

WHEN CHRISTMAS IS OVER

“The remnant shall remain ...” or so it is written. All my life it has seemed a curious thing, this human propensity for celebrating outward things, details, paraphernalia, symbols – and neglecting or turning away from the inner meaning: the reality that makes it important in the first place.

I’m not complaining, like it might sound at first. Especially I’m not complaining at you. You are here. The remnant does remain. And the remnant is all I have ever known, or at least have lived and learned with on a steady basis. It is all I have ever known, and so it is what I have come to expect and appreciate and care about. No, I’m not going to draw any clear-cut lines, like some of you think I might. We will get to that in a minute.

Just for now though, look around. This place was full on Christmas Eve. The music lifted us; we enacted the Ceremony of Light; we sang and prayed and celebrated the Incarnation: God coming to be with us, that we might return to God.

It’s only a few days later. Where is everybody? Did they all truly repent and head for HOME, and we are the only ones left? Did we somehow get the message scrambled, and everyone thought it was Palm Sunday instead and today everyone is supposed to desert – run and hide – like on Good Friday? Or maybe modern Christmas is now two parts Cinderella: at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve, everything disappears and you cannot find it again for another year.

It’s nothing to get discouraged about. This is nothing new for us. It has always been this way. We have come to expect it. Usually we clean up a little better so that it’s not quite so noticeable. The decorations are still lovely, but somehow they already make us feel uneasy. It’s over, so shouldn’t we sort of, you know, admit it and clean things up and return to normal? That is what the sermon title is about: What about when Christmas is over? What then? What do we do next?

A friend of the family asked five-year-old Ruth, “Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?” After a moment’s hesitation, she answered, “No. But then, it’s not *my* birthday.” That’s also part of the puzzlement. If it *was* my birthday, or even your birthday, maybe I could understand it better. But with Jesus’ birthday, it’s hard to understand why the whole thing wears off so fast.

Of course, I understand – or at least I have been told often enough – that going to church, participation in worship, being part of a Christian congregation is not important anymore. And that there are lots of bad people in the church and lots of good people outside the church. I'm sure this is quite true, though I don't understand what it has to do with anything. In any case, the unimportant, no-account church was full on Christmas Eve. I'm not talking about just here; it was full across the land. And I'm not talking about just our denomination. Unimportant, no-account, "they don't make any difference" churches of almost every persuasion were packed out on Christmas Eve. Yet half the people who packed them out are so busy or so unconcerned with what Christmas means that they are nowhere to be found today. If it were left to them, there would be no more churches to hold candlelight services in. And if it were left to them, in one generation or so there would be no Christmas to celebrate. That is, they would not be telling anybody about it, or caring enough about it to be able to tell anyone its meaning even if they wanted to.

I'm rather ashamed of it now, but in the old days it made me angry that all these strangers would show up to interfere with our holy days. Christmas and Easter should be special days for those who walk the Christian Path daily and care about carrying the flame through every day and in all our ways. But there is no place for the faithful to gather for worship on our most special days because all these pagans come stomping into God's courts, thinking it's a performance instead of an act of worship, and invariably we end up "putting on" some hybrid cross between a worship service and a public performance. I suppose the notion is that if we perform well enough, some of the "visitors" might return and become part of us. Have you ever heard a more twisted logic? It pleases me that this church does not operate very much out of such motives.

Anyway, I rarely feel angry about it anymore. That was years ago, when I used to think that if people could come to realize what they were doing, it would change things. (It's nice to be young and naive, if it doesn't last too long; everybody should try it once.) After my anger went away, it started to make me very sad. It seemed one of the saddest things in the world that people were getting so close to such glory but then, like sleepwalkers, were going right on by. They were singing the carols, giving presents, lighting candles, hearing the Scripture readings – the whole thing. But none of it was sinking in. Well, maybe something was sinking in a little, but none of it was going deep enough to hit

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any of the chords of power. And so I would see the empty chairs the following Sunday and they seemed to say:

Here sat a precious child of God who knows not that they are a special child of God.

Here sat a being of enormous worth and skill and ability, but they have not seen that Life is fulfilled by using it for their Creator.

Here sat a person hoping for peace and love and purpose, but they did not perceive that God is real or that friends of the WAY really do live here. And now they are all out there somewhere – lonely still, looking still, wondering still if somewhere there is not “more to life than meets the eye.”

In reality, of course, they were not the sad ones at all. They were out having a fine time, and I was the one feeling sad about it. But it made me start looking for more and clearer ways to explain it. It seemed like if the Message were declared clearly, then surely some would find a phrase, a concept, a thought, or a feeling as they went through the Christmas rituals, and maybe some spark would catch and they would see behind the tinsel to the real wonder of Christ’s coming.

Finally the Deacons said to me, “Hey, they’re not listening anyway and we have already heard it, and there are better times for those who want to hear.” And of course they were right. So I stopped feeling angry, and then I stopped feeling sad. And now I feel grateful again – not just for Christmas Eve, but for the seats that are not empty the Sunday after. It seems wonderful that there are those of us for whom Christmas is not over. That’s all I need. How thankful I am to be among those who will go on thinking about the Christ and trying to understand and walk with the Christ all through the days to come. What would I do if, like so many others, I had to put it all away for another year? For them, that is of no consequence. For me, it is hard to imagine why anyone would want to bother with life at all apart from Christ and His church.

