

“Will The Real Christmas Please Stand Up”

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6 January 2019 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

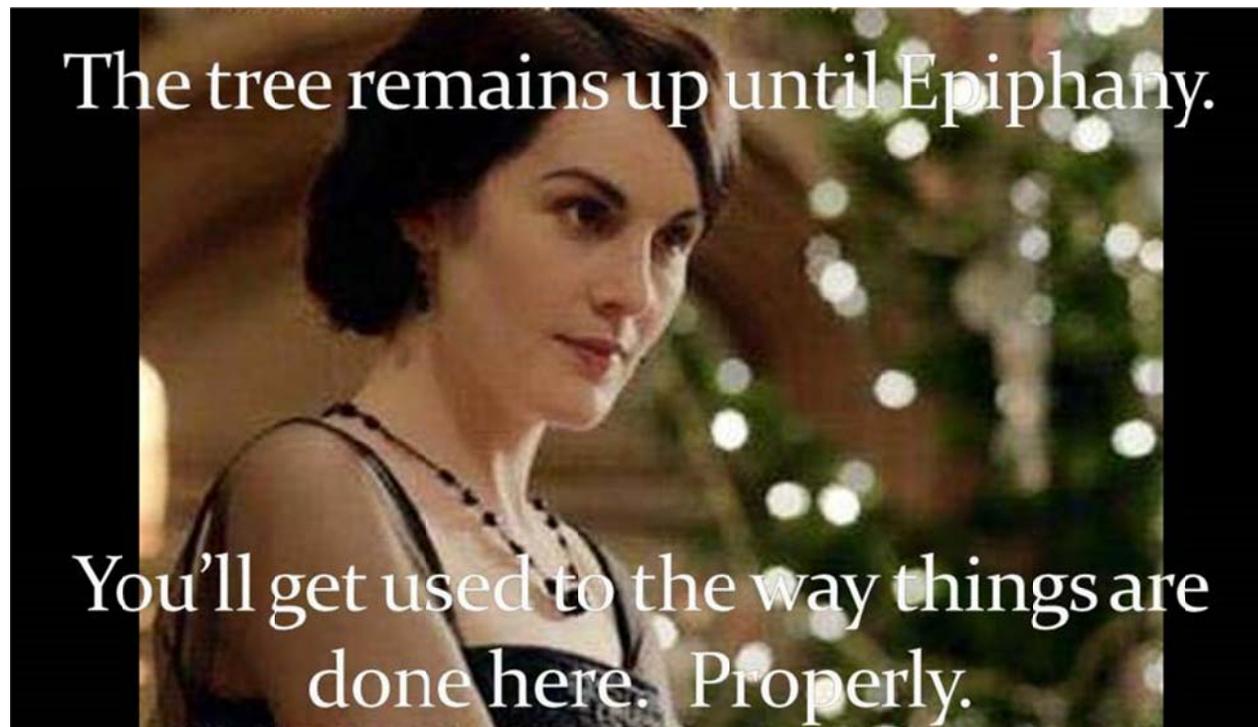
Matthew 2:1-12 = Epiphany

The presents gathered with such thoughtful attention now are all unwrapped. The tree is beginning to look a little forlorn. We are in that limbo time where it still feels like Christmas but you can no longer find eggnog at the supermarket, or if you do, it is marked down and perilously close to expiration.

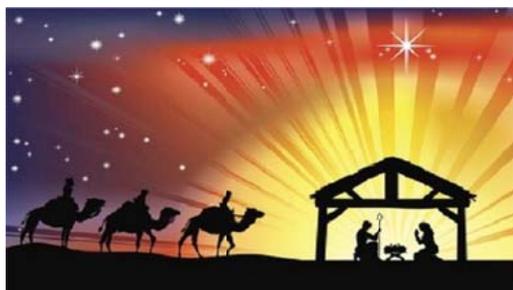


This is the time when some have already begun taking down their exterior decorations while leaving the tree to the last. These are the in-between times, the confusing times. Christmas sure feels past, but is it?

No one says it better than Lady Mary Crawley of Downton Abbey:



What's wrong with this picture? No, it's not the cat. It's that the Magi do not arrive until Epiphany and the shepherds are long gone. Technically, the Magi don't arrive until today in our readings, on Epiphany, 12 days later. We must ask in the immortal words of *To Tell The Truth*: "will the real Christmas please stand up?"



No one actually knows Jesus' birthday ~ the date we've set is just a convention set up based on anything but historical data. In all likelihood Jesus was actually born in the spring rather than winter, given that the lambing season in spring is when shepherds keep "watch over their flocks by night."

The date for celebrating Christ's birth was chosen by a Roman Emperor in an attempt to overwrite an immensely popular pagan festival noted for its drunken reveling and wild excesses. It is by no means certain even now whether Christmas tamed the pagan festival, or whether the Roman wild, end-of-the-year blast subsumed Christianity.



