



A Letter to the Stewards of the Celebration
of the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ
in the New England Synod of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America

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The worst Christmas sermon I ever preached included scenes from a grade B monster movie that ended with a huge wave engulfing the hero and heroine, killing them while their backs were turned. I felt compelled to warn people about the wave of materialism that was threatening them in their celebration of Christmas. From my pastoral perspective, our season was way too rushed, consumer-oriented and sentimental even though I had worked so hard to shape it otherwise.

Of course, the sermon arose from my own issues. I was weary from worship planning, decorating the sanctuary, Advent Adventures and the parenting of my four small children who knew all about Jesus' birthday but lived each day in giddy expectation (fueled by a Christmas cookie sugar high) of Santa's visit.

Unbridled greed was everywhere and congregational giving to the poor seemed ludicrously tokenistic. Christmas worship was clearly an add-on to a season of over-partying, over-spending and over-eating. Plus, I was dreading the resistant sullenness of adult children dragged to church by parents eager to revive their faith by this one experience of worship. If sharing lighted candles in a darkened sanctuary while singing "Silent Night" couldn't do it, what could?

I can still see the shocked faces, hear the loud silence following my sermon, and recall how people politely avoided me at coffee hour. They were not newly aware of their failings; they were offended. I went home and threw the sermon away.

My mistake was twofold. First, I preached from a place of judgment about their lives without knowledge of how God was at work in them. Second, I was sure it was up to me to make it happen, to make the Christmas miracle burst upon them with new and transforming power.

We must both read and meditate upon the Nativity. If the meditation does not reach the heart, we shall sense no sweetness, nor shall we know what solace for humankind lies in this contemplation.

Martin Luther

I was sure that my sermon would provide the best chance for that meditation, the best way to pierce their hearts. But meditation can take many forms besides formal worship and study – the preparation of food and places to sleep; time spent in candlelight; a longing for holiday reconciliation; the desire to delight a loved one with a gift; a revival of wonder; a spirit of grace stretched beyond usual. All of these things might look sentimental on the outside but may in fact be true paths into the holy sweetness of the Nativity.

So many people are without solace at Christmas time. Their suffering and brokenness makes it hard for them to grasp even the smallest bit of Christmas comfort to ease their pain, let alone realize how meditation on it can be healing. But that's the mystery of Christmas – that a time-wasting, unproductive, mystic, low-tech activity such as meditation can make a miracle.

Yet every form of meditation, inside or outside the church, will always be laced with sinfulness; it's just who we are as human beings. Even if we honor Advent, simplify our celebration, give generously to the poor, and go to church for all the right reasons, we will still be people whose only hope of freedom from sin and death is Jesus. The unconditional love that was bundled up in that manger is the grace that we need to extricate us from the tangled web of laws and set us free. Grace is the miracle of Christmas and those who experienced it first-hand knew in their bones that the Nativity was the birth of a whole new way to live in love and peace,

The Wise Men discovered Jesus not at Herod's court, not with the high priests, not in the great city Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, in the stable, with lowly folk, with Mary and Joseph. In a word, they found him where one would least have expected.

Martin Luther

Perhaps the job of Steward of the Celebration is easier than we imagine: tell the story and offer tools for the contemplation of it. A miracle will happen when people make their way into the story, by whatever means they have at hand, and their hearts come to know that delving into meditation reveals the difference between life and death.

But beware. The Christmas mysteries are promiscuous and will show up in places unadorned with finery, out of the hearing of choirs and beyond the sound of the best sermon ever. If we count on finding Jesus only in the expected places, then we will miss the Christmas party that is going on all over the world all the time in lowly places and among suffering people. After the worship, all year long, we can find the nativity again and again, tasting its sweetness, receiving solace as we join Jesus in the unexpected places where grace and truth are hidden from power.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

With prayers for a blessed Christmas,

+ Margaret J. Payne