

The Celebration of the Nativity of Jesus, AKA Christmas. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods
Freeland December 24/25 2015 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Ever had to write a "theme?" You know, an essay or a paper about a particular topic? In the Christmas Classic "A Christmas Story" Ralphie and his class mates have to write a theme about.....? Do you remember? "What I for Christmas!" Do you remember what Ralphie wanted? "An official 'Red Rider' carbine action air rifle with a compass in the stock!" It's that time of year! That scene reminds me of a piece by English novelist Howard Jacobson reflecting on when his teacher asked his class to write just such a piece when he was about 10. It's title was "What does Christmas mean to you?" It would be tricky to ask that sort of "meaning" question in a state school in this country – it could and can be asked in an English state school because there's no separation between Church and State in England.

Howard is Jewish, so you might think that this was a tricky assignment for him, but not so! He wrote that Christmas meant, for him, seeing his father dressed as Santa Claus, getting stuck coming down the chimney.

Howard's teacher clearly thought that Howard had made that up, because she asked "Isn't your family, er...Jewish?"

"Yes," Howard replied. "We are, er... Jewish. But my father likes dressing up."

Howard said, however, that he didn't want his teacher thinking that his family had abandoned their Jewish faith, so he delved into the rich store of myths and cultural icons that any 10 year old accumulates, and told her that the reason his father had got stuck was that he was carrying a Hanukkah candelabra down the chimney. Deeply skeptical, his teacher observed that the correct word was "candelabrum," (that's very English, to do that!), assuming, she said, that he was carrying only one.

In for a penny, in for a pound, Howard thought, so he replied "actually, he was carrying three.....and the right word is menorah."

That story reminds me that we Christians can both claim this season for our own, yet also still manage to confuse its symbols. There was no "Santa Claus" in Bethlehem, after all. Christmas Trees are only a few hundred years old - Martin Luther is the first recorded person to have one - adding lighted candles to an evergreen. And we all know about "Tannenbaum" ("Christmas Tree") which shows up in 18th Century Germany. Yes, the Christmas story of our day has become "mongrelized," it's crossed cultural divides, with a resultant confusion about the original story's content.

I don't think we should complain too loudly about what's happened to Christmas. After all, scratch one ancient winter festival and you find another. Christmas itself was grafted onto other festivals, most notably the Roman Empire's December 25 celebration of *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* - the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun (S-U-N)," and also, of course, on *Hanukkah*, the festival of Lights, with its menorah candelabra that you'll recall I mentioned earlier...! This

reality is why a rabbi-friend of mine often wishes me a “Merry Chris-nukkah” this time of year!

Behind all our celebrations, whether we’re purists who insist that it should be all and only about the birth of a child, and that all this other stuff with Santa, or Hanukkah is quite beside the point, or whether we’re “ecumenical” in our celebrations, grabbing something from many traditions, the truth is that the central message across all these iterations is the same: the universal message of love.

And, in fact, Jesus himself - a very good and observant Jew - went out of his way to ignore religious puritanism in favor of love. He was totally “ecumenical” about who he’d celebrate with: prostitutes, extortionists (especially the ‘vertically challenged’ kind, like Zacchaeus), people with HIV (or, the HIV of the day - leprosy), as well as with those much-maligned but actually really quite liberal folk, the Pharisees. Tonight, Jesus would be out at all hours, raising a glass with drug dealers and gang-bangers – all the time reminding them that if they really wanted to find out what life was all about, maybe they might like to try living focused on others rather than themselves, placing love at the center.

An altogether excellent message, in my view for this time of year – though I tend to have trouble realizing that such a suggestion’s directed at me – and you – as much as it’s directed toward drug dealers and gang-bangers, and prostitutes, and extortionists and people with HIV.....there are, after all, no exceptions to God’s demand for justice, kindness, compassion, and integrity, and no one falls outside the sphere where these values should be exercised.

As much as I might feel that I really “get it” about Christmas – that the celebration of the birth of a child who will transform the world – and us along with it if we’ll only open our hearts – doesn’t begin until today, and that all the stuff that most of North America has been doing for much of the last month is really beside the point.....as much as I might feel that I really “get it” about Christmas, the real truth is that the mongrelization of this festive time is actually a good thing. We live in a world made dangerous by the pursuit of religious purity. There is nothing wrong with elaboration, embellishment, or ornamentation if those things are done in ways that bring out the core of this story that we celebrate this night: that if we can place love at the center of our lives there is nothing we cannot do, no person who cannot be transformed, nothing broken that cannot be made whole.

So don’t worry, if people want to wish you “Happy Holidays” or “Season's Greetings.” You can always respond in a positive way; you don’t even have to mention “Jesus” or “Bethlehem” – you can respond by saying – if you mean it, of course! – “may the love at the heart of this season be yours.” You’ll be surprised by how surprised people are when you say that! How they’ll pause, and say “thank you,” as it it’s just occurred to them that actually, it really is all about love.

And, after all, a history has accrued to Christmas, a literature of feeling about it; and that history, and literature, and feeling is available, accessible, and adoptable for anyone. Just because someone isn’t religious doesn’t mean they can’t peer into religious sentiment with curiosity, affection, and – occasionally – longing. This can be our gift to this part of the world that’s ours this Christmastide. We can celebrate what we mean by “Christmas” on January 3rd, when we

observe the Sunday of the Epiphany, which is really a second religious celebration of Jesus' birth anyway.

Tonight, Christmas belongs to everyone, as long as they want to celebrate the love that's at its core. And isn't it neat that we can share it with them; that at this moment so many people – some of whom know nothing about Jesus but his name, or only use it as an expletive – can know something of the Love that created the Universe, that continues to maintain it, and that hopes for all of us the very best of all things, all the time.

So I end with this: “May the love at the heart of this season be yours.”