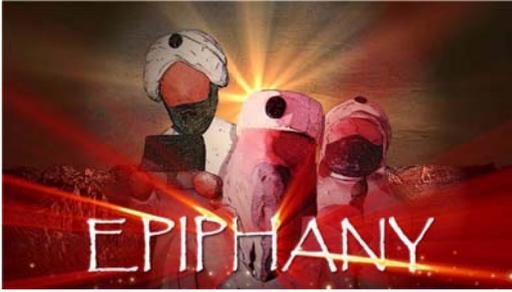
That old Roman festival took place the last five days of the calendar year when social strictures and conventions were relaxed and social roles were reversed. Many of those Roman traditions were preserved in medieval Europe in the popular Feast of Fools from Christmas to New Year's.



Unfortunately, that means we have preserved more of the drunken bacchanalia than the celebration of Jesus' birth.

How much better to celebrate the New Year, not in the drunken haze of the two-faced Roman god Janus, but rather in a chaste and sober rededication of ourselves to God's realm of justice, compassion and peace. That is the celebration we should choose this Epiphany.

The word "Christmas" means simply a holy "mass" or sacrament of the Lord's Supper held in honor of Jesus ~ not necessarily Jesus' birthday.



“Epiphany” on the other hand, is Greek for “manifest upon,” that is, God being manifest upon the Earth, the birth of Jesus. Epiphany falls on the 6th of January which happens to be the 12th day after Christmas.

Before they were subsumed under Western culture, many cultures celebrated Jesus’ birth and held their gift exchanges not on Christmas but rather on “Three Kings Day,” that is, Epiphany when the magi arrived to present their gifts. That truly makes more sense.

So “Will the real Christmas please stand up?” Among all the mistletoe and wreathes and flying reindeer, the cultural accretions *sans* spiritual content, what is the real Christmas, what is God’s original intention for how we should celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Early in our US history, the celebration were quite different, a bit more spiritual ~ a bit closer to the Biblical vision of God’s reign with strong indications of the social and economic reversals found in Scripture.



As our young nation began to spread West, free agrarian workers, slaves and urban workers called for a rearrangement of economic life at Christmas. At the end of the year, they were routinely furloughed and found themselves coming into the harsh winter in poverty and deprivation. It was the most miserable time of the year for most, while the landed aristocracy and urban elites enjoyed the fruits of the workers’ labor and were loath to share with them.



Almost straight out of Charles Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*, in our 19th Century growing cities, those with means heard increasing demands for mercy and justice around Christmas. The rabble became increasingly insistent with demands for employment, food and drink on account of the season. Much like Scrooge, the upper crust abhorred both the demands for justice and the revelry besides.

What the landed gentry and factory owners engaged in at the end of the 19th Century was a conscious effort to mitigate the demands for social justice. The publications and the pulpits of the time called on the nation to turn Christmas away from the public partying of furloughed workers, and to move the festivities indoors to become the individualistic family gatherings we know today ~ shorn of any social critique.¹ This is when the Christmas card came in, as well as the tree and home decorating and Santa.

Thus was consciously engineered a form of false consciousness to upend the social justice implicit in the message of the Messiah's birth as heard so magnificently in Mary's Song, the *Magnificat*, and the proclamation of the great Good News to simple shepherds, the lowest of the low.

“Sign me up” for the so-called “war on Christmas,” says Mark Sandlin writing in *Sojourners* magazine. The cultural accessions have so twisted the message of the birth of the Messiah that it bears almost no resemblance to the longed-for one coming to right the wrongs and create a just and peaceful world. Sandlin says:



“So, instead of the story of an olive skinned middle-eastern, unwed, pregnant mother, who was seen as little more than property, giving birth to what the world would surely see as an illegitimate child who was wrapped in what rags they could find and placed in a smelly, flea-infested feeding trough in the midst of a dark musky smelling animal stall, [instead] we end up with a clean, white-skinned European woman giving birth to a glowing baby wrapped in impossibly white swaddling clothes and laid to rest in a manger that looks more like a crib than a trough in the midst of a barn that is more kept and clean than many of our houses.”

Sandlin continues:

“The Christmas story has been hijacked by a dominant culture. Places of power and positions of prestige have warped the comeuppance sensibilities of the original Christmas story. God's vision of liberating the oppressed, the downtrodden, has been slowly replaced year after year with a story that no longer brings fear to the Powers that Be, but rather supports the big business agendas of profit and mass consumerism.”²

On Christmas Eve back in 2015, my co-pastor Beth Williams pointed out powerfully that “We need Christmas.” But even more, she asserted: “Christmas needs us.” Most of all Christmas needs to be shorn of all cultural accretions so we can experience it in all its deepest meaning and original power.



We don't know when Jesus was born. We have a guess of a date chosen for all kinds of reasons other than spirit. What we do know is that Jesus was born at the edge, at the margin of the margin, to an unwed mother in a filthy stable ~ all soon to be refugee immigrants fleeing for their lives ~ all of this according to God's plan. Jesus was born at the margins to bring salvation, hope, joy, peace, love, justice and empowerment to all the marginalized persons on this globe.



From Christmas to Epiphany and beyond to Easter and Pentecost and the whole of our existence, let us be God's Epiphany people. Let us be and become and remain God's Christmas community where the reign and realm of God begins, and let it begin with us.

¹ Paul Manseau in *The Atlantic*: http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/12/why-people-give-christmas-gifts/421908/?google_editors_picks=true

² Mark Sandlin in *Sojourner*: <https://sojo.net/articles/war-christmas-sign-minister>