

“Neon Noels or Living Light?”

In his book, Brothers Keepers, novelist Donald E. Westlake tells the story of Brother Benedict. This is a monk who has been cloistered for ten years and suddenly finds himself forced into the “outside world” by events that threaten the monastery in which he lives. He has to journey away from the isolated monastery into midtown Manhattan. It is Christmastime, and he is taken aback by the sights and sounds of the city as he travels through.

While riding in a car — something he hadn’t done in ten years — he notices some things and makes an observation:

I turned away, looking out at the traffic, seeing in front of us now a yellow taxicab with a bumper sticker reading Put Christ Back In Christmas. An excellent sentiment, only slightly marred by the fact the lettering was colored red and white and blue, as though Christ were a good American running for re-election. But it's the thought that counts, however muddled.

Finishing with the bumper sticker, I looked out my side window at the activities of the world. It was not yet eleven o'clock on Saturday night, the thirteenth of December, and the streets were full of people, most of them couples, most of them holding hands. The pagan Christmas icons — pictures of that fat red-garbed god of plenty — were displayed in store windows everywhere, but most of the pedestrians seemed concerned with more personal pleasures: movies, the theater, a nightclub, a late dinner out. Neither of our Western gods — Christ and Santa Claus, the ascetic and the voluptuary — seemed much in the thoughts of the citizenry tonight.

Put Christ back in Christmas. The next thing they'll say is, Put Jehovah Back In Justice. Think about that for a minute.

How the gods change. Or, to phrase it more exactly, how our image of God changes. Long ago, human beings became uneasy with that stern

and unforgiving God the Father, the thunderbolt who lashed out so violently and unpredictably. Western man replaced Him with Christ, a more human God, a kind of supernatural Best Friend, a Buddy who would take the rap for us. (The Holy Ghost has always been too . . . ghostlike, to pick up many fans. What's His personality, where's the character hook, where's the worshipper identification?)

But even Christ carries with Him that sense of austerity, that implication of duty and risk and the possibility of truly horrible loss. So on comes jolly Santa Claus, a god so easygoing he doesn't even ask us to believe in him. With that belly and that nose, he surely eats too much and drinks too much, and more than likely pinches the waitress's bottom as well. But it doesn't matter, it's all harmless fun, the romping child in all of us. Bit by bit over the centuries we have humanized God until we have finally brought Him down to our own level and then some; today, with Santa Claus, we can not only worship ourselves but the silliest part of ourselves.

It struck me as I read this for the first time that Westlake has hit on one of the dilemmas for Christians in today's world: For us, is Christmas to be a celebration of neon noels or a celebration of the Living Light? There is a real danger that we face by allowing our faith to be overwhelmed by allurements which really have nothing to do with Christmas. The "easy god" — Santa — allows us to believe nothing. The so-called "joy of the season" gets translated into the celebration of celebrating — another form of the worship of self.

The real concern is not just distortions by which the world tries to mirror Christmas — seemingly endless debates over whether or not crèches can be displayed on government property unless equal time is given to Stars of David and menorahs, Kinara for Kwanzaa, Santa, snowflakes, candy canes; myriads of television specials hold up reindeer and snowmen as the objects of Christmas joy — the real concern is that to which St. John points when he speaks of the Light of the world and the darkness: ***"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."***

Some time ago, I was speaking with someone about the relative merits of urban and suburban living over against rural life. One thing on which we both agreed was that, in the country, stars seem to shine with greater brilliance. Scientifically, that is not the case — a star's brilliance is constant. But when city and suburban lights are present, the proximity of the diffusion of that man-made light causes the starlight to become more difficult to observe.

I fear that this is the way it is for many Christians in today's world. ***“The light of men,”*** as John calls Him, shines with equal brightness today as He did more than 2,000 years ago. But today there are other lights that distract us and shield our eyes from seeing Him in all His brilliance.

I personally know of no Christians who would even come close to laying the claim to “worship” Santa as some kind of god. Yet . . . the darkness of the world has been so imbued with man-made light that there is an allurements to fall into step with what those around us are doing. As a consequence, our energies are diverted, our focus distorted, our passion cools, and ***“the true light of the world”*** does not receive the full response of joy in worship that is due Him at His Incarnation.

If we strip away the electric lights and the cut-out snowflakes, the wire reindeer and the plastic holly, the wrapping paper emblazoned with elves, peppermint sticks, and shiny ornaments — if all of that were suddenly taken away — could we... would we... come with equal enthusiasm to celebrate this night?

The dilemma is not simply a matter of choosing between Christ and Santa (it is not my role to play the Grinch). There is a greater danger that the joy we celebrate today we will allow to become only a seasonal joy. When the tree is taken down, the ornaments and lights packed away in the attic or basement, the Christmas cards discarded (or, as in our house, set aside and then cut up to be used as gift tags the following year), when the sounds of carols have echoed away — will our joy remain?

Do we celebrate today, and that's it? Next week, will we let this all to

evaporate into nothingness? No. Not if we celebrate the Babe who is the Light and not just (to use Donald Westlake's phrase) "*the silliest part of ourselves.*"

The real joy of Christ's birth is precisely this: "***The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.***" It will not overcome it . . . it cannot overcome it. "***The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.***" It would not be inaccurate to translate that "*keeps coming into the world.*" Not just for this day only, but for all of life the light keeps coming.

The joy of Christ's birth is the joy — not just of getting and giving (the order apparently preferred by the majority of Americans); not just the cuddly-ness of babies; not merely the wonder of childlike innocence — it is the joy that comes from knowing that the living Light, the true light shines on.

All the glitter, the hype, the myths and legends . . . electric candles, icicles, tree lights and displays . . . the many versions of Santa, including giant inflatable lawn jockeys, more giant snowmen, and even more giant candy canes and gingerbread houses . . . huge billboards that would have you believe that Santa favors less filling over more taste . . . jingles that take songs of praise and turn them into vehicles for propping up sagging retail sales . . . all of that collectively make up what I'm calling "Neon Noels." But they fade as Santa returns to wherever for the off-season so that the next bargain sale can begin.

That has nothing to do with joy; it has everything to do with what we have transmuted into "the pursuit of happiness." Each Christmas I hear more and more often from more and more people how hard they find it to "*get into the holiday spirit.*" I'm convinced that is because somehow we have been led to think that we can manufacture joy in the same way we manufacture toys, TV's, and cars — since most of that has been consigned offshore, it's no wonder we have a hard time finding "the spirit."

So we settle for the momentary, transient feeling of happiness, when our spirits are longing, thirsting, hungering for joy. Such joy can come only through the Living Light — by living in Him and by His living in us! True joy seeks to pierce through the neon distractions and distortions to see ***“the true light which enlightens everyone.”*** Such joy cannot admit to a merely seasonal desire to be a little generous by showing a manufactured *“goodwill toward”* others.

True joy is engendered by the Good News: ***“the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory . . .”***

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Nor can the artificial, eye-popping, retina-searing lights that the world throws up compensate for the darkness in which we live. Real joy comes by celebrating the true light. Real joy lets that light shine through to others. Real joy witnesses to that light, serves that light, praises that light, and keeps doing it without pause.

Great joy can and will be ours as we behold His eternal, abiding, confirming glory, ***“glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”*** That is the real joy our spirits so desperately seek.

Amen.