

“So this is Christmas”

Christmas is a wonderful and beautiful time of year. People are happy and smiling. We try to be a bit more patient (at least once the Black Friday sales are over). There are festivities of all kinds from the lighting of Christmas trees, parties, decorations both tacky and sublime, special music on the radio and in concerts and in church, special worship services, and flickering candles in windows. The scents of evergreens and spices enliven the air, and children are all aglow anticipating Santa Claus. It is a special time of the year.

But I must admit that I get pensive at Christmas. I see the merriment and the fun but I cannot help but wonder about the state of our weary world and our struggling society. Despite all of those wonders the world continues to groan from war in Ukraine and elsewhere, poverty and famine throughout the world even in the US the world’s richest country, autocratic rulers oppress their populations and deny them basic freedoms, cold snaps like the one we are experiencing threaten those without sufficient resources to pay for fuel or electricity to heat their homes and especially the homeless, and let us not forget the lonely and alone who have no one with which to celebrate.

In addition to the ongoing woes of the world we have all experienced the stress of the pandemic over the past three years and feel a new stress with the tri-demic that public health officials are warning us about.

The trials of the world can put a damper on our Christmas merriment and wonder. Of course, we can just put out of our minds all that is distressing or uncomfortable. Sadly, many do just that. But I do not think Jesus came into the world to encourage apathy any more than he came into the world to condemn the world. What he came for was to teach us how an old way could be a new way.

He came to teach us that God’s love for the world which pervades the Hebrew Scriptures is not so much about the commandments themselves as living the spirit of the commandments. What better way to start that teaching those concepts than by coming into the world as a helpless child who needs love and care or he will die. As he grew and lived—teaching, preaching, healing, being persecuted, dying and rising he taught us something more about Christmas. He taught us that life is much more complex than living from celebration to celebration inuring ourselves to the groanings and pains of creation. We are to use the joy of this day and this season to attend to the world in love, peace, and compassion.

The work of Christmas is not just the celebration, gift giving and singing all of which are good. The work of Christmas goes on for the rest of the year when the angels, shepherds and magi have gone home, the star is not bright in the sky, and our hearts, which are so light this day, have become heavy. The work of Christmas needn’t be a burden. Indeed, it is the joy of Christmas—the angels, shepherds, magi, star and loving parents—which inspire us. The carols continue ringing in our hearts as we do the work Jesus called us to loving God

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Christmas Eve
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above all else and our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus shows us that when we do that everything holds together as God created it to.

Howard Thurman was a Christian preacher, academic, civil rights activist, student of Gandhi, and mentor to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His writings are profound and are still read in seminaries and churches of every stripe. Occasionally he also wrote poems. This one called "The Work of Christmas" is a favorite of mine because it calls me beyond my celebrations and my pensiveness to something true and beautiful to live by every day of the year. He wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among to [all],
To make music in the heart.

Merry Christmas! May our hearts make the music of joy this day and each day as we do the work of Christmas every day of the year.