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Christmas Eve

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When does Christmas happen? Let me explain the question. Christmas starts happening in early October. Shops start tinseling, office parties start booking, people start saying 'We're going to my parents' this year as we went to his last year.' But none of those things are Christmas. December's when there are carol services, and egg nog lattes, and a resolution to make more of an effort to send cards this year, and efforts to rescue crushed old tree decorations and lights where one goes out and they all go out. But December isn't Christmas. So when does Christmas happen? I'm going to suggest four different possible answers to that question.

Maybe Christmas happens when you hold a gift on your lap, and you genuinely don't know what's inside – you hold it up to your ear as if listening for the gift's heartbeat. Whatever it is, you expect you are going to like it. There's a bunch of traditions about what you do next. There's the cherish-in-your-fingers-and-try-to-guess school: only for the very patient and those unworried about keeping everyone waiting. There's the open-carefully-and-save-the-precious-wrapping-paper school: only for the exceptionally tidy and frugal. And there's the tear-open-in-a-frenzy-of-eager-hope school: which only really works if the present really is beyond expectation – otherwise the lapsed shoulders

and attempt to feign gratitude vividly disclose their own story. But surely that's too worldly to be the heart of Christmas?

Let's try another one. Maybe Christmas happens when the oven door opens and a golden-topped turkey emerges, full of crackling fat, laden with stuffing, followed by pulled crackers, scalloped potatoes, green bean casserole, and all that caloric grandeur chased by the after-dinner game of cards the family has played for generations – the football game no one cares about on the TV, Mariah Carey's voice coming from the kitchen, the fire crackling in the hearth, grandad taking a snooze in his chair. That's certainly domestic existence as the advertisements portray it, and the scene that most every celebration in a night shelter or children's home is seeking to replicate. But what exactly do turkeys, crackers, fir trees and dozing grandparents have to do with a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem? Family, food and fun are marvelous things, on their day, but is that really the essence of Christmas?

Let's try a third one. Perhaps Christmas is centrally about worship. After all, angels from the realms of glory came to tell tidings of comfort and joy, shepherds from their flocks abiding left to visit the infant king, three kings came from Persian lands afar. For all we know the ox and the donkey and the sheep knelt down and got in on the act; and Mary and Joseph, once the post-natal health and safety check was completed and filed, did their share of adoring too. So maybe gathering in a mighty throng like we are now, doing our best imitation, at least of the shepherds, if not the angels and kings; maybe this is when Christmas happens. That's of course what you'd expect the priest to say. But isn't that missing something a little bit more intimate, a touch more personal? When you leave here in a few minutes' time, won't you still be thinking Christmas still lies somehow ahead of you – that being together here right now is a necessary but not sufficient part of Christmas?

So what is that more intimate, personal touch? Maybe this is getting closer to the heart of it. Christmas is said to be about not receiving, but giving. Perhaps Christmas really happens when you're on a bus, or walking down Main Street, or perhaps, today, on a website, and you're thinking of a person you care about, and you realize you've identified just the thing that will bring a smile and make them feel understood and listened to and appreciated and loved. After all, what causes the most hurt at Christmas? It's not that Auntie Betsy helped herself to all the Lindors in the bowl, because she does that every year. It's not that the children got overexcited and there were tears, because no one can have a three-month emotional build-up to some great event without some features causing envy or greed or disappointment.

It's that this person, whom you thought knew you, whom you hoped loved you, or at least paid some sort of attention to you, has been totally clueless to get you earrings when it's perfectly obvious your ears aren't pierced, or buy you a tie when everyone knows you never wear one, or not even deign to set foot in a shop on your behalf or think about you more than five minutes before the exchange of gifts and so just stuffs a \$20 in an envelope – and to add insult to injury doesn't even bother to get a new envelope. If Christmas really is all about the ideal of perfect presents, then we might as well resign ourselves to an annual wake of perpetual failure and festering resentment.

