

The Vintage Voice

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A Different Christmas

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For years our Christmases were reliably the same. Same fluffed-up Advent wreath. Same favorite ornaments on the tree. Same treasured crèches on every available surface. Same recording of Amahl, his mother, and those regal night visitors filling our house with their compelling voices. But the climax was always the Christmas Eve service in our church, where my husband, John, was rector. That service — the Christ Mass — *was* Christmas.

When John retired, our Christmases began to change. Our three sons were grown though not yet married. So they could still celebrate with us. On that first Christmas, one son suggested we spend the holiday in New Orleans. That seemed a bit strange, but — not wanting to be inflexible — we went. Dinner on Christmas Eve was shrimp étouffée instead of our usual ham and cheese grits, but we made it to the Cathedral for the midnight service. And as always, the Christ Mass *was* Christmas.

For the next few years, our Christmas venue varied widely from my mother's in West Texas (once) to Santa Fe (thrice) to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico (twice). As our venue changed, our participants changed, as well. Two sons got married, so daughters-in-law were added; and then, of course, grandchildren. Then one son moved with his family to far-away Argentina, and they were out of our Christmas plans entirely. The rest of us settled into alternating Christmases between Prescott, Arizona, and Albuquerque, New Mexico, where the other two sons lived.

But no matter where we were or who was there, no matter how many traditions we had given up (because we were now celebrating the next generation's Christmases), still we always made it to a Christmas Eve service in a local Episcopal church.

This past year, however, we didn't even manage to do that. Everyone had assembled in Taos, New Mexico, where the son and his family from Argentina had just moved. This would be his children's first Christmas with the rest of us.

On Christmas Eve all of us went to the Taos Pueblo to watch the fascinating procession of the Virgin, and we were thrilled and delighted by the innumerable, enormous bonfires. John and I had thought we would leave in time to make it to the service, but it was not to be. We didn't even make it on Christmas Day because we were, of course, opening presents with the gathered family.

And so our last perfectly preserved, uninterrupted Christmas tradition hit a big road bump: no church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. But we survived the jolt, and, in fact, we may have inaugurated a marvelous new tradition. Not a replacement, but an addition: a formal candlelight dinner for the grandchildren. Because John and I were staying in one home and everyone else was staying with the son who had just moved to Taos, I sent out an invitation to our grandchildren a couple of weeks before we were all to gather: "You are invited to a candlelight dinner on the second day of Christmas. . . ."

I asked our unmarried son and his good friend to join us. But *no* parents were invited! On the appointed hour, our five “grands” appeared at the door. A fire was roaring in our little New Mexican kiva fireplace, Christmas music was playing, and candles were burning in the windows, on the hearth, and on every tabletop. We were ready. We sat in a circle on the floor between the fireplace and the bedecked Christmas tree, and we talked about the Christmas story. They were very knowledgeable, which both thrilled and surprised me, as none of our grandchildren attends Sunday school and church (unless they go with us).

When we started talking about the angels, Colter (six) wanted to know if we could sing “that angels’ song” again. He and his siblings had loved singing it the year before. They were very good at all those “glorias”! We sang every Christmas carol we knew, and hearing those children’s little voices singing so tenderly was one of those moments when I felt the veil was almost transparent. The Holy was visible . . . and, poignantly, audible.

After our chorale, it was time for dinner. I told them that tonight was going to be special because we were all going to act very civilized at the table. We were going to imagine that we were having dinner with the Queen. We must sit up straight, put our napkins in our laps, not eat with our fingers, and we must have scintillating conversation (because that is what one does at a dinner party!) Of course, no one should even think of leaving the table until everyone was finished.

They were quite taken with the whole idea. Suddenly table manners became fun. The conversation was lively and entertaining. Everyone had something interesting to say. My favorite comment was Owen’s explanation of what oxen are: “Oh, you know, oxen are a lot like yak.” Toward the end of the meal, as we were finishing up our peppermint ice cream, Ellie (six) asked if we could do this every year. Hailey (nine) chimed in that this was the very nicest dinner party she had ever been to. Owen (eight) thanked me for having this special party. Colter, ever the diplomat, thanked Poppie, too. And Claire (three) smiled a lot.

Then, the *piece de resistance*. I had bought some poppers, “on sale” Fourth-of-July poppers (not Christmas crackers). They came in a long tube, and as you turned the end of the tube, they exploded with a very loud bang, and mylar confetti and serpentines spewed out everywhere. We had made our circle again, and as the tubes exploded, the children started laughing and scooping up the confetti and serpentines and throwing them on one another. Suddenly, bedlam! The next thing I knew, Uncle Mark turned into a monster and started chasing the children throughout the little house. Then the children were transformed into monsters, too — wild, screaming, mylar-covered monsters. It was into this out-of-control scene that the two subdued-looking sets of parents arrived. They probably thought we had not been able to keep control all evening. They looked slightly horrified.

For the nine of us gathered that evening, it was a night to remember. For three miraculous hours, they were not young children, and we were not old grandparents. We were equals, truly savoring one another’s company, and celebrating the birth of Christ together . . . telling the story, singing the songs, exploding the poppers, for Heaven’s sake. It was as good as church.



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