

Christmas At The Beach

*“Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.”*

Traditional Christmas carol¹

It will be an unusual Christmas for Imogene and me this year. We have no Christmas tree in our resort room overlooking the ocean at North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

There are no presents to wrap.

We won't be driving to join family for the holidays.

And none of them will be joining us.

Our euchre-playing friends invited us to join them for Christmas dinner and cards afterwards. Our other option was Boulineau's IGA up on the corner for a Christmas meal. (The same place where our local men's group meets on Wednesday mornings—last week we had an Elvis impersonator singing his Christmas songs).

This is the first Christmas that neither of my parents aren't alive to celebrate.

We're hopeful we can get in mom and dad's remodeled house by the first part of next month. (We plan to drive home the last day of December).

The sand in the hourglass is running out for my walks on the beach. Last evening, at dusk, I took a stroll alongside the ocean. The vivid red, orange, purple and blue hues—set against the ever-flowing in-and-out of the ocean waves—was breathtaking. It always is. Every night here at the beach is another exquisite tapestry painted on God's palette. I wonder what Jesus Christ thought as he looked out at the majestic setting of the sun over the Sea of Galilee or the Mediterranean Sea? He was there when the entire creative plan was spoken into existence. What thoughts went through his mind? Did he see the colors through his physical eyes—which he created according to the grand design—the same way I see them? Did the colors take on added beauty and texture viewed through his spiritual eyes? Why am I even privileged to wonder about the grandeur of creation? How is it that I am even self-conscious to the point of thinking about the incredible beauty of these sunsets?

Most incredible of all, this magnificent universe was created for us—human beings—to enjoy. The sole purpose of all this beauty is to testify of the greatness of God.

At the end of time, the entire universe will be rolled up as a scroll.

For those who will be worshipping around the throne—lost in His presence—it will no longer be needed.

That is really hard to wrap my head around as I continue my stroll down the beach.

¹ The Christmas carol was written in 1719, by Issac Watts, an English Christian minister whose words were inspired by *Psalms* 98:4 (“Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise and rejoice, and sing praise.”) The carol is so popular that as of the 20th century, it was the most published Christmas hymn in North America.

As I'm writing this portion of the missive, it is 3:00 in the morning. I'm sitting on the couch beside my grandson Grant Richard, who is wrapped in a blanket and hacking and wheezing. We have pumped him full of cough medicine so he can sleep. Grandma Imogene is snoozing on the other end of the couch. Today we took Grant and Eden Grace (Bethany's two oldest children) out to see our friend Gwenna and her dog Jet. Gwenna loves children but none of her kids live here. So she bought a couple nice presents for the kids and even crocheted hats for them. (Shortly after we left, Ima got a call from Gwenna that her mom had suffered a stroke).

"Sigh."

We've tried to make the visit of our grandkids special: a swim in the pool, a visit to the Christmas show at the Alabama Theater, McDonald's for pancakes, and last night, a trip to a local Christmas "festival of lights." It was really nice. They had a Santa's Workshop area where the grandkids had a special photo taken with Ol' Saint Nick himself. We all enjoyed the Music Land section where the lights were synchronized with Christmas songs played by a local radio station.

As we drove through, it reminded me of one holiday season on the "Christmas Street"—Juniper Avenue in Sterling, Virginia—where we lived for twenty years. One house in the neighborhood was fully decorated with lights that were synchronized with a local radio station.

Ah, such memories. Those were the glory days of our "Christmas Street": when the street in front of our house was so crowded that we couldn't back out of the driveway; when carolers roamed the street and donation boxes were set up to collect food and toys; when buses hauled senior citizens down the street to see the decorations; when the neighbors up and down the street fully participated (it began as neighbors honoring a family that lost a son over the holidays, a child who loved Christmas lights); when our neighbor across the street chopped down an unwanted pine tree in his front yard, created a grinch-figure in his garage workshop, and put the whole creative display—with lighting—on his roof; and when we had our own big NOEL sign with penguins sliding down the "L" and a growing "waddle" of penguins around our small blue spruce tree in the front yard.

But the girls grew older and moved away and the grandkids became less interested in helping grandpa pull the decorations out of the attic. It became harder and harder to make the effort to haul out the lights and decorations. As I observed in a past holiday missive, our advancing years, and the search for a warmer climate after retirement, have turned us, in many ways, into Mr. and Mrs. Scrooge.

The "Christmas Street" likewise changed. It was as though our street seemed to be suffering some kind of holiday fatigue. New couples moved in and could care less about the neighborhood tradition or, apparently, the true meaning of Christmas.

"Sigh."

The thought also occurred to me recently, that the Christmas season is less than a festive time of "Joy" for those with a lukewarm faith or no faith at all; or those who are lonely, broken, estranged from family and friends, or serving our country abroad. I remember flying a combat orbit off the Vietnam coast on Christmas Eve. That was five decades ago, but I remember the empty feeling like it was yesterday.

