

“The Best Christmas Tradition”
Psalm 96:10-13/Luke 2:8-14

One of my favorite carols of the season is “Joy to the World.” Tonight marks the 35th time I have planned a Christmas Eve service and while I don’t have the bulletins in front of me to prove what I’m about to say it, I’m guessing all of those previous gatherings began either with “Joy to the World” or “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” The only reason we aren’t doing so tonight is because of our COVID protocols that still limit our singing here to one hymn in its entirety. Otherwise, I certainly would have continued that tradition during this gathering, too.

Yet even though it isn’t part of this service, a repeating phrase from that carol’s first verse stayed with me as I prepared for tonight. “Joy to the world,” we would have sung, “the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and heaven and nature sing.” Despite some quick online research, I found no explanation of what led Isaac Watts to write of “heaven and nature” singing. Maybe, it was that moment we just recalled when Luke tells of heavenly host in Bethlehem who sang, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” Or perhaps Watts was thinking of that Psalm we read when a believer of the past declared “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it.” Whatever the source of his inspiration, I’d like for us to place that glimpse of heaven and earth singing alongside the many traditions of this night.

As there is no annual event more tradition-laden than Christmas. In my family of origin, our parents would require us to wait on the stairs on Christmas morning while my father would go see if Santa had put in an appearance the night before. Dad would usually return with a sad face and say “It looks like we got passed over this year, but you can take a look if you want.” With that word of release, we would dash into the room, discover that yet again he had been teasing and celebrate our gifts. Lori and I continued that pattern with our children.

Over the years, I’ve heard of traditions for other families as to when the tree goes up and when presents are opened, when the big meal is served and what foods must be part of it. An article last year suggests such rituals only scratch the surface of how others observe the day.

A journalist asked readers to share traditions. Susan Burroughs wrote that in her family “the gift card is so much more than the ‘to’ and ‘from.’ It is a thoughtfully-produced series of clues to what is inside the package. Success is judged on reaction, which can range from anger to confusion, fear, hilarity, and eventually, when unwrapped, great fun for all.” Family newcomers have been known to neglect that tradition in tagging gifts to others. Even worse, they “fail to read the clue, appreciate the wit, and just tear open the gift without partaking of the ritual!”

Tom Logan wrote that when he was growing up, Christmas mornings were a free-for-all with torn gift wrap everyone. That contrasted with the first Christmas he spent with the family of his wife, Melinda. Tom was bit confused when his new father-and brother-in-law pulled out pocket knives and opened them. ‘Why? There was absolutely *no* tearing the wrapping paper. You cut the tape ever so carefully, removed the paper and folded it up for use next year.’

“Marlyn Pringle was a newlywed when she visited her new in-laws for Christmas. She and her husband, Jeff, were asleep in bed...when they were awoken by a knock at the door. ‘It’s Christmas,’ shouted Marlyn’s new sister-in-law Robyn. It was 4:30 a.m. ‘Robyn was no toddler. She was an adult in college who had just been one of my bridesmaids.’ It turned out that getting up at the crack of dawn was a Christmas tradition in Marlyn’s new family. [She] struggled to the living room where she learned about another family tradition: no one could approach the tree

until Grandmother ate a tangerine and offered one to everyone.“ (Kelly, John. “Christmas comes but once a year. Christmas traditions come in infinite flavors.” *The Washington Post*, 12/22/20)

I suspect that your customs for this night vary from those and are ones to which you hold with equal fervor, but tonight, I’d like to name what I believe is the best Christmas tradition. It’s a risky thing for me to do, of course, but I’m basing my choice on what I hear Scripture to reveal. Also, as we know, if something occurs a second time in the same way it is on its way to tradition status. Thus, before identifying the best norm, I’d like to be clear about two facets of tonight I hope do not become traditions; the singing of only one carol and required masks! With those caveats, let’s consider the best Christmas tradition as revealed in our Biblical passages.

The first clue comes in recalling that the initial recipients of news about the birth of Jesus were shepherds. While we tend to have warm associations with those characters—perhaps remembering when we or one of our children played the role of a shepherd in a pageant—the fact that God sent an angel to tell shepherds first would have been shocking. In that era, shepherds were viewed as a kind of pastoral thief since they allowed their sheep to graze on land that belonged to others. They were included on lists the priests kept of people automatically excluded as potential witnesses in a trial as they were presumed untrustworthy. Yet God chose to tell the amazing news to shepherds first and only then did heaven and nature sing.

The other clue comes from the Psalm, that as we have already noted, speaks of how all creation joins in singing its praise of God. It goes on to explain why. “Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.” Did you hear that? The reason heaven and earth will sing together is because one is coming who will judge creation fairly and fully bring God’s righteousness. When heard alongside the reminder of the first recipients of the news about Jesus, it suggests the best Christian traditions are ones that recognize creation is not yet all that God intends and leads us to act in a way that honors the hurting ones.

Several years ago, I heard a story about a family who that did just that. "It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree," an unnamed woman wrote. "No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas--oh, not the true meaning...but the commercial aspects of it--overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma; the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual [gifts]...The inspiration came in an unusual way.

"Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level...and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church...These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class... Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly. 'I wish just one of them could have won,' he said. 'They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them.' Mike loved kids--all kids--and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came.

"I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the

envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition [by giving to a different cause and then telling him about it]. The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened... and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its content.

"The story doesn't end there," the woman concludes. "You see, we lost Mike last year... When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with...anticipation watching as their [parents] take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us." (*Ministry of Money Newsletter*, December 2000, p. 14)

What is the best Christmas tradition? What response is the most faithful one to how those events at Bethlehem were first shared? It is one where we act in a way that brings good news to the hurting ones of creation. A tradition that demonstrates we know the world does not yet fully reflect the righteousness of God and until it does we will act to ease their hardship.

So have fun with all the traditions that will mark this night and tomorrow for you and your loved ones. Enjoy all the ways that you uniquely celebrate the birth of Jesus. Yet at the same time, I encourage you to add a new tradition or build upon one already in place that in some intentional way blesses the shepherd-like figures of this day. For when you do, a hymn writer of long ago tells us what will happen: as surely, heaven and nature will sing again.