

Chapel Talk  
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What was I waiting for? What was it I wanted so desperately, as if my very being depended on that present? And how did it flash by so quickly? Where are those toys now? That day of days, those brief, sometimes mere 15 minutes of rabid, lustful tearing and discovery and ecstasy: that day, Christmas, a day that takes forever to get here, paradoxically, ends suddenly. What we imagined would nourish us forever dissipates before we reach the afternoon nap. As great an expectation as Christmas Day is, it lacks a sustaining power; there's an inevitable let-down to Christmas because of how we've built it up, how we've marketed it, how material we've made it. Even thinking about it now may be a heavy, sour memory, like being asked about that college you didn't get into or that former boy or girlfriend you no longer speak with.

For many of us, Christmas teems with family traditions, rituals that organize, or try to control, the chaos inherent in this day. In my family, nothing happens until everyone is awake and assembled downstairs, including grandparents who live down the road. As we start to gather, it's Joshua's task to show Carter the half-eaten cookie, the milk glass holding only a film of white at the bottom, and look! – there on the floor by the fireplace is an ashy footprint (perhaps too closely resembling dad's L.L. Bean boot, noted Joshua, the house detective, a few years ago) where Santa Claus walked into the room. Santa's even smudged the note Carter wrote Santa wishing him a Merry Christmas. My sister's young children left Santa questions: "What do you do during the summer?" "I go sledding," replied Santa, "and I get to go faster because there are no toys in the back!" And yes, the stockings that hung empty the night before now burst with packages. Anticipation mounts. Each family member scurries to a seat, awaiting the signal to begin.

Every since I was a child, my family began Christmas Day with stockings. All clad in pajamas— one particularly cold morning my grandfather wore my father's raccoon coat as a bathrobe—we opened stockings before breakfast. However, for my family, dating back to my grandfather Speers, stockings contain silly, frivolous, yet very intentional presents. Despite handwriting that looks quite familiar, these presents come from people I've never met or haven't seen in years, but who know something funny about me, and want to send me a gift to celebrate

that quality or moment. This past year I received wiffle golf balls from Tiger Woods, breath mints from William Shakespeare, a sporty car from a nearby car-dealer, sensuous hand lotion from a high-school girlfriend. Two years ago, in handwriting that looked a lot like my eldest son's, there was a present addressed to me from Gwyneth Paltrow, who once, I know, gazed at me while she performed in a play that previous summer. It was a book, *Dating for Dummies*. In my family, stocking presents are pay-back time; they are reminders of embarrassing experiences in the past year; and my siblings and parents spend much of the year accumulating these tokens. No event is off-limits: after my mother's reconstructive knee operation, Joshua, pretending to be her surgeon, gave her a package of screws and bolts. For me as a child and young adult this part of Christmas morning is filled with memories of teary-eyed laughter and scorching humility as I watched my siblings and parents read aloud the forged card before revealing the special gift. This was true family time.

After stockings, which takes almost an hour, there's breakfast— scrambled eggs, bacon, coffee cake, grapefruit, sometimes freshly squeezed orange juice; tea simmers in the pot. Recently it's been a challenge to keep Carter at the table after he wolfs down three bites. Finally, well-after 10:00 a.m., we move over to the big presents. One year some cousins spent Christmas with us; their children woke up at 6:00 a.m., aroused Christopher and Joshua and crept downstairs, so by 7:00 a.m. every present was unwrapped. That was a long day. In my mother's family, when she was a child, the routine was breakfast (not rushed), then stockings, then church with a sermon and communion, then back home for a formal lunch—her grandfather always had a second helping of dessert before his coffee—then, by mid-afternoon, when the waiting was nearly unbearable, with the sun almost gone, with her friends already playing outside in the street with their new toys, she at last got to open presents. That too was a long day. At their best, Christmas presents are surprises that connect and celebrate a friendship, a love, a bond. It is the joy of discovering what others think of you, what they want you to have—last year my younger and less athletic brother gave me a pogo stick. We give to recreate the offerings of the Three Wise Men, or, as Carter and his five-year old cousin labeled them, “the gift guys.” As excited as Carter was about what might be under the tree for him (hourly on Christmas Eve he updated the standings: “Dad, Christopher has four presents, Joshua has four presents, I have five presents, you have two presents)—despite this natural glee, he also confided to me: “Dad, I can almost see Chris' face when he sees that my present for him is