For all these reasons, we're reluctant to commit ourselves to when Christmas happens. We sweep the hand and say, 'It's all of it.' But if it's all of it, does that mean also the awkward parts, the colleague at work whom you feel you should be kind to but just thinking about it surfaces all the anger and irritation of a year of undeclared war; the post-dinner washing up that no one feels in the mood to do, the eagerness to close the door on anything and anyone that might seem cold, or needy, or sad, or alone in an impulse to don the Christmas sweater and be hearty, warm, and ready to refill the glass for another drink?

Here's the paradox of Christmas. We aren't really sure when Christmas really happens, so to hide our anxiety we tend to crowd the season with celebration, gifts, half-finished conversations, and rapidly-purchased less-than-suitable presents, as if the festive season were an overfull Christmas stocking packed so tightly with trinkets lest we ever possibly look closely enough at any of them to wonder if it's of any real value.

So when does Christmas happen? I'll tell you when I think Christmas happens. Think about a moment around 8.30 in the evening of Christmas Day. All the flurry is over, wrapping paper's strewn around, the chocolate box is open and half-finished, the coffee cups haven't made it back to the kitchen, it's gone dark outside but no one's yet had the energy to get up and put a light on. A child of about eight years old has found a quiet place in the semi-darkness. On close inspection the child is holding something. There's been a stocking. There's been money from Aunt Betty who said, 'Go get yourself something in the sales.' There's been some other gifts. But sitting in a corner in the twilight, this child is holding tight to just one present.

That one present represents hope fulfilled, perhaps exceeded, joy awaited, imagination engaged, love expressed, needs met, longings understood, excitement ahead. It's already obvious that when bedtime comes, that present is going on the bedside table or under the pillow.

Right now it's not clear if this child is ever going to let that present out of its sight till kingdom come. That intensity, that certainty, that fixed attention and unswerving clasp rather puts in the shade the crammed stocking and the litany of gifts. In the end, there was only one present that mattered. This one. In time, the other gifts may or may not get a swift glance; but this one is the precious one. This one is Christmas.

I want you to focus all your energy and wonder on this child right now, and on the present in this child's hands. Who is this child? And what is the significance of that present? The answer to this question is what Christmas is all about. This child is God the Father who made the world as a playground of delight, a theater of glory, a place of encounter and relationship and trust restored and talents expressed and beauty perceived and truth embodied. This child is God the Son who adores us so much that he never lets go, who goes to any lengths to be with us, who bears the cost of our folly into his own body: if you look closely at this child you'll see he's holding the present with hands that have marks of nails and blood and pain and love. This child is God the Holy Spirit who weaves a pattern of hope around and between us, who reconciles and heals and sings God's song in our hearts, who makes something wondrous out of even the mess in which we leave things. If you get near to that child you can hear her whispering, humming and singing to the present about how cherished and beloved it is. This child is God.

And what is that present? That present is you. For you God the Father longs and yearns and dreams and hopes. For you God the Son becomes flesh and lives and dies and is raised again. For you God the Holy Spirit plays and weaves and dances and heals. Christmas is the moment in history when we see into the heart of God. And what we see is that God could have anything – God could have any present in the universe, God could have stars or waterfalls or meteors or big bangs or rainbows or galaxies or black holes or comets. But at the end of all things, when all the good and all the failed ideas and wonders of creation are lying littered across the floor of God's living room, what do we see but God, a small child, cherishing, relishing, holding, beholding the one thing that matters: us.

At Christmas God the Father says, 'I made creation so as to be with you.' At Christmas God the Son says, 'I want to be with you in flesh and blood, in sorrow and in joy, in tragedy and hope.' At Christmas God the Holy Spirit says, 'I will be with you always. Nothing can separate us.'

That's what Christmas is. That's when Christmas happens. When we realize only one thing matters, only one thing lasts for ever, only one thing's in God's heart. When in the darkness we hear a little child softly singing, and we realize that little child is God, and we recognize the words God's singing: 'All I want for Christmas is you.'