

The tradition of opening presents on Christmas morning is almost pervasive among Christians in America. It is among the best traditions we have and even many nonbelievers agree by making it a part of their lives at Christmastime. Even our selfish degradations fail to ruin it.

I can remember that for a few years when I was a child it was nearly impossible to fall asleep on Christmas Eve and very easy to wake up at 4 or 5 am so we could satisfy our excitement over the coming day. Those years happened between early childhood and adolescence when sleep was a precious jewel not to be neglected.

The same pattern was repeated by my own children. For a few years after they were old enough to anticipate the joy of opening presents they were up pretty early. More recently we have been able to sleep in a little. Last year I woke them up at noon or so.

It is those in-between years that are very interesting. They serve as an example of something very important in the Christian Faith; the coming together of divine and human will; the voluntary acceptance of the gift of life which is seen as such an overwhelmingly positive thing that only great excitement and energy can

accompany its celebration. It represents a hopefulness and joy that few other experiences of life exemplify.

### Struggle/Wilderness

A more realistic view of life is that it is a struggle, a journey through the wilderness characterized by hardships and difficulties that are fearsome to contemplate and result in dread and denial and avoidance whenever possible. A common experience of the morning is to feel burdened by the demands of the day and to grudgingly awaken at the latest possible moment. Evening is seen as a liberation from those demands. I realize that everyone experiences this journey differently; for me it took years of disappointments to accept the wilderness interpretation of life, and there may be some of you who find it foreign to your experience of life, even though it is very much represented in the bible.

One of the central images of the bible is the Exodus. The Israelites were kept as forced laborers in Egypt and long despaired of deliverance. When their redemption finally came they found themselves out in the desert. Some of them longed for their homes in Egypt. They wanted slavery back! Others feared the prospects of future confrontations and rather than faithful excitement at the thought of a promised

homeland they hesitated, choosing to remain in the wilderness where they perceived a greater safety. Later, the Israelites rejected their calling because they desired to be like the nations around them, a temptation, I might add, that is common among all nations. They wanted to conquer and dominate rather than to invite and befriend. They established a monarchy that was nothing much more than trouble until it finally fell. Life wasn't very much like Christmas for them.

## Isaiah

The prophets of Israel were able to see something different than the wilderness. Even though sometimes their proclamations were hard and judgments harsh they must be seen as doggedly optimistic. They saw life under God as a wondrous thing. Many of their words are a well-known part of our Christmas celebration. There is no better example than in Isaiah:

He says the people living in darkness have seen a great light.

The young woman shall be with child and give birth to a son and later names him Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Such thoughts are interspersed in Isaiah's presentation of an otherwise bleak and troubled world. Sometimes

the Book of Isaiah stops the judging and challenging and lamenting and bubbles over with a joy that resembles the joy of Christmas Morning. Chapter 35 is one such reference. Listen to some excerpts from its vision:

The desert and the parched land will be glad  
The wilderness will rejoice and blossom . . .

The eyes of the blind will be opened  
The ears of the deaf unstopped  
The lame will leap like the deer  
The silent tongue will shout for joy . . .

Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
streams in the desert  
The burning sand will become a pool . . .

and most importantly;

There will be a highway there! The Way of Holiness  
No lion will threaten on it, it will be safe . . .

The redeemed of the Lord will be there

It is the way home. And when they return to Zion;

Everlasting joy will crown their heads  
Gladness and Joy will overtake them

Sorrow and sighing will flee away

The most notorious feature of his vision is that it is not naive, but mature. It is the vision of one who has seen the worst, been through the wilderness, *is in the wilderness*, and the joy is too grand for words. There are few things we know that compare to it; birth, romance, the grandeur of an ocean sunrise or a mountain vista, long-awaited success after hard work and sacrifice, Christmas.

### Voluntary Joy

Christians sometimes speak of God's will as a burdensome demand and the discovery and doing of it as if it involves pain, self-denial, a kind of asceticism. The ways of God are above us and only a few can endeavor to understand them. The tradition of having "saints" speaks of this conviction. The implication of this belief is that the extraordinary demands of the gospel are meant only for a few, the exceptional. And of course, the extraordinary joy of the gospel is also reserved only for the few. This conviction and its implications are contrary to the actual biblical message.

If in the bible earthly life is acknowledged for its tragic burden and pain; the gospel word is surprisingly joyful and filled with meaning.

The prophetic discovery is that life is Christmas! And here, for once, this discovery tells us that our will and God's will is the same just like on Christmas morning when the will of the parents and the will of the children is the same. Everyone wants to open presents, wants everyone else to open them too. There is no defiant "sticking it to the man" here. We hear the invitation to come to the feast and find it compatible with our desire to be filled and satisfied. It is only because of human sinfulness that life becomes such a struggle. We are finally invited past the mirage of earthly pleasure and power to the inescapable reality of God's Grace.

To have faith in Jesus Christ is to receive this good news with joy. It is God's will that when evening and its promised rest comes, it will be welcomed in anticipation of the morning when:

Our heads are crowned with joy  
Gladness overtakes us  
And we sing the joyful songs

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