

## **Reflection on Christmas - December 25, 2022**

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Good morning and blessings to you all, stalwarts. Christmas, for me, was and is a gateway, at the start of the improbable story of how I ended up here. A person raised without religion talking to you from a pulpit on Christmas day. I wish my father could have been here because I'd love to know his reaction to Rocky asking me to speak with you today. "Well, Rocky, you get what you pay for," (is one of the things I suppose he might say).

The backstory: My father's father was a Presbyterian minister and a general surgeon. My father had perfect attendance at Sunday school for 13 years. My mother's family was Catholic. When they married, not everyone in the family approved of the \*mixed\* marriage. It caused enough consternation that they both ended up disaffected. They didn't go to his, hers, or any church. When I was born, they – New Orleans natives – were living in Salt Lake City, Utah. I was baptized in the Presbyterian church there, but that was the last time we went.

Sundays were spent outside. Hiking, skiing, climbing apple and cherry trees. Now, there is a reason people of faith chose to put down roots in the Salt Lake Valley. Fair weather or foul: being in the Wasatch mountains, or Big Cottonwood Canyon, or at the bottom of the foothills gazing up at snow-capped peaks, was a spiritual experience. There are few better ways to \*know\* the power and beauty of the creation that God has entrusted to our care.

I didn't know any bible stories, though, to my grandparents' chagrin, save the Nativity story. And I don't really remember how I know it. My parents certainly must have told me, but there was always a sense

that it came from something more too. That it came from everywhere. And at least as a child it was hard to not feel overcome by the enveloping sense of wonder and joy in the story of the baby born to save us. Other things conspired to compound the sense of wonder, there was almost always snow. There was *\*absolutely\** always music. My parents were great lovers of Christmas music. And they were in good company in Salt Lake City. To this day I have difficulty imagining the Nativity without a score: the Tabernacle Choir. O Holy Night. Choirs of Angels and all.

The years later took us elsewhere. By my adolescence, we were living in Cleveland, Ohio. Christmas had no mountains there, but still lots of snow. Our family had settled into a few lasting traditions. Dad cooked for Christmas. Nearly always dessert. Nearly always something very complicated. Nearly always driving my mother to distraction with the time and resources he occupied in the kitchen. There was also the reading of “The Night before Christmas.” On Christmas Eve. We always did it twice: first the 1823 original poem, followed by “The Cajun Night before Christmas” in celebration of the family’s Louisiana roots. For those of you who may not know the story, St. Nick drives a skiff pulled by eight alligators.

As I became a young adult, I started to take more notice of our friends’ and neighbors’ traditions. There were several families in the neighborhood who, following very merry drinks and dinner, attended the candlelight Christmas Eve services. They always commended the music.

After many Christmas Eves hearing tell of what I was missing, one night after the Cajun Night Before Christmas, I announced to my parents that I was going to the 10:30 PM Christmas Eve service at the local Episcopal church. No one volunteered to come along.

I arrived alone. A few minutes late. I sat in the back, only just inside the sanctuary. I knew people there, but I also suspected that they knew I didn't really belong. \*Only just inside\* the doorway was the most comfortable place to be.

I wasn't prepared for what came next though. The story of our Saviour's birth, punctuated by soaring songs of hope, reverence, celebration, love. It quickened something in me. A feeling of being seen, yearning to be closer, and peace in being present.

Every Christmas Eve for years in a row, I came back. Alone – but singing with a heart full of promise. And then ultimately a heart full of peace, stepping out into the snowy, quiet, night-tide.

One year, after the Cajun Night Before Christmas, I made it known that I was off to my candlelight service. "I'll come," said my brother. "I'll come too," said my Dad. Then what to my wondering eyes should appear but my father – and my brother – pulling on coats to come to church.

The program proceeded as usual, but there wasn't anything usual about it for me. Sharing the music with my family, as opposed to being alone in a crowd, was uncomfortable. And exciting. For the first time in many Christmas Eves, I didn't know where this was going.

But I was sharing the good news – and it felt thrilling.

My Dad was there next to me singing in earnest and emphatically, hymn after hymn. And finally, Silent Night, by candle glow. "With the dawn of redeeming grace. Jesus Lord at thy birth..."

As the final notes hung in the air, I glanced over at him. His eyes had welled up with tears. He whispered, to no one in particular: "I had forgotten."

Long comfortable with the notion that it was OK to come to church on Christmas Eve, I didn't know until that very moment was that I had been waiting on a signal that it would be all right to stay.

God - Message received.

### **Conclusion**

So know the gates are open. Come for Christmas. Embrace the hope of Christmas. Embrace the possibility of a child born to save us, of love, and the promise of something new. And know you, too, are welcome to stay. Merry Christmas.