

**THE BIGGER STORY**  
**CHRISTMAS DAY – DECEMBER 25, 2019**  
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Christmas Day is truly a day set apart from all the others.

Stores and attractions that don't close on any other day are closed today – not all of them, but way, way more than any other day of the year.

Unlike when I was a kid, it's not because of government regulations, it's just the thing to do. What is it about this day? In an increasingly secular world, why is Christmas Day a day we still choose to make different?

I think Titus nailed it: it's an act of God's grace, unmerited, perhaps even un-asked for, and, nowadays, grace un-acknowledged by millions.

God isn't given the credit, but I don't think God is nearly as interested in getting credit as God uses both memory and hope to stir human hearts and spirits.

It all seems to come to a peak this day.

Not just Christian ones, either. It will never make the news, but I, personally received deeply warm greetings and even gifts, specifically, CHRISTMAS greetings and gifts, from my Jewish and Muslim friends this past week.

What a precious thing this Spirit of Christmas is when so many other days are filled with shouting politicians and constant wars, with trade disagreements and a constant string of natural disasters.

But, today we can look at the bigger story, a story that began so long before us, and it helps frame what happens to us in the individual spans of our years.

I was thinking about this when I got out our Christmas decorations two days ago.

My 2 ½ foot tall table tree was pretty bare.

I waited so long to finally get the tree decorations out, not because I'm some Advent purist, but because I'm, well, just kinda real busy in the weeks before Christmas.

But I wasn't always a parish priest! Years ago, when our family was young,

I began decorating my house the weekend after Thanksgiving.

It took 2 days to decorate just the inside of our home: a real tree, big fat colored lights, lighted garlands on the stair banisters, stockings, and candles in all 12 of the windows in our Dutch Colonial house.

Then a day outside: lights on the eaves, wreaths, evergreen swags on the fence, red bows on the posts. I took Christmas decorating pretty seriously.

Where did I learn about all this? from my mom. When we were growing up, we moved all over: from New York to California and a dozen states in between, plus Okinawa and Spain.

Most of the time Daddy, a fighter pilot, was home for Christmas, but a couple times he was far, far away in a strange land that didn't know Christmas from the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

Wherever we went, though, Mom made sure we had a real tree, with those big multicolored lights, (no elegant tiny white lights for the Robbins family!)

paper chain garlands, and popcorn garlands – both handmade; gingerbread, and a modest collection of family ornaments that came out year after year.

My sister, Debbie, and I fought ONE of the ornaments: a long-legged pipe cleaner Santa.

Since I was born, it had always been the first ornament on the tree, and from the time she was old enough to stand up for herself –

she's pretty feisty, so I'd say beginning when she was 3 and I was 5 -

we fought and hit and screamed over whose turn it was to put the first ornament on until Mom resorted to the "Santa's watching" card.

For a couple years, Mom tried to get us to do it together.

Finally, when Debbie was old enough to understand odd and even numbers,  
Mom declared that I got to put Santa up in the even years, Debbie in the odd.

One year one of us – and I honestly don't remember who did it –  
one of us snuck in and put the Santa on the tree on the "wrong year."

Then Debbie and I fought about it again. Tradition.

Mom was not amused. Pipe-cleaner Santa came down and spent Christmas in the ornament box.

A solid decade or so later, Gus and I were married and the year we were no longer starving students,  
and we had a home with a real tree. Mom brought the pipe cleaner Santa for me to put on our tree.

Here is the pipe cleaner Santa. It's pretty darned pathetic, isn't it?

Somewhere along the line, a dog chewed the face off, it has faded quite a lot.

To think I used to hit my sister – and she, me – over this thing.

It seemed so important at the time.

Even while we fought and cheated, Mom just kept Christmas going for the family:  
the tree, the lights, the garlands, the Spirit of Christmas.

Mom was the keeper of the bigger story, the larger truth that no matter where you are,  
what awful things are going on, being together as a family makes a house a home.

The Spirit of Christmas happens because of the story behind it,  
not because of the stuff under the tree.

Then, one year, after I was a mom myself, I became the keeper of the bigger story for my family.

However, by the time I had two kids, I was smart enough not to have a "first ornament" tradition.

Each one of us got our own bag of special ornaments, plus the dozens of others that filled the tree.

Here's my bag: it has so many memories that bring that Spirit of Christmas to me.

(I reviewed ornaments that remind me of people and animals I've loved over the years).