Gandolph.” Of course the most meaningful presents are those you make—the wobbly clay bowl you crafted 10 years ago which dad still has on his desk; the pine-cone you decorated and gave to mom; the wildly painted wooden key holder you created in shop for the grandparents. It’s akin to what the Little Drummer Boy plays for the Baby Jesus, or what the young couple sacrifices for the other in O’Henry’s beautiful story, “The Gift of the Magi.” The presents many of you shared through Mr. Cheban’s efforts after the Christmas Service mirror that spirit.

At its worst, Christmas Day becomes yet another exercise in competition and accumulation. As a country and as a people, we can be so carnivorous in what we desire and claim we need. We compare what we got afterwards like test scores or paper grades. Even our giving can become solipsistic, grandiose, vain—that TV commercial over Christmas about sending in the dog with the new set of car keys was a prime example of how twisted our conception of giving has become. All of a sudden, the gift I just opened looks pretty measly compared to what he just got – especially if the object of my envy belongs to a brother or sister. And thus the moment of long-anticipated ecstasy becomes a pout, and there is little harmony beneath those boughs. Mrs. Cottone told me that Ava didn’t care what present she received: she just loved ripping and tearing at the paper. The gift didn’t matter—how far we’ve transgressed from that innocent joy.

The last tradition of the day is the Christmas dinner. If unwrapping presents has been fraught with disappointment and competition, then the ensuing dinner is sure to be a simply marvelous occasion of family unity and holiday cheer. There you are seated—it may feel like imprisoned—next to an ancient aunt or uncle who regales you with endless stories of “When I was your age”; and on your other side, just to help complete your perfectly disastrous day, is your perfect cousin, with perfect complexion, perfect smile, perfect SAT scores, perfect co-curricular activities—and most of all, that perfect Christmas attitude, the one which casually mentions all the incredible presents received with an almost blasé comfort in his or her good fortune. You feel increasingly inadequate throughout the meal, and you realize why once a year is too often to exist with the rest of your family.

Sometimes this dinner is the last ritual any of us feel we have the strength for. Can’t I just take a bowl of cereal up to bed, or zone out in front of the TV? Over Christmas break, a cousin of

mine admitted he and his brother have a family tradition of weighing themselves before and after the meal, to see who can gain the most poundage during dinner. The record? Eight pounds in two and a half hours. There have been times after the Christmas dinner when I've glanced at the tree, and noticed how all those decorations and ornaments suddenly appear awkward, obsolete, wrong. It's time to move on, to exchange most of what you were given; to put in a closet the toy which is already broken or stripped of its initially coveted appeal; time quickly to pack away anything which is red or green or sparkles or jingles. There should be a law against playing Christmas songs after December 25th, you mutter Scrooge-like.

What was it I so wanted for Christmas? This year I found myself seeking only one present. The longing for it started in November, as I looked around at all my friends who seemed to have "it": I confess I wanted Santa to bring me a 20-year marriage. I wanted it like it could be a present magically wrapped under the tree. I found myself staring with envy—and therefore also with shame—at faculty couples, those married for forty years, those for much less. In the depth of my envy, I longed for what that 9th grade couple "had" as they walked together, even if it only lasted until lunch the next day. I was just like the speaker in Shakespeare's sonnet, a poem a few of us can remember Maya Angelou reciting at St. Andrew's in 1983:

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone bewep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed...

There I was, comparing, ashamed of my own situation, envious of those who had the shared intimacy, who experienced the idealized marital joy, who merely had a companion. Where could I find that present?

