

Christmas Past

When I hear the words “Christmas Past” I am reminded of Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.” For me, Christmas past is not so much about Ebenezer Scrooge but about a time long ago – that is what happens when you get older “older” you have a lot of Christmases past – heck, you have a lot of everything past – memories, experiences, life. The challenge for “Christmas Present” is that much of Christmas past is shrouded in hazy nostalgia both of the times and our childhood.

Christmas, as I knew it, was post-depression and post-world war two. I was too young to know the spirit of the times – optimism, hope, life. I just lived - and enjoyed. The family pictures from those Christmases show trees seemingly resting on mountains of presents. Store windows competed with each other for dazzling displays. Times were different from a mere ten or fifteen years earlier. There was an innocence about the era (or maybe it was just me.) People wishing each other Merry Christmas (without offending anybody.) I am sure there were lavish holiday parties (I don’t know I was sent to bed.) Entertainment, movies and television celebrated the holidays and the season. I am sure that the marketing of Christmas was in full force. (Marketing has been going on since the first chicken cackled at the laying of her eggs.) But all that is hazy except for the deep emotions and memories of Christmas past. The excitement for children (and for the bigger children called adults) was everywhere. Presents were exchanged. Family visits occurred. Good food. Life at its seeming best. Goodwill on Earth and Peace towards men.

Mom and Dad were not particularly religious but the extended family, grandma, aunts and uncles and cousins supplied much of that especially after the divorce. (That was not a Christmas present. I even started school in Reno, Nevada.) Not celebrating Christmas with Mom AND Dad changed the dynamic of the season. Grandma was a widow by this time and Dad took over caring for her. We would spend Christmas day with my aunt and her family. And for years that became the tradition. Also, a tradition was that a few days after Christmas we would spend another Christmas with my uncle and his family who lived in the opposite direction. I liked that extended Christmas. (Whatever happened to the twelve days of Christmas?)

Now surrounding all of this were reminders of the reason for the season. Christmas cards with the baby Jesus, Christmas carols playing in stores and on the radio. (And if you didn’t go to a liturgical church you got Christmas carols before Christmas.) There was the church Christmas program, young people going caroling. There were manger everywhere. Sunday school classes sharing the coming good news. There were sermons about Bethlehem, the wisemen, the shepherds, the Star of Bethlehem. There were Christmas eve services, Christmas eve mass. There was church on Christmas morn. Yes, Santa Claus was there but he hadn’t taken the place of the baby Jesus. You knew that Christmas was Jesus’ birthday (and our hope.)

Maybe, it happens to all of us that the story repeated so many times becomes common place, pedestrian and we lose the freshness of the mystery and the marvel of the story behind the story. Emmanuel – God with us, and if we choose God in us. The pattern of the discovery of Christmas may repeat itself in freshness as we have children and want them to experience the same awareness of Christ with us. We would sing Happy Birthday to Jesus and read the Christmas story before we opened presents. Soon, again, Christmas can lose that spiritual freshness as we repeat the story for our children. Somehow, the season takes on a stress of its own: shopping, decorating, partying, celebrating. And somehow, if we are not careful, the baby Jesus gets lost somewhere in the memories of our own Bethlehem.

When our children became adults, employed and successful, our gift giving tapered off. (Anything they might want for Christmas they had already bought for themselves.) Trees no longer floated on mountains of presents like I had as a child and as they also had and experienced. Not going shopping, not going to the stores dampened a little of the memories of Christmas past. In fact, there were a couple of Christmases that I seemed to have completely missed, missed taking in the wonders of the sights and the lights and missed the wonder and the reminder of the lights that dazzled the shepherds and sent them to Bethlehem.

Then you start over, sort of, with the grandchildren so they don't miss the marvel of Christmas and trying to keep the wonder of Emmanuel – God with us fresh and alive. That is our challenge to continue to be in awe of the story. In awe of the plan. In awe of the working out of the details even from before Creation all the way down to you and me when we decide to let the Christ Child be born in our hearts as He was born in the manger.

The danger of losing Christmas past is that it changes Christmas present. If we forget to be awed by the story we can lose sight of the greatest gift of all, the one that came wrapped in swaddling clothes, the gift that was sent with love, the gift that changes all of the Christmas futures. Emmanuel – God is with us.

Merry Christmas.