When I see today's headlines on my cellphone, there also appears to be an absence of "Joy" anywhere I look. The war grinds on in Ukraine, now approaching 670 days old, the barbaric acts committed by Hamas and the corresponding Israeli operation in Gaza is over 75 days old, the age-old specter of antisemitism is raising its ugly head again, and the political

rancor and bitter partisanship in our country is worse than I can ever remember—there is a whole lot more shouting than talking to those who disagree with us.

As Jimmy Buffet would say—“changes in attitudes, changes in latitudes” are everywhere around us these days.

But true “Joy” appears to be missing in action.

For that reason, more and more, I seek the refuge of memories to dredge up incidents of joy from my past. These next two holiday memories will be familiar to my long-time readers. The first one comes from the final school where Imogene taught in Loudoun County, Virginia. Every year, (in the days before COVID), Ima’s school hosted a holiday dinner. Many—if not most—of the students who attended Ima’s elementary school were from low-income families. Hispanic and immigrant families inhabited the housing areas surrounding the school.

That was their *community*.

Their service area.

The week before Thanksgiving Day, the school invited the kids, parents, grandparents and other community members to a special dinner.

It was a tradition for the school.

No one was turned away.

For many of the families that was the best meal they would eat all year.

Food was donated by local merchants. The teachers cooked the turkeys at home, the school cafeteria fixed the rest of the food.

On that special night, teachers and administrators generously doled out the food on school trays at the door.

Tables were set up in the gymnasium and cafeteria.

Each of the school’s grades provided decorations for the walls and tables.

A local middle school band provided Christmas music as the people entered.

In the cafeteria area a Hispanic band played a mix of pop and classic hits (the lead guitar obviously preferred Santana riffs).

A local church provided a Christmas toy to each of the kids. The church adopted the school as a mission-outreach endeavor and its members do many other things for the school throughout the year.

Ima and I volunteered in the kitchen, working late into the night cleaning and drying trays.

The work was hard.

But what a joy!

Such a special evening.

I couldn’t help but think that is the way it is supposed to be—and, in many respects, used to be—in this country.

No cumbersome government program and no bureaucratic strings.

No debilitating *woke* agenda.

A school, a community, working together to provide a special gift of love for the students they serve and their families.

I was singularly blessed to play a small part in the event.

Ima’s school holiday dinner reminded me of another special occasion.

It has been many years now.

I have recounted this memory in my last three holiday missives.

That is how strong the memory remains etched in my brain.

In those days, I was the Director of the June Buchanan School—a small, private school located on the Alice Lloyd College campus—in remote Pippa Passes, Kentucky. Our students were from the rural Appalachian Mountains, a mixture of kids from local families, campus families, and a scattering of kids from professional families in nearby communities.

Running the school, and working with those incredible kids and families, were the best years of my life.

We had a special group of highly motivated teachers. (They certainly didn't do it because they would become rich.) Our usual Christmas tradition was a party at a restaurant in nearby Hazard or Pikeville, where we exchanged mostly gag gifts and enjoyed each other's company. (A pair of pink-laced handcuffs made the rounds year-after-year as the most memorable gag gift for the couples).

One year we departed from tradition.

I'm not sure whose idea it was.

But we decided to pick the neediest family in our school population, collected donations of food stuffs and money—students included—to give to this family.

The Slone family had two kids in school. To help defray tuition costs, the mother went above the call of duty in cleaning the school after hours and helping provide other tasks as needed. She was a blessing to us all.

Her husband was out of work. He had gone through several surgeries (he lifted up his shirt one day to show me his stomach, chest and back, which were crisscrossed by a number of railroad-looking post-surgery scar tracks).

Like many men in those days, if you weren't fit enough to work in the underground coal mines, there was no work available. (Today, years of well-meaning but ultimately destructive social welfare programs have spawned generations of young men in the mountains who deplore the idea of a hard day's work and use all their creativity to get "on the draw." Drug overdose deaths and suicides are far too common).

The Slone's didn't have two nickels to rub together.

One cold-gray, snowy evening, the entire body of teachers and staff loaded up in a convoy of cars to make the slippery trek up a narrow "holler" to the trailer where the Slone's lived. The unmistakable smell of burning coal lingered in the air.

We all huddled together inside the trailer's small but warm living room.

We sang Christmas carols.

We distributed foodstuffs, toys and money to the family.

There were tears of joy from both recipients and givers of the gifts.

I will never forget the warm glow I felt inside that evening.

The frigid weather outside could not dampen that feeling.

That was my best Christmas ... ever.

I trust each of you close your ears to the noise around you and delight in the pure "Joy" of the season. It is not about presents, but God's special gift to each of us. Think on the true reason for the season and make your own unforgettable memory this year.

Merry Christmas!