

God, Life, and Everything. Merry Christmas

For those of you who are Christians - Merry Christmas! (For the rest of you, please forgive a decidedly Christmas-centric column this week).

This is a wonderful and joyous holiday for us, and it's worth celebrating. But we don't need to get carried away, either.

You see, early Christianity didn't celebrate Christmas at all for the first couple hundred years. It took awhile for anyone to see why it was worth celebrating. (In contrast, they celebrated Easter almost immediately.)

In America, Christmas has a spotty history. The Puritans who came here on the Mayflower thought it was wrong because it wasn't mentioned in the bible. Besides, as famous Puritan leader Cotton Mather said in 1712, "the feast of Christ's nativity is spent in reveling, dicing, carding, masking, and in all licentious liberty...by mad mirth, by long eating, by hard drinking, by lewd gaming, by rude reveling!"

There were other objections to Christmas (and Easter, for that matter), including that Christ probably wasn't born on December 25, and that it was associated with the pagan Saturnalia. Those Puritans were stubborn about the holidays - they kept up their objections well in the middle of the 19th Century.

Some folks still object to Christmas because of the whole Saturnalian thing, but they may be able to ease up a bit on that score. Saturnalia is just one theory, and many scholars believe there is another more compelling argument for the December 25 date (not that anyone is arguing for December 25 as the *actual* date of Christ's birth).

The alternate rationale is that December 25 is nine months after March 25, which in the Hebrew calendar would have been the date associated with the Crucifixion. The date of the crucifixion is tied to Passover, so it's pretty easy to at least get in the ballpark. In some circles, it was considered a sign of holiness if a person died on the anniversary of their conception. So, if Jesus died on the anniversary of his conception (ie., March 25), then nine months later must be his birthday. Get it?

Frankly, does anybody care? Lots of folks celebrate their births on other days than their actual birthdays. It simply doesn't matter.

What *does* matter about Christmas is that God became one with us. The word "Emmanuel," an alternate name for Jesus, means "God with us." If you have any belief at all in the divine, then you can see how important this is. God is not distant, not disinterested, not cold and uncaring.

Rather, God is present, loving, caring, and seemingly overindulgent as parents go.

The birth of Christ celebrates the fact that God knows us, knows what it's like, understands and can relate.

That is the single most important aspect of this holiday. Without that, Easter makes no sense. Everything else is just fun and games.

Not that I object to the fun and games. Secular Christmas (Santa, trees, presents, cheesy songs) has so deeply ingrained itself into the American psyche that I doubt we'll tone it down - let alone get rid of it - within my lifetime. It just is a part of us, and grouching about it isn't going to make anyone come closer to Jesus.

For my part, I'll continue to hold up Jesus, God Incarnate, as the best reason to celebrate even as folks go about their mad dash for last minute gifts. The Puritans may not approve, but I think I can risk it.

If you would like to take a risk on Christmas this year, why not join us at St. James'? We have two services on Christmas Eve, one at 6:00 pm, and one at 10:00 pm. We also have a service on Christmas morning at 10:00 am (at our chapel on 10 E. Market Street).

However you choose to celebrate this holy day, I wish you a joyful, happy, and blessed Christmas!