

Christmas Eve 2022

What is the best part of Christmas? Presents!

How many of you have already opened at least some of your presents? When I was a kid my parents had a strict rule. We could not open our presents until 5 am Christmas morning. We kids would be up way before that, looking at the tree sparkling with lights in the dark, excitedly beholding the stacks of gifts all around it. But our parents would forbid us to start opening our presents until they would stumble sleepily into the living room at 5:00, turn on the lights, start the stereo player and begin to brew the coffee. The coffee of course was for them, we did not drink coffee yet, and we certainly did not need any.

As I became a more jaded teenager, it was my parents who would wake us kids up at 5. They would open our bedroom doors, turn on the lights and shout out that Santa Claus had come! Really we had to do this at 5:00 in the morning? It was then that I learned that my parents were actually as excited as we had been when we were kids, not to open their presents, but to share in our excitement and wide eyed wonder as we kids would open Santa's gifts to us.

At Christmas we all get presents, and we all give presents. Some are expensive, something we would never get for ourselves. Some of the most precious though are homemade. Even gifts that we will never ever actually be caught dead wearing or have any conceivable use for, they are still precious on Christmas morning. Because in the end its not the gift, it's the giver and ultimately, the love for us that that gift expresses, that matters most. In the end then gifts matter because they tell us that we matter to those who give them to us. In the end gifts matter because in the end we are the real gifts, to each other.

Now some worry that the practice of gift giving can co-opt the meaning of Christmas, that it can turn Christmas from a sacred holy day into a commercial holiday. But holy days are harder to observe if they are not also holidays! Have you ever had to work on Christmas? What a bummer. It used to be that no one was open on Christmas. In the days before we could pump our own gas, even finding an open gas station on Christmas could be tricky. For while holy days like Christmas, call for prayer and reverence, yes, they also call for celebration. We do not observe Christmas, we celebrate Christmas, not only by gifts but by fabulous food, by cheerful music, by spending time with loved ones, whether we like them or not.

Why *has* the holy day of Christmas specifically come to be celebrated above all by the giving and receiving of gifts?

To celebrate the giving of the greatest gift of all. God giving the gift of himself to us. Christmas marks the birth of Christ in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. Which really only means something to us if Christ is also being born again right here, right now-- this evening here at church, tomorrow morning under the tree, tomorrow afternoon feasting, tomorrow night exhausted, and peopled out.

As a parish we have helped to bring Christ this Christmas into the homes of some of our neighbors. To make sure that they too will have presents to open and food to feast upon tomorrow. And our collection this evening will go to Catholic charities, who brings Christ, in our name, to those that need Christ the most in our wider community throughout the year.

Let me close with an image of Christmas I heard up at Schweitzer chapel one Christmas Eve by Steve Kuder, my dearly departed brother, who celebrated Christmas Eve Mass on the mountain every year for as long as I had known him, over forty years.

One Christmas Eve, in his homily he told of a little chapel high up in the Swiss Alps. The people from the surrounding villages would gather there for midnight mass every Christmas Eve. But the chapel had no electricity, no heat, no lights. Rather the villagers would light lanterns to hike up to the chapel, and they would hang the lanterns on hooks along the walls of the church during mass. And so even without electricity the church was bathed in light and everyone kept warm by bundling up and huddling together in the pews. And then after Mass, the villagers would zip up their coats, take their lanterns and return home. To anyone watching from afar it was as if points of light first collected from around the village into the church, which came a blaze and then, afterwards, as if a stream of light poured back out of the church to spread throughout the village. To the eyes of faith, it was as if the light and warmth of Christ collected together, flamed out and radiated back into the cold, dark streets.

May we all be alight this night with the light of Christ. And may be bring that sacred light to those we know and love, as well as to those we do not know but still love through our love of Christ this Christmas season.