



Looking Out My Window, December 24, 2021

What does Christmas mean? It means memories, like Santa falling off the roof. My grandparents' farmhouse in southern Louisiana was built of cypress and had a steeply pitched roof of cypress shingles. The house sat high off the ground on brick footings and was heated with a wood stove in the kitchen and a wood heater in the dining room.

On Christmas Eve night of my seventh year (my brother, John, was five), my Dad and his youngest brother, Earl, climbed up on that roof, thinly coated with fresh snow (a rarity in southern Louisiana). They intended to stomp in imitation of Santa's reindeer touching down to excite us about his arrival. (I'm not quite sure how they intended to get us to sleep afterwards.) Uncle Earl lost his footing and slid down that steep pitch, falling uninjured onto the soft earth. The sounds of his falling and his muffled cry of despair shocked John and me. "Momma, Santa fell off the roof? Is he still coming to leave our gifts?", John cried.

Christmas also means that God has ventured into our existence. The central mystery of our faith has the technical label "incarnation." Jesus was a genuine flesh and blood person. His birth in risky and deprived circumstances tells us that. Yet, the presence of God's Son was so fully concealed and compressed within that human life that the Gospels do not record anyone having seen any hint of that (with the possible exception of those three who saw the Transfiguration on the mount and felt dumbfounded by the moment). After the resurrection, Jesus' followers, Jewish monotheists, reflecting on his life through the lens of his death and resurrection, came to believe that he was divine.

Christmas means that human existence continues in God's presence in Jesus' ascended humanity. It means that my feelings, my limitations, my struggles have come into God's own experience through Jesus Christ. It means that I am never again alone and misunderstood.

Even the isolation of a pandemic cannot undermine the joy of celebration. Last Christmas Eve night, I stood, in a pouring rain, under an outdoor dining shelter of a closed restaurant in Philly with my son, Ben. I had dropped by to leave their Christmas gifts before returning to Virginia from an interim on the Allegheny Plateau of PA. Without risking exposure to the entire family, we found a way to toast the season and express our love with single-malt Scotch and hugs in masks.

The joy Christ's presence evokes simply pushes through any circumstance. Karl Barth called joy "a defiant nevertheless." May that joy arise within you this holiday season.

God's peace,

David

David W Perkins, Interim Rector