

# Excavations of the Heart

## "Put on a rescued face."

### Isaiah 40:1-5

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#### Cancellation

December 21 (or something like that) and the decorations were all coming down. Placed back in their boxes. Put away in the attic. There was a death in the family and Mamie, a woman weathered by years and now an inconsolable loss, said the grief was too much. No celebration of Christmas that year. Cancelled.

Why celebrate Christmas when you have reason to cry? Isn't Christmas mostly for profit and laughter and a frenzy of joyful activity?

A frenzy at least in many quarters, is what Christmas has become –almost to the point it has been trivialized. And who needs the trivial in the face of grief?

The Puritans of old had enough of it. To them Christmas carols were hypocritical. They saw nothing scriptural or holy about decorated trees, the drinking of wassail, or a day set aside for idleness. In fact, they thought it all sinful, a farce and a mockery of the event of Jesus' birth.<sup>1</sup>

So, they cancelled Christmas. Oliver Cromwell preached against so-called heathen traditions of singing Christmas carols, decorated trees and any joyful expression.<sup>2</sup> Puritans in the American colonies outlawed it and decreed that Christmas should be a day for getting work done; a time for private prayer with no public display. Anyone violating the ordinance could be arrested for disturbing the peace.<sup>3</sup> I wonder what they'd say if they saw what's become of it now.

#### Restoration

'Seems pretty severe to me. Yet, doesn't it respect the place people like Mamie find themselves? *Shouldn't* you cancel Christmas if you can't put on a happy face?

"A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make strait in the desert a highway for the Lord." This is incredible. This wilderness for the Jews is the heart of someone else's civilization. There *are* highways about them, but not their highways. On these roads enemy armies march home, carrying the plunder of the

conquered, rubbing defeat in the face of the vanquished. This is *their civilization, their highway*. It doesn't belong to the people of God.

Yet, the voice cries, "Comfort! Build your highway in the midst of your wilderness because God is coming to the rescue.

This isn't an easy thing to believe. When you're in a hopeless situation blessing is a hard concept to grasp. When you see your grief as punishment for sin, all you see is abandonment. When all you get is bad news, it seems the whole world is falling apart.

Yet here's the first message of hope. It's the worst of all moments, but God's already beginning to act. You can't see it, but God's already at work. God's been sustaining you all this time and you didn't even know it. Right now God is at work in the very announcement of his salvation. The time of suffering is past. So make straight God's way.

Mamie could have left the decorations. Cromwell could have danced. And no matter what your guilt or grief: God is already ahead of you, giving you a Savior for forgiveness, rescue, and relief.

To be fair to the stodgy Puritan, their eye was cast on a world of need and a season filled with people celebrating to distraction. So, they cancelled Christmas; and party-popping as it was, it was a valiant attempt to save Christmas for Christmas.

Today, "Merry Christmas" has often become "Happy Holidays," toys for young and old are what's held sacred, and you and I are apt to get to the other side of the Super Bowl with too much debt and too little joy. So much for the benefits of god's we serve. So much for the fluff we pile so high and deep upon ourselves that we can scarcely breathe let alone believe.

We need Christmas to be Christmas. Like the people of the ages, we need God to tear open the heavens and be here with you. We need God to make a difference in our lives forgiving away our sins and freeing us from the powers that bind us.

### **Cross in the Shadows of Christmas**

Long ago after all the rush and the early festive worship, I sat in the sanctuary and there was peace. Midnight Communion. People could enter the sanctuary and sit in silence as long as they wished. In their own time each would approach the table for bread and wine. The lights were dimmed. Shadows hung everywhere.

The sanctuary had once faced the opposite direction; and part of the original chancel remained on the posterior wall: wood paneling with a large cross overlay. That night, in the silence and the shadows, it was hidden at first in the shadow.

Soft music played. The people came, slowly. My spirit finally found rest in the peace and the holiness of the moment. Silent night, holy night... little-by-little my eyes adjusted and began to see the image on the back wall of the sanctuary.

Ever-so-faint, yet increasingly real in this holy moment of Christmas I could see the Cross. It was as if God himself (or some angel) spoke: "Yes. Even as angels sang and shepherds quaked with the star shining bright: there was the presence of the Cross.

Finally, comfort: "For unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord...born to die...to make you free."

A Savior for Mamie.

And Cromwell.

For you and me.

In this wilderness: build the highway and let the Savior come.

*A Postscript: ..."Fluff?" Did I say, "fluff"? Laura and I just went to her parents up north and cut a wild, 11 foot spruce her father helped us find. We set it up last night and are spending the afternoon today decorating it. All the decorations are going to be hanging. I wouldn't have it any other way. Fluff?*

*This isn't fluff...so long as it all points...*

*To Jesus.*

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<sup>1</sup> The History Channel web site. "Christmas Trees".  
<http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays/christmas/trees.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Whitman House Web Site. "Did the Puritans Celebrate Christmas?"  
<http://www.stanleywhitman.org/puritanchristmas.html>