

Christmas Presents & Christmas Presence

Reflections by Paul Anderson 12-25-22

Good morning. I am Paul Anderson, a member of OPMH since 2019. When Rocky asked if I would share some reflections about Christmas, I was too surprised and flat-footed to think of a good excuse to say no. So here it goes...I hope he, and you, and I won't regret it.

For the next few minutes, I will share a few personal memories and ask a few questions I hope will stir up some of your own warm and precious Christmas memories.

What is Christmas all about?

As young boy, I thought Christmas was all about the presents. I was reminded of just how exciting Christmas is to a child by way of a cassette tape my father had secretly recorded Christmas morning circa 1969. When my three brothers and I got the all clear to come downstairs, the frantic footsteps racing toward the Santa gifts and stockings near the fireplace sounded like a stampede – a lightweight running of the bulls. Next came the sound of wrapping paper being violently shredded, followed by exclamations of joy and delight. Listening to the tape, I chuckled at the giddy girly voice I assumed belonged to my little brother David, until that voice exclaimed “Oh Boy, a football game...thanks a million!”. I knew instantly that wasn't David, it was me! That electric football game was **my** gift, and I felt just like Ralphie from the Christmas Story finally holding his Red Ryder BB gun. Looking back with a Madden 2022 video game perspective, it's hard to know why I was so excited. The game was downright primitive. It consisted of sheet metal table painted green with yard markers and end zones. The players were molded plastic statues in football poses, crudely painted to resemble real NFL team uniforms, and the “football” was a sad little white felt oval just about the size of a Lipitor tablet. Each coach arranged his players each along the line of scrimmage with chess master concentration, defenses cleverly configured to shut down any forward progress, and the offense brilliantly arrayed to ensure end zone glory. A turn of a knob started the play, and for the next 10 seconds the table vibrated wildly, sending the players scattering randomly until most were stuck in a blob against one of the side rails. A new line of scrimmage was set, and

the process repeated. It looked a lot like a toddler team soccer practice or an overcrowded bumper car arcade, only less coherent and productive. I don't remember a single touchdown. By March I had completely lost interest in the game, and by June it was likely donated to Goodwill. But for that morning, it felt like I had won the Super Bowl. Sure, I did get a few other presents, but none merited more than a polite "thanks a thousand!".

What were the presents that made your heart leap, the ones you remember to this day?

Our annual trip to my Grandma's house before Christmas marked the real beginning of the Christmas season for me. It required a two-hour ride that felt like months in the back of a station wagon, which gave me a deep appreciation for the harrowing journey of wise men. When we finally crested the last hill at Tyebrook, the family farm where my mom grew up, we were greeted by a stately 40' tall evergreen marking the driveway, magnificently lit by hundreds of large old fashioned colored lights that dazzled in the crisp December sky. The tree at Rockefeller Plaza wishes it was so grand. Yes, finally, we were there yet.

Racing into the house, we quickly shed our jackets and ran to match up with our cousins - and there were a lot of them...15 kids within 10 years of age, with 13 of them boys. It was a rambunctious, magical mess. We were barely supervised and allowed to race the halls and stairs, invade the chicken coop, make forts from hay bales in the barn, eat together at the cool scaled down kid's tables, and sleep like gerbils packed into beds however we chose. We feasted on country ham biscuits, frozen homegrown peaches picked last summer, and ate way too many Christmas cookies. It felt like a John Denver song. I started to realize that Christmas was more about who we were with than what we got.

Where does Christmas happen for you and Who are your Christmas people?

Time marched on, and my voice and interests changed. So much so that in December of 1984, I got on got on one knee and gave a very special girl a ring that was pretty but modest, all that college senior and soon-to-be graduate student could afford. She thought it was wonderful and promised to spend every Christmas thereafter with me. That was both the best decision I ever made and the best gift I ever received.

Once Judi and I became parents, Christmas came to be less about magic and mystery, and more about logistics and planning. Attending school pageants, decorating the tree, hanging stockings and wreaths, assembling bikes at 2 am, being awoken at 6 am by excited smiling boys begging us to “get up already!”. Sounds like a lot of work, but no Christmas I experienced as a boy holds a candle to any of those I recall as a father. Maybe it really is better to give than receive.

Judi would always have an amazing late morning brunch queued up and ready to go just as the adrenaline faded and hunger was starting to show up. Sticky buns, sausage, egg, and cheese casserole, fruit salad, and more. It was always something to look forward to. In my dad’s later years, I would pick him up from the nursing home and bring him over to see the boys and share that amazing meal with us all. It was a bit of a production with minivans and wheelchairs, but Dad’s cleaned plate and satisfied smile seems to shout “Thanks a million!”

Late in the afternoon, after trying on new clothes, playing with new games, maybe even a nap for mom and dad, we would follow up with another Christmas tradition, the seeds of which were planted when I was a boy - going to the movie theater on Christmas night. The first I remember was Tora, Tora, Tora, a great World War II movie about the attack on Pearl Harbor. What better way to keep that peace on earth vibe going right? Whatever the reason, I was mesmerized and hooked – and to this day it’s not really Christmas for the Andersons without a movie at the theater. The decision of what to watch was sometimes hotly debated, but democracy ruled. The family vote led to some dubious choices, but even a dud with the whole family sharing popcorn and the experience was wonderful, especially when we followed it up with the all-you-can eat buffet at the Red Palace Chinese restaurant, always open and surprisingly busy on Christmas Night.

How do you make Christmas special for you and your family, and What holiday movies, songs, and traditions mean the most to you?

Of course, not every Christmas memory is joyful. If you have experienced enough Christmases, there will be memories that are bittersweet, painful, even haunting. The very people and traditions that bring us such joy when they are with us leave an aching void when they are gone. Time can slowly lessen that ache, but while

new joys enter our lives, we never stop missing those we love with whom we can no longer share Christmas.

Who are you the loved ones you are missing most this Christmas?

To close, I want to circle back to where we began, to the question of what is Christmas all about? We have thought about the What, Where, Who, and How of Christmas, but the biggest question of all is **why**? Why is there a Christmas at all, and why is it such a big deal?

Just over a month ago, our family got a tangible, unmistakable insight into the answer. Our second grandchild was born one month early due to pregnancy complications that could have been deadly serious to mother and baby. As we held our new grandson, carefully swaddled in blanket by his father, not much bigger than a football, helpless but healthy, we experienced feelings of both Thanksgiving and Christmas at the same time. Henrik, born on my 60th birthday, was an innocent little troublemaker, and an eagerly awaited priceless gift to our family.

Over two thousand years ago, another innocent troublemaker and a long anticipated and desperately needed gift to humanity entered this world. Jesus was born in a hurry, far from home during troubled times in a dangerous world, a helpless child totally dependent on an unmarried teenage mother and her loyal husband to be. He arrived not in a grand palace or even a modest home, but in a lowly stable with livestock, shepherds, and angels as witnesses. Not a story the human mind could conceive or easily believe, but exactly the way God planned it - an amazing convergence of humility, humanity, and divinity.

Maybe I had it right as a child after all...Christmas really is all about the Presence. The presence of a God who loves us so much he came to be with us, his Christmas people, not just back then and over there, but right here and right now.