

December 23, 2022

## Christmas 2022

I returned to East St. Louis a day before the cold and the dusting of snow that is just enough to make it a white Christmas. For the first time since the pandemic, we were able to go to Toyland in Greenland. It was good to see most of the old crew who come during the Christmas season to help the northern Santa. Sadly, some of the regulars have joined the ancestors, but we held a very moving memorial service for them. As you know from my other Christmas writings, I work with the location division that tracks where children will be so that Santa will know where to deliver their presents. This year, the work was very very difficult, made more difficult by the Ukraine War. All four Santas are having trouble tracking children this year because so many have been displaced through war, or through migration as their parents flee poverty, violence, and repressive governments.

Every Christmas, humanity is fighting itself on some part of the globe. This year, we can be thankful that two conflicts have paused, in Yemen and the conflict between Ethiopia and the Tigray. In the latter conflict, both sides have agreed to create a monitoring body to oversee the peace agreement. Life is still difficult, but it is slowly getting back to normal. Sadly, such is not the case in Ukraine. Working with figures from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), we think that more than half of the country's 7.5 million children were displaced after only a month of the war; that is about 4.3 million children. Approximately 1.8 million have been displaced outside of the country and 2.5 million have been internally displaced. The Russians have taken some children from Ukraine's orphanages to Russia. Traditionally, Santa is not big in Ukraine. However, under the influence of the West, Christmas in Ukraine is starting to look more like Christmas in western Europe. Santa dispatched one of his surrogates to be St. Nicholas, and the government issued assurances that there would be air defenses to protect him.

Actually, when the real Santa and I talked about the changing celebrations, he hoped that the old traditions of food, caroling, and ancestor respect and remembrance would remain. Traditionally, Christmas Eve is January 6, but more people celebrate on December 25. In Russia, Santa is known as Grandfather Frost and he gives gifts along with his granddaughter, the Snow Maiden. Again, food is a large part of Christmas celebrations, and the religious significance of the holiday returned after the Soviet period. However, during war, especially this year in Ukraine, food is difficult to come by. There is a lack of heat, electricity, and water in Ukraine because the Russians are bombing critical energy infrastructure. Actually, the war is causing economic hardships across the globe because humanity is interconnected.

Santa and I spoke about the tragedy of the Ukraine war one morning over breakfast. "I heard you have been reading Russian literature again since the war started," Santa said, as he dug his fork into a steaming plate of scrambled eggs made with half whole eggs and half egg whites.

"I have. I decided to read the novel *Dr. Zhivago*. I have seen the movie I don't know how many times, and have watched the television version once or twice. But, I decided to read the book, looking for a quote about how happily married men do not volunteer to fight wars. I didn't find the quote, but I did find other descriptions of war that reminds us: war is madness," I said.

"And then?" Santa asked with that twinkle in his eye that says he already knows the answer to the question he just asked.

"Then I started reading the history of Napoleon in preparation of writing a letter to Putin from Napoleon. I found a description and a denunciation of war that could have been written by the most committed peacenik in history, but was written by Napoleon," I answered, wondering what the next question would be.

"And then?"

"Then I became angry, not only at Putin and his puppets in government, but I became angry with Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church for his support of the war. He calls it a war of self-defense when he knows full well that Russia started this insanity. Russia was not under threat either by Ukraine or by NATO or by the EU or by the United States. It is times like this that I wished I still believed in hell. Now, I have to hope that within the Cosmic mystery that is Divine Love, Putin, Kirill, and others will receive their just due. No grace. No mercy. Justice. And I am glad that I am not God."

"And then?" Santa asked, this time sipping his hot chocolate.

"Then I started reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, knowing that it would give me a description of war that shows its horrors, but then, I stopped reading *War and Peace*, and started reading his books on religion. I know that Tolstoy's religion led him to a pacifism that I have yet to achieve. I think there are times when one ought to fight one's enemies to an unconditional surrender, that this is the only way to peace. This conflict in Ukraine is one of those wars. Putin will never stop until he sees no possibility of victory. Once they have suffered a devastating defeat, the Russian people can finally rid themselves of a leader who ought to be committed to a facility for the criminally insane. Tolstoy was a great writer and strived to be a Christian. By this I do not mean a member in good standing in a particular church. I mean he took the teachings of Jesus seriously and found within them the way to his own happiness and peace. I appreciate the end of his book, *My Religion*, when he writes: 'The Church that sought to detach men from error and to weld them together again by the solemn affirmation that it alone was the truth, has long since fallen to decay. But the Church composed of men united, not by promises or sacraments, but by deeds of truth and love, has always lived and will live forever.'"

Santa smiled. Having finished his breakfast, he rose to go about his day leaving me to mine.

"We'll speak some more later."

All day long, I thought about what else he wanted to talk to me about. Would he be angry that I have not touched the issue of climate change since we spoke about it last Christmas? I know that he believes that women and other pregnant people ought to have the right to say a holy no to pregnancy and child birth, a struggle that has taken a good portion of my time this year. I know he is proud to see Ketanji Brown Jackson sitting as the first Blackwoman justice of the United States Supreme Court. I wrote about this in an essay – “Answered Questions.” Perhaps he wants to interrogate me more about my thinking on the phenomenon of religion itself because I am working on it in relation to the *Game of Thrones*.

Later, in the evening, the entire community came together for a concert. Each evening, after work, those who wanted to could come together to see an artistic performance. Two weeks ago, we watched the Morehouse-Spelman Christmas Carol Concert via YouTube. I was very proud of those beautiful young people making such beautiful music, representing the culture well. Another night, we watched a performance of the Nutcracker Ballet. This night, we watched Handel’s Messiah Trinity Church Wall Street. As I saw the women dressed in their beautiful gowns and the men dressed in their good suits, I was once again amazed at how extraordinary ordinary people are. All of the performers would be people one would pass on the street, not thinking for a moment that they possessed an angelic singing voice. We all have a gift to share with the world.

Santa and I never had an opportunity to complete our conversation unless it was the last thing he said before I got in the car to get my flight home. “Remember Mr. Paige,” he said, referring to Mr. Paige, a Bible study teacher at Grace Baptist Church of Germantown in Philadelphia when I was a member there. “Weary not in well doing for you will reap if you faint not.” Santa said, quoting the scripture Mr. Paige said to me whenever he saw me. I suspect he gave this same encouragement to others as well. I smiled, knowing that there will be many challenges to address in the new year, not the least of which is child poverty, including something called bed poverty where children do not have a bed of their own in which to sleep. They share a bed or sleep on the sofa or in the bathtub or on the floor, leading to sleep deprivation, problems with mental health, and poor performance in school. There is much writing to be done to remind people that the purpose of our living is sustenance and joy, not only for ourselves, but for the whole world, for nature and all of creation, that we are the Christ child, that we each, ourselves, ought to be the human incarnation of Divine Love.

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and a very Happy New Year!