

Pastor's Ponderings - December 2022

While we were watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on TV, my 30-something daughter wondered aloud why so many of the newer Christmas songs seem to be so "cheesy" compared to the good old classic Christmas carols. I found myself immediately speculating that it might well be because Christmas as we know it had the vitality of youth back when most of those now traditional songs were being written in the first half of the 20th century and our modern Christmas traditions were being established. While there are numerous 19th century hymns about the birth of Christ, most of our traditional popular Christmas carols are from the early-mid 1900s. Our current notion of Christmas, I said, is much younger than we think. But now that Christmas is so well ingrained in our culture, most producers of new music in the 21st century aren't creating Christmas carols so much as they are producing songs that might sell well in the Christmas season (despite being unsingable for most people).

Prior to the 20th century, Christmas Day was no more prominent than other holy days such as Michaelmas (Sept. 29), St. Nicholas Day (Dec. 6) St. Lucia Day (Dec. 13), St. Stephens Day (Dec. 26), Epiphany (Jan. 6), or Candlemas (Feb. 2)—all of which contributed to our contemporary "traditions" of



Christmas. Often, our "good old traditions" are not nearly as old or traditional as we think. For example, our current notions of Santa Claus and gift-giving really emerged in the modern advent of Madison Avenue advertising campaigns in the 1920s and 30s. Many credit our present imagery of Santa Claus to one particular magazine ad for Coca Cola in 1931.

From there Christmas has grown into the major shopping holiday it is today, with some "pre-Black Friday" sales now beginning in mid-October.

I read an essay some years ago arguing that the church ought to abandon Christmas altogether since it has become such a dominant secular consumer holiday that its religious meaning is irredeemably lost. But an opposite approach is also possible. Despite its extreme secularity and consumerism, we can embrace the fact that Christian themes of hope, peace, joy, and love all revolving around the birth of the savior are everywhere in our society in these weeks leading up to Christmas—we hear them sung in stores, written on cards and decorations, and depicted in television shows. Yes, in some cases specific mention of Jesus may be taken out of these messages in the public, nonetheless, the messages and images are present.

This is an opportunity for church-going Christians to try to highlight and celebrate, and most of all embody and live out those themes while they are, so to speak, in the air around us. Perhaps we might even contribute in small ways to disentangling those themes from their now secular trappings and show their reality to others. Many people are primed and inclined to return to traditions at Christmas time, including religious traditions.

It is a good time to invite someone to your home or church and share your traditions and the fruits of your faith. These holy days are set aside to notice and help others notice and remember the presence of God, born and embodied in the Christ of Christmas and still present within us and among us.

May it be so.

Ted