

Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



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Christmas and the Cross

I remember this jarring image: It was Christmas Eve candlelight service at my home church. A banner depicting Mary and Joseph 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 during Advent, 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 at 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 did not like it!

Christmas can be such a fraught season because 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 happy endings like every TV special. We *must* get everything done, make everything perfect by midnight on December 24. But what are we longing for? We want love and peace and a place to belong. We want reconciliation and rest and hope. We want the assurance that all of this means something.

My friends, 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." (*What Child is This?*) All our glories 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 time or money or energy hoping to attract the gift or the Giver by making everything right by Christmas.

So let's be gentle with ourselves and each other this 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's the best gift exchange ever.**

Good Christian friends, rejoice!

(Written by Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the ELCA, in her Christmas message published in *The Lutheran*, December 2014.)