

First Sunday after Christmas Day, December 30, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Last Monday was – what? – Christmas eve, right? It's in the rear-view mirror now – and very quickly, too! We've forgotten the fact that some of us had no power. I do remember, though, that I was able to run by Payless on my way to church to pick-up 4 quarts of half-and-half (so don't throw them out – they're good!).

For most of us, Christmas Eve meant a couple of things: church, and a meal! I heard from a bunch of you about your Christmas meals – some of you choked them down between the two services, 'cos you were serving at both!

There are hungry people out there who didn't get to share in a Christmas meal last Monday. And there are quite a few places – churches, synagogues, mosques, temples – all religious places, you'll notice – who were doing their best to answer the call and provide that food.

Most of them don't do it on a “one-off” basis; they do it regularly. So what do you do if you're, say, St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Detroit? They're between Downtown and the industrial district, which is one reason why they have a ministry in their basement called the “Manna Community Meal.” It's a soup kitchen that started in 1976. They serve soup five days a week, Monday through Friday – no exception for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day – especially no exception then.

Quite a few of the volunteers at the Soup kitchen have other responsibilities upstairs on Christmas Eve; and they'd like to be doing what a lot of us did: have a festive meal with family and friends.

This year, they got to do that because another group volunteered to take over their ministry for Christmas eve, so they could celebrate.

Who were these volunteers? They were members of the local Muslim community who – not celebrating Christmas (at least not the religious part!) decided they would make a double gift: one gift of their time to serve the homeless, those who live on the cold streets of downtown Detroit, and a second gift that allowed the St. Peter's folk to celebrate Christmas.

As usual, canned goods were distributed, and food prepared and served for about 200 people – “soup, fruit, doughnuts, coffee,” said Hibah Naseer. “All of the food that makes you feel good.”

There was a third gift given last Monday, too. As one of the Muslim volunteers said, ***“I've actually never been to a church. I've wanted to come to a church for a long time. So this is my first time at a church, and it was really rewarding seeing people with other faiths coming together for a common cause.”***

Turns out that Christmas is a time when Muslims get into the “holiday spirit” too – and why

should we be surprised?! As another Muslim said, “this is a time of year for everyone to give back, no matter your religion.”

Great story! It’s not a new one. There are stories like this happening all the time; we just hear about them at Christmas. And they go beyond feeding ministries. When the shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue happened in Pittsburgh, here in Seattle, Muslims came out on Sabbath and formed a human wall across the main doors of several local Synagogues, along with Christians, and Buddhists, and – well, you get the picture.

It’s what one of my clergy friends described as a KAG moment – “Keep American Great” – since when have we not been great after all?

While what I’m about to say might make retailers salivate, I believe it’s true: “Christmas is for everyone!” The theological message behind that statement is this one: that Even in the midst of darkness, or despair, or doubt, or persecution, or violence, or death – especially in the midst of these things – new life is possible. We don’t even have to deserve it; it’s God’s free gift, there for the grasping.

Obviously the Muslims who staffed St. Peter’s didn’t do so because they’re Christians celebrating Christmas; they did so because they’re Godly people – people of faith – who have placed a priority on serving the poor and homeless in this way at this particular moment in the year.

That’s a sort of Christmas Spirit that we can all applaud. And isn’t that the sort of Christmas spirit we want to emulate, too – finding ways to come together as people of faith from different traditions to work together for the common good, in the name of the one God of all of us? I think so. I hope you do, too.