

Finding the Newness of Life in the Darkness

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

I had one of those classic holiday moments the other day. I was driving my youngest son Matthew to school. Matthew is just two years old and is still piecing together this whole Christmas thing for himself. As is the case for most small children his age, lives in the present—he likes the lights and the decorations and the Christmas tree. I thought I would test his knowledge of what was going on. So I asked him, “Who comes down the chimney and gives us all presents.” His answer: Spiderman! As one of my college friends said, when I relayed this story on Facebook, “Who would you bet on, the fat guy in the red suit or the guy who can climb walls with spider powers?!”

It is easy to get confused about Christmas. One of the classic mash ups happened to a friend of mine, Rev. James Kubal-Komoto. James and I went to seminary together, and he now serves a church in suburban Seattle. For many years before that though he lived in Tokyo. One day, during the weeks that lead up to Christmas in Japan, he was walking by

a department store. There he saw in a window a full size Santa Claus spread out on a cross! What a delicious lost-in-translation moment.

And yet one can kind of see how they got there; to Santa Claus on the cross. The secular celebration of Christmas gets mashed up with the religious celebration of Christmas all of the time. It has become popular now with new video editing technology, the obliquity of camera phones, and the ease with which one can upload to YouTube to have what is called a video mashup. Imagine someone painstakingly going through all of Barack Obama's speeches and reediting them so that they fit the music and rhythm of a rap song. Or two videos merged together in a funny or entertaining way. That is essentially what Christmas has become; a mashup of the biblical story with secular and pagan elements. It's not really all that hard to get Santa Claus mixed in with Jesus or perhaps even Spiderman.

As Buchanan astutely points out in our Modern Reading this evening, this mashup has been going on for literally millennia. In case you are interested, most biblical scholars guess that Jesus was born some time in April, but no one knows for sure. Christmas was not celebrated by the early Christians who were far more interested in Jesus' return after death than they were about his birth. But when it appeared that Jesus wasn't coming back any time soon, and with the spread of Christianity within Roman culture, the early Christians noticed that there was some competition for the spiritual hearts and minds of the people.

Saturnalia was a week long festival in ancient Rome that celebrated the moment of the year with the least amount of daylight. This celebration centered around Saturn, the father of Jupiter or in Greek Zeus, to begin increasing the amount of sunlight. Many people today, and I am sure back then, get depressed from a lack of sunlight. A celebration may be just what was needed. And oh, did they celebrate those ancient Romans. They would burn logs—probably the origin of the Yule log. But regardless of the theology behind it, Saturnalia became a chance for the Romans to do what they did best: feasting, fertility, and gift giving all commemorated good old Saturn.

From a certain point of view, one can understand how that is a tough act to top, but that is what the Christians tried to do when they moved Christmas to fall right in the middle of Saturnalia. To be sure the Christians were not unsuccessful in rounding off some of the more hardcore edges of Saturnalia. They definitely gave it a more spiritual focus than it sounds like it had. However there are still elements of that ancient Roman celebration that feel a bit familiar to us, particularly in modern America: the economics of gift giving, the excesses of holiday eating and drinking, and the general sense that one should be “merry” this time of year despite the lack of the sun.

It is little wonder that our spiritual ancestors, the Puritans, disliked Christmas so much. As their name implies they sought to practice Christianity in its “purist” form devoid of all so-called pagan elements.

Christmas would surely fail that litmus test. There are still groups around like the Jehovah's Witnesses who do not celebrate Christmas for similar reasons. It is tempting to suggest that the Puritan's dislike for Christmas may have been passed on to their great-great-great grandchildren, the Unitarians, who have also struggled to find meaning in the holiday.

Yet I am here before you tonight to say with Buchanan that Christmas, as it is typically understood, presents us with a false dichotomy. We can enjoy the pagan slash secular portions of Christmas AND still revere it as a spiritual holy day. Despite what Charlie Brown and Linus may have you thinking, the two are not mutually exclusive because Christmas has been a mashup from the very beginning.

This is true even and especially in the Bible. While the gospel of John has no nativity story per se, it does have a prologue, an opening reflection, on what it meant for Jesus to be made incarnate in the world. The Gospel of John opens, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." These words might be so familiar to us that we do not realize their full intent. At the time they were written there were Christians called Gnostics who

denied the humanity of Jesus. The Gnostics claimed that since Jesus was a God he could not have taken on human flesh which they viewed as dirty, fallen, and imperfect. The Gospel of John taken as a whole, and especially its opening chapter, is a refutation of Gnosticism. John's author insists that Jesus, the *logos* and *lumina* was not merely just "word" and "light." He was also one of us. He was human, and therefore humanity cannot be as fallen as imperfect and as despised as some would have it.

Thus the birth of Jesus is a metaphor for humanity itself—one part fallen and imperfect subject to decay and death, and the other part divine, transcendent, calling us to our higher selves. We too are a mashup of those two aspects—the secular and the sacred. We, all of us, carry with us in our very being that creative divine potential along with our everyday stupidity, callousness, and greed. Thus the divine made incarnate in this world is not so much a historical fact as much as it is an existential and psychological reality. Christmas happens in our hearts, minds, and souls moment to moment.

Saturnalia is the pagan celebration of the darkness, while Christmas is the celebration of new life. These two are inextricably linked together this time of year because they are inextricably linked together in us. From that vantage point one can perhaps view in a new light the attempts to put the Christ back into "Christmas," the sloganeering of "Jesus is the reason for the season," and even the

banning of “Happy Holidays” as a secular greeting. That is our inner Puritan trying to come out and banish the Romanesque aspects of our Christmas celebrations. Perhaps the subconscious thought is that if we remove those secular slash pagan practices from our culture, we will have somehow removed them from ourselves too. Either way, Buchanan is right, all such attempts will fail. Frankly I find it more comforting to celebrate the holy within the profane, the sacred amidst the secular, God alive and present within the dark, cold, and imperfect world of ours. We are the ultimate mashup between the secular and sacred, and we would do well to deny neither. Rather we should celebrate all aspects of ourselves.

In the climax of “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” Linus famously recites from memory parts of Luke’s gospel which we heard as our Ancient Reading, this year and every year. Angels call the shepherds to Bethlehem and the manger. Earlier an angel informs Joseph that the Holy Spirit in fact did incarnate in his fiancé. Often in the Bible angels call us to our best selves. Christmas is meant to be a reminder to us. A reminder that amidst economic difficulties, materialism, gluttony, suffering, and darkness, there is new life to be found. In fact that new life has the potential to be born in us at any moment, but we need a time, a season of reflection to remember this aspect of ourselves. Why not do so right at the moment when we need to remember this the most—the beginning of the cold winter and the pinnacle of darkness. That new life

is in you and in me waiting to come out. It might be expressed as Santa Claus, the baby Jesus in the manger, or Spiderman crawling down your chimney, but whatever the metaphor you prefer happens to be, let it touch you deep down in your heart. Be moved by that call to a new life each and every day of the new year.

The other day I asked my son Matthew the same question again, “Who is it that comes down the chimney and leaves us presents?” This time he got it right: Santa. I am sure the intervening weeks, in which he has seen many a Christmas special and lots of Christmas themed cartoons, helped him improve his Christmas education. I have to admit part of me was a little sad that he had gotten it right. There is a certain reasonableness and rationality to expecting Spiderman to come down your chimney, as opposed to Santa. And besides, why not? Why not use the symbol you like the most to get at that sacred reality which none of us ever truly knows? Whatever your symbol or celebration may be, may you have a Merry Christmas and a very blessed New Year. Amen.