So the empty seats remind me that I used to be angry and that I used to be sad. And yes, sometimes I still get twinges of one or the other. There are some folk who sat in those empty seats who will one day feel grateful to be here on the Sunday after and all through the year. And we must find ways to let them know as they begin to want to know.

But the empty seats are not the real issue. The full seats are the thing that matters. And now it is time for some disclaimers. Just because we happened to show up today does not make us true-blue Christian disciples. And just because some of our members are elsewhere today does not mean that they have not deserved to be counted among the remnant. If it troubles your mind that you find wonderful people outside the church, remember who created them. And some of them are not as satisfied and finished with looking for the truth as you might assume.

In any case, the remnant does remain. Not all the seats are empty. For some, Christmas is not over. Christmas is only a yearly reminder of all that Jesus started. And we are even more excited about the WAY to follow Him than we are about the announcement itself. Christmas is the announcement of a new reality – a new WAY of Life – coming into the world. If everybody shouts “Hooray!” and then walks away without finding out what it’s like to experience the new WAY of Life, then what was the shouting all about?

What do we do when Christmas is over? For us it is not over. It just invites us or reinvites us – puts us or re-puts us – into the story of God’s reconciliation and redemption of the world. So Christmas is fun, but now we get to move into the new Life it opens up to us. At the Christmas Party, we only get to *look* at the wonder that is coming. Of course we celebrate! It is incredible and beautiful, hearts soar, and hope flows high again. But as the Party closes, we get to start tasting the actual reality of it all. We get to start trying it on.

Children are smart. They love Christmas. They love to open the presents, and their eyes light up to see their new toys. But no sane kid in the world stops there, like a lot of adults do. The children take it a step further: They also *play* with the toys! They make them their own by spending hours and hours delighting in them, learning all about them, using them. And if the toys turn out to be cheap junk, children have sense enough to be disappointed and throw them away. Most adults have junk all over the house that they have neither “played with” nor made their own, or had sense enough to throw away.

And if a present turns out not to be cheap junk but is instead, for example, a well-designed and skillfully made bicycle of high quality, then Christmas Day is not the end of it. There is the learning to ride, the hours of increasing the skill, then trips, and years of greater freedom and more adventure and broader horizons because of the gift. Of course, that is a very small analogy, but it makes its point.

When Christmas is over, the real excitement begins. We get days to find out about the gift we have been given. We get to learn about Jesus, and we get to find out what it's like to have Him with us wherever we go. We get to experience the difference of His presence. We get to practice doing things with His very different approach, His very different value system, His strange new kind of power.

Perhaps my analogy is more clear to me than to you. I remember my first bicycle very clearly. I had wanted one for at least a hundred years. Across the street lived Mr. Holt, a retired engineer who looked after his orchards. He was kind enough, but not easy to get to know. Nevertheless, one day I spotted an old bicycle hanging on the wall of one of his sheds. I only caught a glimpse of it, but it was enough to mention it to my father. Mr. Holt certainly never used it. If new ones were too expensive, maybe this one would be possible?

Days went by and nothing happened. I guess Dad had to wait for the right moment to approach Mr. Holt. Then one day we went to look at it. Oh my – up close it looked terrible. The tires were all hard and cracked; it was covered with cobwebs; some spokes were bent and rusty. And it had these skinny little wheels the likes of which I had never seen before. It looked to me like the bike would never ride again. Mr. Holt thought maybe his nephew might one day want it, but he said he would think about selling it. I was now hoping he wouldn't.

Back home, my father smiled and said it would make a fine bike, with a little work. It turned out that my father had worked in a bike shop for a couple of years. I didn't know he had ever even *been* on a bike. He was always full of surprises. Anyway, more days passed. Then suddenly, there it was: restored and in perfect condition. It still looked funny with those skinny tires – not like any of the bikes the kids at school had. But I fell in love with it anyway.

Before, where I had ranged for blocks, I now ranged for miles. The bike and I became closer and closer friends. After a while there was almost nothing that bike would not do for me. Months later, some of the kids from school decided to get together and ride bikes after school (we did not live near each other, so that did not happen all the time). That day, to everyone's amazement – mostly my own – it turned out that those skinny, funny-looking tires were FAST! Mr. Holt had been storing "Man o' War" in his old shed. Then I remembered my father's smile the day we had first seen it up close. Nobody, not even kids three and four years older, could touch that bike's speed.

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That was not the important thing; nobody raced me more than once. But I remember the pleasure of that fine machine. It was one of my best friends. We went many places, saw many things, and spent many hours together. It was a great and exciting day when my father gave me the gift – one of the best gifts I ever received. But the day of the giving was small in comparison to what came after. Is it not that way with you and Christmas?

Tomorrow as we go to our various tasks – write letters, make phone calls, see people, make plans, do our various deeds, work at our daily responsibilities – that is when we get to find out if this Christmas gift is really worth anything. And as the days keep coming and we keep practicing with it, that is the only way we will come to know if the love of God in sending us Christ Jesus is really of any value to us.

What do we do when Christmas is over? I cannot imagine it being over. It just keeps getting bigger and bigger and more important and more beautiful all the time. The more we open and use the gift, the more we discover its endless dimensions, and the more we find it wonderful in the smallest details of each new day. Come to think of it, isn't that exactly the kind of gift you would *expect* from the Almighty, Omnipotent God – if God really loves you?