Then down will come butler, bowl and all.

Now, the edges in *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* become clearer.

We won't go until we get some,
we won't go until we get some,
we won't go until we get some,
so bring it right here.

Hmmmm. We won't go until we get some – or else.

In a culture of great inequality of wealth, Christmas celebrations were a form of social control. Peasants, servants and apprentices could let off steam, demand that which they could not have the rest of the year. When their demand was met, there was a tacit agreement of goodwill for that night and beyond. As if to say if we can turn the tables now and then, we'll go back to our laboring lives. The Lord of the Manor also knew if he were cruel or arbitrary during the year, he would have to watch out at Christmas. It was a kind of social contract.

In these days, when we see more dissatisfaction, frustration and anger at the inequalities of

our economic system, this becomes an interesting reflection. What are we willing to put up with to continue to offer our goodwill? The Occupy Movement of a few years back, and now, at least in part, the protests across the country in response to the deaths of unarmed black men and boys in Ferguson, New York and Cleveland, are fueled by a sense of deep inequity in class and race. People across the nation are less willing to offer goodwill because a social contract, which promises life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is being broken.

In our history of Christmas we come next to the Puritans in England and America. They objected to Christmas excess in the name of purifying the church of all pagan influences based in nature.

“It was this entire cultural world ... – and not just Christmas itself – that Puritans felt to be corrupt, ‘pagan,’ evil. It was this world that they systematically attempted to abolish and ‘purify,’” writes Nissenbaum. “They wished to replace it with a simpler, more orderly culture in which people were more disciplined and self-regulated, in which ornate churches and cathedrals were replaced by plain ‘meeting houses,’ in which lavish periodic celebrations ... were replaced by an orderly and regular succession of days, punctuated only by a weekly day of rest and self-examination, the Sabbath.” (*TBFC*, p. 12)

Starting anew in the wilds of America, the Puritans in Massachusetts actually wrote a law making celebrating Christmas punishable by a five-shilling fine. Of course it didn’t work. The need for such celebration, the marking of the seasons, is too deeply ingrained in the human psyche and soul.

Yet if the Puritans were not successful at banning Christmas, by the early 19th century succeeding generations, among them many Unitarians, managed to tame Christmas by turning it into a domestic holiday of childhood delights.

In the early 1820s, around the time *The Night Before Christmas* was first published, Christmas became increasingly family focused. The ideal Christmas was celebrated around the family hearth, and gift exchanges began. Santa Claus and Christmas trees entered the culture for the first time, and Christmas became focused on children as never before.

And within one or two decades of this cultural shift, people began complaining about the over-commercialization of Christmas and about children who wanted more and more gifts without appreciating what they had. Disappointment that Christmas had degenerated into a festival of greed and excess.

Listen to these excerpts from an 1850 Christmas story by Harriet Beecher Stowe that Nissenbaum quotes in his book. A character exclaims, “Oh dear! Christmas is coming in a fortnight, and I have got to think of presents for everybody! Dear me, it’s so tedious. Everybody has got everything that can be thought of.” Nostalgically, the woman recalls the days when a child would be “perfectly delighted” with the gift of a single piece of candy. But nowadays, things are different. “There are worlds of money wasted...” she laments, “in getting things that nobody wants, and nobody cares for after they are got.”

1850!

So it seems there never was an ideal Christmas. The Christmas of joy and gratitude, celebrating the love of family beyond crass commercialism was a myth from the beginning.

As successful as the Victorians ultimately were in taming Christmas, transforming it from revelry and debauchery. To a tender family celebration, it was “corrupted” almost instantly. Almost as soon as Christmas took on this loving, familial ethos, there arose Scrooges and Grinches. Bah humbuggers who needed to be transformed by the ephemeral Spirit of Christmas.

Christmas was never pure and good and unspoiled in some previous day. It has always been fraught with all sorts of cultural, societal, familial tensions. There never were the good old days.

Yet as you enter this Christmas season, remember that you are engaging in an ancient human rhythm. Even as we are so much farther from the land. No longer at the mercy of the seasons and elements as we once were, there is an ancient rhythm that we are dancing to.

Remember that Christmas is essentially made up, so you can create or continue whatever holiday traditions work for you.

Why do it at all, then? you might well ask – because it is something we need as humans. Part of it arises from our connection to the rhythms of the earth. Even though our meat is fresh year-round, even as wonderful Northwest microbreweries provide a steady stream of fine ales, we still need to mark the turning of the seasons. We still need times to remind us of generosity, of the possibility of peace on earth. We still need the days of waiting, reflection and anticipation that Advent asks of us.

The Christmas story, the religious story of the birth of a babe who will bring peace, the magic of St. Nick, of gifts and Christmas trees, and the Pagan traditions of the turning year all still call us to enter the mystery of being alive, of our relationship to the divine however we define it our connection to rhythms of Nature. We still need reminders to be generous of spirit, to ourselves, our families, to those in the world who struggle in poverty. We still need excuses to get together with family and friends to celebrate life and love. We still need reminders in this darkest time of year, that the light will return. Physically the days will grow longer, and the light will also return to despairing hearts.

This is the promise of Christmas. May it be fulfilled in our hearts and in the world.

Amen.

Blessed be.