

THE CROSS IS THE TRUE *GIFT* OF CHRISTMAS

By Elizabeth A. Eaton

I remember this jarring image: It was the Christmas Eve candlelight service at my home congregation. A banner depicting Mary and Jesus in the manger had been hung from the ceiling at the front of the nave completely obscuring the large suspended cross. I had seen that banner on Sunday mornings, but on this Christmas Eve in the semidarkness something else appeared. A spotlight that illumined the cross now shown on the banner with the effect of making the outline of the cross appear as the background of the Christmas scene.

The cross on Christmas? I didn't want the crucified Christ casting a shadow on the Christ child. Christmas is about angels and shepherds and the babe, lying in a manger, not betrayal and death. I didn't like it.

Christmas can be such a fraught season. It is forced to carry so much emotional freight. We must be merry. We must be filled with good cheer. We must be home surrounded by family. We must turn our lives into the happy endings of every TV Christmas special. There is a certain drivenness to get everything done, to get everything perfect by the stroke of midnight on Dec. 24.

Secular culture reflects this. *A Christmas Carol* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* are stories of redemption. The song "I'll Be Home for Christmas" and the film *Home Alone* are filled with wistful longing. I remember a *M*A*S*H* episode where the doctors in the operating room turned the clock back to 11:59 p.m. on the 24th so a young soldier's death wouldn't be recorded on Christmas.

But what are we longing for?

Certainly we want peace in our homes and in the world. We want love and a place to belong. We want life and the end of all the deadly things in the world that bring death and destruction. We want reconciliation. We want rest. We want hope. We want the assurance that all of this means something. We want to know that someone cares. And so we try to accomplish all of those things and squeeze it all into the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. No wonder we can find ourselves exhausted and empty on Dec. 26. The mall scene the day after Christmas—returning broken toys and ill-fitting



or unwanted sweaters, the picked-over look of marked down Christmas decorations and wrapping paper—is the retail version of the reality of a broken world that doesn't know peace or love or hope. Except ...

The hope of Christmas is fulfilled on Good Friday. The cross is part of Christmas. "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you; hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 296). All of our Christmas glorias are realized in Jesus' glorification on the cross. We have peace. We have hope. We are loved. And not just at Christmas.

The cross is the Christmas gift. Through it God reconciles and heals. Through it God's love is made known and in God's love we are known and have our home. And it is a gift. We don't have to spend our energy and time hoping to attract the gift or the Giver by making everything right by Christmas. If we aren't physically at home, if our lives have not turned into the happy endings of TV Christmas specials, if we are estranged from family, if we are not merry, even if we should die, this gift of life has come to us.

Let's be gentle with ourselves and each other this Advent and Christmas. Let's not fret about imperfect lives and incomplete holiday preparations. We won't ever get it completely right. That's God's work. It is the best gift exchange ever. Martin Luther wrote: "Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is wholly innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is, my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who am nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity? And then besides dies the shameful death of the cross for my sake ... that I may live with him eternally" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 51). †

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