Gus and I still have our bags;

the kid's bags eventually went to their homes when they became adults with their own trees.

With age, I've come to see how the bigger story my mother kept for our family,  
that I kept for mine, the one my daughter is now keeping for her growing family,  
is a reflection of what God has been doing for eons upon eons.

As we make homes and families, nations and economic systems,  
as we bicker and fight, grow older and wearier and wonder if we can keep doing this,  
we find there's a story bigger – WAY bigger – than our story,  
bigger than our personal grievances and anxieties,  
greater than our individual passions and objectives.

The bigger story is that of love, forgiveness, mercy and most of all, hope – hope there will be real peace,  
heavenly peace, a peace that is eternal and universal for all of God's children.

The bigger story is that God is much, much greater than human ambitions,  
and that, in the end, the earth's salvation comes from God's eternal wisdom,  
from an awesome Creator who loves us to death and also loves us into life.

God loves us because we're God's children,

not because we're worthy, and in spite of our fussing and fighting. God never gives up on us.

The big story of how time and time again God has given the gifts of love, forgiveness,  
and the hope of peace is the true glory of God.

The very specific time, when God's love came down at Christmas,  
the Holy Child of Bethlehem was born to a government-displaced peasant family  
that soon had to flee to another country for their very lives.

A specific time when a child was born,

when love come down to walk among us full of grace and truth,

that child came to heal and welcome, to bless and remind us of how beloved we are  
even when we are far, far from righteous.

Every time I see this decrepit old pipe cleaner Santa,  
 the Spirit of Christmas ties into my story, and each of our stories,  
 even with all our mistakes and fussing and fighting.

All our stories are tied to the eternal story of the belovedness of Creation,  
 that no matter how complicated life is, no matter pathetic we and our pipe cleaner Santas get,  
 God never gives up on us.

Just as my patient mother kept unleashing the Spirit of Christmas  
 even when her beloved children fought,

God, born once among us and yet eternally present,  
 patiently keeps unleashing the Spirit of Christmas,  
 hanging garlands of twinkling lights in the sky.

The angels from the realms of glory who sang on the first day of Creation  
 sing again and forever the good news of great joy that we were made for praise,  
 created to have meaningful lives, and, in the Spirit of Christmas,  
 to help others to have meaningful, abundant, hope-filled lives, too.

Even if this isn't everybody's holiday, it is THE Holy Day for all creation.

God and the angels have never, ever stopped the singing Creation into being;  
 the bigger story is of eternal love, forgiveness, mercy and the hope of peace  
 the gift of the presence of Jesus is patiently given to us year after complicated year  
 not because of the righteous things we've done,  
 but because God's brighter vision for Creation is our divine destiny.

*Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*

Merry Christmas!

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#### **ISAIAH 9:2-7**

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. You have made the nation great; you have increased its joy. They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest, as those who divide plunder rejoice. As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke that burdened them, the staff on their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressor. Because every boot of the thundering warriors, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned, fuel for the fire.

A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever.

The zeal of the Lord of heavenly forces will do this.

#### **PSALM 96** [Tune: *What Star is This*]

Sing to the Lord new songs of praise; Let all the earth sing to the Lord.  
 Sing out and praise God's holy Name; Proclaim good news with one accord.

Declare God's glory far and wide, God's wondrous acts and holy law;  
 For God is greatly to be praised And then beheld with greatest awe.

Magnificent God's presence here, With splendid courts in glorious light;  
 Ascribe to God all peoples, tongues; Ascribe to God all power and might.

**TITUS 3:4-7**

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

**LUKE 2:1-20**

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told."

**SERMON HYMN: Angels from the Realms of Glory**

*Angels, from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er all the earth;  
Once you sang creation's story; now proclaim Messiah's birth;  
Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king.*

*Shepherds, in the field abiding, watching o'er your flocks by night,  
God with us is now residing, Yonder shines the infant light  
Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king.*

*Sages, leave your contemplations, brighter visions beam afar;  
Seek the great desire of nations, you have seen his natal star.  
Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king.*

*All creation, join in praising God, the Father, Spirit, Son,  
Evermore your voices raising to the eternal Three in One.  
Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king.*

**BLESSING:**

**P** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

**C** **The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth,  
and we have seen his glory.**

**P** In him was life, and that life was the light of all.

**C** **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never  
been able to extinguish it.**

**P** The light and life of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, bless you and keep you close in the days and nights unfolding before us.

**C** **Amen.**