On a walk with my two girlfriends, Millie and Tallulah, just as break started, with Christmas fast approaching, I had an insight to this lowly lot of mine. No, I wasn't going to audition for the over-40 category of "The Bachelor," nor put a personal ad in the News Journal, nor hang out Friday night at The Big Kahunaville. In actuality, it was a simple epiphany: I don't need a twenty-year marriage with all the trimmings. I already have three incredible children who fill my

world totally, eight siblings and spouses and parents who accept me without a thought of my supposed shame—and as the dogs ran off through the woods after a smell, I began to understand that I still have this central being which is me that gradually I’m learning to accept, to accept this particular me, this me who somewhere within is still ashamed at who I’m not or am supposed to be. Paul D’s words to Sethe at the end of *Beloved* pinched me again: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are

Yes, I admit, this is an heinous cliché of an insight that I experienced out on the cross-country trails, verging into that parody from “Saturday Night Live”, where Stuart Smalley peers into the mirror and recites, “You’re good enough, you’re smart enough, and dog-gone-it, people like you!” But this moment stuck with me throughout the holidays because of a second epiphany. The great people around me, here at St. Andrew’s, in my family, in my other home in New Hampshire: those friends, I realized, didn’t need any presents for Christmas. I could tell by looking at them, being with them, that they had that “self”; they possessed a comfort, an intimacy, an acceptance of the self that didn’t involve envy or shame. They had the “self” to be able to give themselves – not that they don’t enjoy presents, but their sense of self is so strong they know they don’t lack anything. Instead of fighting the pain, rubbing salt into that wound again and again, I decided to acknowledge it. “Yea,” I thought to myself, “I don’t have that 25 year marriage I dreamed was going to be the cornerstone of my adult life. So?” By slowly accepting me, this whole me, I had less to feel guilty about, feel ashamed about, feel wanting for. No, I haven’t filled that place with my life’s companion: I’ve just made that hole smaller. Our identities are composed of all of what we are, not just the parts we like. My favorite character from *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* is Treebeard, who when asked for his name responds: “I am not going to tell you my name, not yet at any rate. For one thing it would take a long while: my name is growing all the time, and I’ve lived a very long, long time; so my name is like a story.” That’s us too: we are the sum of all of who we are: to deny any aspect of us, even the parts we don’t like, is to let shame and envy roost in us. They don’t have to be there.

A final observation about December 25th: have you noticed that except for “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” there are no Christmas hymns about opening presents? The Gospel stories move immediately into his baptism (the Scripture read tonight), and his ministry the last few years

of his life. Even the Bible tells us to move past Christmas morning; and then fast on the heels of Christmas is New Year's Day, a time when once again we search and ask for more. Our New Year's Resolutions, made not even a week after Christmas morning, are more things we need—but these desires are intangible: no more chocolate, lose ten pounds, write letters, balance the checkbook, volunteer at the hospital, do better at this or that. As separate as these two holidays are, one Christian, one pagan, are they not actually bound together? Don't these hollow promises underscore what remains absent in our lives, what we thought we could assuage or fill with what we just bought and received? In a sermon last Sunday, my minister brother Tom proclaimed that the reason that Christmas promises so much and seems to deliver so little is because we haven't changed. Today in this new year, we can yet change. We return "from whence we came, but we need not return as the same tired creatures, care-worn and spirit-lost, for we have seen wonderful things that have come to pass, strange and mighty sights that will never let us look at the skies in quite the same manner as before"(Peter Gomes).

I don't think we need to make any New Year's resolutions. Instead, we should have dreams—goals that are based not on guilt or shame or absence, but rather on certainties and beliefs. By grounding these aspirations in such a firm foundation, we are not wanting. Indeed, we go out into the New Year with what we are, who we are. Remember Peter Salett's commencement speech last year, quoting Nelson Mandela:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

My Christmas present to you is something you don't need because you already have it. You. It is my gift to me as well. Me. There is much to do and dream about and hope for in our world. It needs us. We have it within us to do. Let's get to it.