

# The Vintage Voice

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## How Does Christmas Come?

*The Rev. Canon Warren S. Nyback*

The late *Los Angeles Times* columnist, Jack Smith, wrote an annual piece about how Christmas “came” for him that year. The gist of the column was that he usually felt like Scrooge, but then something would happen to get him into the spirit of the season. While it was a “feel good” piece devoid of any theology, I always found a certain truth to it. As an active priest, I found that I was always so busy getting ready, making Christmas come for others, that it sometimes didn’t come for me until it was over for everyone else.

I didn’t want it to be that way for our family. When our family was young and growing, we had a plethora of “Christmas liturgies” — things we did together to get ready so that Christmas would come for us. The Advent Calendar, the Christmas books, putting the lights up outdoors, getting out the boxes of wrapping paper, ornaments, and Christmas “kitsch” were things we and our daughters looked forward to as Christmas excitement grew.

Two things always highlighted our preparation, though.

The first was the buying of the tree. Bundled in warm clothing, we would spend a late afternoon and early evening at the rail yards in the produce district of Los Angeles where dozens of wholesalers sold trees to the public. We would wander from dealer to dealer, looking for “our tree”—the one waiting for us to discover it amongst the thousands of others. It couldn’t be perfect. It had to have a “gap” in it somewhere, so we could hang a truly silly oversized ornament of a young skier we named “Hector.” We would circle a tree asking, “Where’s the spot for Hector?” When we and our tree found each other, it was tied to the top of the car and we went to our favorite Mexican restaurant for dinner, before the perilous thirty-mile ride home on Southern California’s finest freeways. The ride home was always a time of tension in the car. Had we tied it down well? Would it fly off the car? Would the wind damage it? We always got home safely. The tree always stayed on the car and was always undamaged. But every year, we would worry.

The second highlight was the buying of special ornaments. A year before our older daughter was born, we began what became a tradition of buying a special ornament each year for each person in the family. As our girls got older, this, too, became an important part of our Christmas preparation. These were always special, out-of-the-ordinary decorations, ornaments you wouldn’t see on just any tree, often purchased at upscale department stores. Our elder daughter Amy collected tea pots. My late wife Gretchen collected glass and crystal animals. Our younger daughter Rachel collected candy canes. We thought that when the girls grew up and began their own households, they would take their ornaments and thus always have a part of their family and their childhood with them.

Each year, then, we bought five ornaments: one for each of us and one for the family. Gretchen carefully labeled each ornament with the date and the name of the person whose it was. When they

were all on the tree, it was a most amazing sight, an eclectic jumble of unique and beautiful adornments.

Then things radically changed. Amy died suddenly in a severe asthma attack. We gave a few of her ornaments to some of her closest friends. Eighteen months later, Gretchen died. Making Christmas come would forever be different. There I was, with enough ornaments for two or three trees. Last year, for the first time, Rachel, having taught abroad, gone to seminary, and now settled in her own apartment in southern California, took her ornaments and put them on her own tree. I gave her a box with many of her sister's and mother's ornaments, as well. At least part of the plan worked.

Christmas still comes, but in different ways.

In memories, of course, for as we decorate the tree each year, each ornament seems wrapped in a memory: where it was bought; the arguments over who saw it first; the trips when I brought back ornaments from museum shops and Christmas stores; and how we'd sit down to parcel them out, everyone arguing, negotiating, and choosing the one they wanted.

In reflection, as well, for as I unwrap them, the festive clutter of memories gets deeper and deeper: how different and wonderful things were then. And how utterly normal, too: the perfect family—two lovely daughters, a loving and wickedly funny wife, a nice home, a responsive and supportive congregation. And at the same time, as I listen to the carols in the background from the stereo, I wonder at my life in semi-retirement; how different things are now. Wonderful, yes, and normal, too, but so very different.

But it comes also as I struggle into the present. After 14 years together, my partner still doesn't get Christmas quite the same way I do, and there's always a tense moment or two. But somewhere, as we clean up the old ornament wrappings, as one of us climbs the ladder to put that last angel on the very top of the tree, or when we stand together at the door to greet friends coming for dinner, Christmas comes for us. In the here and now—in the things we do together and for each other, Christmas comes for us.

With the freedom of retirement, I've discovered another way in which being in the here and now lets Christmas come. No longer worrying if the liturgy will go well, I can sit in a congregation participating as a worshiper, or be part of the altar party on Christmas Eve. I can listen, sing, and pray in a more centered and open way; I can really celebrate the outpouring of God's love because I'm not mentally gauging if it all is working. And when it's all over, I'm refreshed, not exhausted!

May Christmas come for you in wonderful memories, and in the challenges of the here and now.



Warren celebrates 42 years of priesthood in March of next year, all of it in the Diocese of Los Angeles. Since his retirement, he has been the Bishop's Chaplain to Retired Clergy and Clergy Survivors for Bishop Bruno. He resides in Pomona, California, where he enjoys gardening, cooking, theater, smiling proudly as his daughter Rachel enters her third year of ordained ministry, and planning travels for himself and his partner.