

It Came Just the Same
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I'm thinking about the Day of Infamy this morning, now an almost unbelievable 70 years in the past. December 7, 1941. An early winter morning's calm shattered in Hawaii and a nation ushered belatedly into the global conflict that would become known as World War II. And just eighteen days later, Christmas came just the same.

No doubt it was overshadowed by war. No doubt the families of those killed at Pearl Harbor scarcely noticed the trees and the candles and the carols through their grief. No doubt the families of those young men recently deployed to the Pacific or the European Theater--or soon to be deployed--celebrated a bittersweet Christmas, wondering if it would be their last as a whole family. No doubt calls for rationing and sacrifice were already filing the airwaves. But Christmas came. It came just the same.

That is the thing about the calendar. Except for Leap Day, each day of the year rolls around again next year and the year after, year after year. Even Leap Day makes predictable appearances. They come all the same.

Christmas came the year relatives lost their first pregnancy to a mid-December miscarriage. Christmas came in December 2001, just short months after 9/11. And Christmas will come this month, despite the Cargill workers and thousands of others who have lost jobs this month, this year. And despite those who have gone yet another year without finding sufficient employment.

And, whether it is our favorite day of the entire year or we'd rather stand up from Thanksgiving dinner and step directly into January 2, as easily and quickly as walking into the next room, Christmas comes just the same into our lives. So what are we to do, if, like the Grinch, we are seized from time to time by the feeling we must stop Christmas from coming. We must stop it from coming but how?!

My dad's approach, in his half-hearted Grinchiness, was to employ a delaying technique. Each year he'd select a random date--December 17th perhaps--before which no Christmas music was to be played in the house. We got around his decree by playing Christmas music when Dad wasn't home, of course. But even now, nearly ten years after his death, a grown woman with a home of my own, I felt a bit rebellious playing Christmas CDs as Sarah and I did some decorating yesterday.

The Miniver family, in Jan Struther's book *Mrs. Miniver*, made a tradition of eating a summer meal on Boxing Day, December 26, as a relief from the rich and hearty holiday fare. That sort of holiday from the holidays can be a way, not of preventing Christmas but of warding off an overdose of Christmas. December 23 might be a good day to turn off the carols, skip the cookies, not wrap a single present, eat tuna salad, and drink lemonade as a sort of fast before the feast.

More extreme measures might range from an outright household ban on decorations, carols and gifts to a month long vacation in a part of the world in which Christianity is not the majority religion. But ask any American Jew or Moslem or Hindu. Ask any American Jehovah's Witness and you will hear, Christmas comes just the same--unbidden and even unwelcome but inescapable as winter's cold here in Minnesota.

In his thought-provoking, readable and well-researched book *The Battle for Christmas*, Stephen Nissenbaum offers a "cultural history of America's most cherished holiday." As good religious liberals we know much of that history. We learned in Sunday School that Christmas is but one of many festivals of light celebrated by peoples of faith around the world at the darkest part of the year. We learned that early Christians layered Christmas on top of earlier pagan celebration of sun gods because they were unsuccessful in stamping out those pagan celebrations. We're quite comfortable, most Unitarian Universalists anyway, celebrating Christmas in one fashion or another because we know these pieces of history. We know it isn't a purely Christian holy day but rather an almost universal season of the soul in need of light. So we kindle menorahs and burn Yule logs and light Christmas trees.

The more enlightening parts of Nissenbaum's story, for me, examined the persistence of Christmas and the surprising, to twenty-first century minds, Unitarian position advocating **for** Christmas in the early American debate on the subject. That is a story for another sermon--how the Unitarians believed celebrating Christmas was good for families and the nation. Today I'm more interested in the deathlessness of this season.

From those early Christian leaders who found themselves unable to break the traditions of pagan believers and instead had to compromise by putting a Christian veneer atop the existing pagan celebrations to Puritan England which succeeded in stamping out Christmas only as long as the Puritans remained in political power to Puritan America where Christmas was banned more successfully for a much longer period, Christmas, eventually, came just the same. I don't see anything supernatural about this persistence. I don't believe the resilience of this holiday means that it is truly Christ's birthday and that merely human powers cannot suppress it. In fact, I believe quite the opposite. I believe Christmas--for that is the name we give it in our time and place--is a

thoroughly human holy season, born of a enduring human need for light--light in the sky, light in the human, light in the heart. Nothing else explains Christmas' ancient and timeless endurance. It resurfaces again and again, in many and various forms from revelry and debauchery to domesticity, from market place to altar, despite quite drastic attempts to quash it precisely because it answers an equally enduring longing. Perhaps, if one distance day, peace does dawn across the global, in every village and every heart, and the lowly are made high, and goodwill blankets the earth, then Christmas will cease its hold. But in the meantime...

Christmas was necessary in December 1941 perhaps more than ever. Not as a denial of the horror of Pearl Harbor. Not as an affront to those families sending their sons and husbands and brothers and fathers to war. But because of the horror, because of the fear, because of the uncertainty. The story of a prince of peace, born an unlikely infant and placed in a manger was probably especially timely and welcome that year. And the exchange of gifts, physical tokens of invisible love, probably spoke volumes that year.

And so it is in years of death, of job loss, of estrangement, of natural disaster or national tragedy. We can leave the decorations in the closet. We can silence the car radio. We can avoid malls and even skip church. But through some chink in our protective wall Christmas will come just the same. If we're lucky it will be in the form of a particularly beautiful Christmas card with a handwritten message of love and blessing. If we're not so lucky it will be in the form of a particularly distasteful advertisement telling us that a really good sale will allow us to one-up Santa. However it comes, Christmas will come just the same.

Garrison Keillor has said, "a lovely thing about Christmas is that it's compulsory, like a thunderstorm, and we all go through it together." "Lovely" is probably a judgement call, but there is truth in the rest of Keillor's statement. In our society Christmas is more or less compulsory. We don't have to celebrate it ourselves but it will go on around us, everywhere we turn. And in that respect we all go through it together. Some of us enthusiastically. Some of us willingly. Some of us reluctantly. And some of kicking and screaming and dragging our feet all the way.

I can't offer a surefire, lasting way out of Christmas. I won't try to cajole you out of whatever your natural stance toward the season is. But I remind us all, when Christmas bears down upon us, we get to decide how to meet it.

Will we seize a kernel of the message? Offer our own prayer for peace, good will toward all? Bah humbug until we are empty of grinchiness and ready to be filled again with some quite different emotion? Sing a lullaby or make a joyful noise? Carve the

roastbeast at a family dinner or in a soup kitchen? Shovel a neighbor's walk? Sit in silence for long, rejuvenating hours? Send donations to good causes in the names of everyone on our list? Wrap carefully chosen gifts? Care tenderly for our bodies and spirits with light, healthy meals? Savor once a year favorites dripping with cream and butter? Light candles or embrace the darkness?

Each choice can heal. Each choice is holy.

Let Christmas come, invites our closing hymn. We might as well. It will come anyway. Perhaps our welcoming invitation will soften its arrival. May it be so. Amen.