

Keeping Christmas

This morning, we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, which honors a singular moment in the days after Jesus's birth. Wise men out of the East arrive at Herod's palace looking for a newborn king, having seen his star rise in the heavens. Relying on his own advisors, Herod sends the travelers to Bethlehem. They follow the star, find Jesus, and pay him homage. Then, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the wise men leave for their own country. Their departure brings to an end not only their role in Jesus's story, but the entire Christmas season.

Epiphany is one of the Episcopal Church's seven principal feasts, so we return to this story every January. You might not expect there to be much left to say about it after two millennia but, for me, it lands a little differently from year to year. This year, it struck me that, after all the miraculous fanfare, the choirs of angels and celestial fireworks, the visit from the awestruck shepherds, and the arrival of visitors from exotic lands who followed a magical star to bring treasures to the newborn Prince of Peace, everything was just over. The angels returned to heaven, the shepherds went back to tending their flocks, and the wise men headed home. Life returned to normal, almost as if nothing had happened at all.

Something similar happens when we celebrate Christmas in postmodern America. After weeks of planning and shopping, wrapping and shipping, cooking and decorating, hosting and visiting, Christmas is suddenly *done*. We're left with trash bags full of torn wrapping paper and cards, presents we might prefer to exchange, refrigerators crammed with leftovers, and piles of cookies that grow stale before we can finish them off. Social media and magazines quickly replace ideas for "inexpensive holiday gifts they'll love" with tips for how to keep your new year's resolutions, and supermarket shelves are stocked with lacy red goodies for Valentine's Day. Life returns to its everyday secular whirl, and it's almost as though Christmas never

happened at all. However, if Christmas is to be anything more than a brief blowout that fills the coffers of our merchants, our closets and our landfills but makes no lasting difference in our lives, we need to find a way to keep it. And no one wrote more compellingly about keeping Christmas than that great novelist and social crusader, Charles Dickens, in his beloved story of a covetous old sinner whose bitter heart was changed for the good by unearthly spirits, *A Christmas Carol*.

Full disclosure, *A Christmas Carol* holds a cherished place in our family's hearts. I adapted it for the amateur stage several years ago. (Dickens wrote almost all the dialogue, so it wasn't much of a lift.) Mine was only one of many, many versions. Dickens' story has been adapted, modernized, satirized and "sequelized" in every medium from cinema to ballet. Whatever version you watch or read, though, Dickens' message remains the same: we need to keep Christmas, not just for one day each December but all year long.

But what did Dickens mean by "keeping" Christmas? One meaning is to observe holiday customs. For Dickens, keeping Christmas meant joyful celebration – giving presents, hosting parties, caroling, and roaming the busy streets of London in its most festive season. Keeping Christmas also meant giving generously to those in need. As the son of a spendthrift father whose extravagance landed him in debtors' prison and his boy in a factory job worthy of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens was determined that no other child should have to endure what he himself did. He bludgeoned his readers with the sufferings of the poor, to wonderful effect. Charitable giving exploded after *A Christmas Carol* was published, and leagues of concerned lawmakers and activists set to work reforming the worst of England's exploitive institutions. Before *A Christmas Carol*, Christmas was considered a minor holiday, viewed with some suspicion by the church and

polite society as too pagan to be entirely respectable. It was Dickens who popularized Christmas, and *A Christmas Carol* that enshrined many of the traditions we enjoy today.

Ironically, Dickens may have unintentionally inspired some of the excesses of our modern celebrations. While researching this sermon, I found that online references to “keeping Christmas” were equaled or outnumbered by references to “keeping Christ in Christmas.” Jesus truly is the reason for the season because there wouldn’t be any point in celebrating his birthday without him, but some people worry that the spiritual message of Christmas too often gets lost amongst all the Hallmark movies and Mariah Carey music. They have a point, and the oversight may go back to *A Christmas Carol*. There are no direct references to Jesus anywhere in the text and, if you read the story carelessly, you might think you’re keeping Christmas Dickens-style if you just spend a lot of money and time with friends during the holidays.

But a closer read reveals that *A Christmas Carol* is grounded in values that Jesus would heartily approve. The ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge’s business partner, reveals that he’s being punished in death for neglecting the true business of life, concern for humankind. “The common welfare was my business,” Marley laments. “Charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business.” The Cratchit family exemplifies cheerful patience and mutual love in the face of undeserved hardship. The spirits show Scrooge that almost everyone who knows him detests his avarice, and that the hard-won treasures he accumulated in life would be stolen in death if he didn’t change his ways. Scrooge learns to appreciate the company of family and friends just as Jesus loved table fellowship. And, though Dickens mentions it so briefly that you’ll miss it if you blink, on the morning of his conversion, Scrooge *goes to church*. Much as Dickens loved to satirize religious pretension – another trait he shares with Jesus – the virtues he instilled in his best beloved characters were the same virtues that Jesus encouraged throughout his ministry.

When Dickens tells us that the reformed Scrooge “knew how to keep Christmas as well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge,” he means more than ticking off the boxes of holiday to-dos. Scrooge kept Christmas well because he kept up the benevolence, compassion, and engagement in the lives of those closest to him that Christmas summons forth. For ourselves, we must ask, as Presbyterian minister Henry Van Dyke did in an 1888 sermon, are we willing for a day to put our grievances and desires aside to focus on others? “Are [we] willing to make graves for [our] ugly thoughts and gardens for [our] kindly thoughts, with the gates open ... Are [we] willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world--stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death--and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal Love?” If so, we can keep Christmas for one day and always although, as Van Dyke points out, no one can do it alone. If we want to keep Christmas, we need to do it with Christ’s help, and we need to do it together.

There’s a reason why we celebrate Christmas for twelve days, then return to “ordinary time” until Lent. Life is mostly lived in ordinary time, and we need it to do the work of Christmas, described by another great social reformer, Howard Thurman, this way:

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 brothers,
 To make music in the heart.

May we keep Christmas well by doing its sacred work throughout the year and, as Tiny Tim might add, may God bless us, every one. Amen.