

In the Bleak Midwinter: Two Homilies

May the Suffering Be Soothed

Readings: 'Blue Monday' by Diane Wakoski
'The Meeting' by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I love a bittersweet or melancholy Christmas song. Give me 'Blue Christmas' over 'White Christmas' every time. I love the songs that risk something other than happiness this time of year, as we know that December is not a month of nonstop joy for anyone. I love the long playlists of Christmas songs given contrast 'I'll be home for Christmas' with its longing or, my very favorite, 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.'

'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' is my favorite Christmas song. It is originally from the 1944 movie musical 'Meet Me in Saint Louis,' which follows the year in a life of a family in Saint Louis, who might have to move to New York for the father's promotion at work. They are sad to be leaving their home. Judy Garland's character sings the song to her distraught younger sister on Christmas Eve. It is a time of uncertainty for all of them and she sings:

[Lillian Gates sang 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas']

That ending lyric gets me every time. The juxtaposition of muddling and merriment. That call to happiness in the midst of uncertainty feels deeply true, reflective of how life actually works, in a way that is so rare in Christmas music and in life in general. So often, we are muddling and merry, suffering and celebrating, having a mix of emotions at this time of year and all year. This song reminds us that there is room for all of it, the juxtaposition, the emotions that don't seem to fit in the Hallmark version of this time of year.

When this song came out in 1944, our country was in the midst of war, just as now. There were families separated and people confused and uncertain, just as now. This song became popular, especially with those serving in the military far from home and their families. 'Someday soon we all will be together/if the fates allow. Until then we'll have to muddle through somehow.' Spoke to people keenly aware of separation, deeply uncertain of what the future will hold, who nonetheless wanted to encourage one another to merriment in the midst of it all. That is a powerful sort of merriment to claim.

I know for many of us, this end of year, this dark time, this Christmas time can be hard. It might feel more muddling than merry. The ending of the year might remind us of our hopes for the year that did not materialize. This time that brings family togetherness for many might be marked by traditions that have ended, grief, estrangement or the pain of not being loved the way we long to be loved. Perhaps your Christmas is blue or your midwinter is bleak. Know that you are not alone no matter what the carols might say. Know that there is room for you in this season. You are not outside the circle of love and care.

Being someone who muddles this time of year is hard. We don't always make space for it, allow it to be part of the story we tell, the face we show to the world. Even the bittersweet Christmas songs aren't allowed to be their bittersweet selves. In 1957, Frank Sinatra recorded an album of Christmas songs. He wanted to include 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' but he did not want muddling through somehow to be part of it. He called up the songwriter and said, "The name of my album is *A Jolly*

Christmas. Do you think you could jolly up that line for me?" The songwriter complied, changing 'until then we'll have to muddle through somehow.' To 'hang a shining star upon the highest bough.'¹

While, I know some people like that line much more – it is more commonly used on recordings – I'm always a little disappointed when I'm hearing a version that leaves out the muddling. It feels like they are trying to sweep the challenges of this time of year away – and that doesn't serve us. There are plenty of only sweet Christmas songs. Let us have this rare bittersweet one. I don't trust it.

We muddle. We feel absence and distance, sadness and grief, pain and suffering, doubts and concerns, fears and uncertainty.

If you are someone living in the muddle. I invite you to come forward now and light a candle. It is a simple action, but rituals have meaning. There is something about moving alongside one another in the hard times as well as the good times. There is something about seeing candles flickering alongside one another to remind us that we are not alone in this season, whatever we may be feeling. I invite you to come do that now, as Jennifer plays music.

May the Joyous Be Shielded

Readings 'Psalm for the Wintered Soul' by Cynthia Frado
 'Ode to the Joyful Ones' by Thomas Lux

Joy is fragile, a delicate orb, like a prize Christmas ornament, wrapped carefully in paper all year and easily shattered. It doesn't take much. Picture this, 'Christmas Eve, beautiful night, light snowfall, young family of four in the car on the way to grandma's house for dinner. They're listening to the radio... "Jingle Bells" come on. The kids in the back seat go crazy. Everyone breaks into song. The camera pans in on the faces of the kids, mom, dad. what happens next?"

What do you think happens next? Anyone want to offer an answer?

Brene Brown, a professor of social work, whose books and TED talks on shame and vulnerability are spiritual teachers for many in this community and beyond, has done research on this scenario. She finds that 60% of people say a car crash happens next and about 15% more have 'equally fatalistic answers, but more creative.'² Perhaps this is because movies and television have taught us that this sort of peaceful scene needs to be interrupted with tragedy for the sake of a powerful narrative. I think it reminds us of the truth that joy is fragile and delicate.

In her books, Brown writes about how closely joy can be tied to fear. She writes, "I'd argue that joy is probably the most difficult emotion to really feel...In a culture of deep scarcity—of never feeling safe, certain, and sure enough—joy can feel like a setup...We're always waiting for the other shoe to drop."

This feels true to me. Perhaps to you too. I do this, a lot. Often 'a mist and shadow of sadness / Steals over our merriest jests.' as Longfellow describes it. I'll look at someone I care about, be glad to see them, and then remember that they will die someday. When dating was part of my life, I would spend early dates waiting to learn how the person I was dating wasn't as good as they seemed, robbing myself of the joy of

¹ Willman, Chris. 'The History of a Popular Holiday Song.' *Entertainment Weekly*. January 8, 2007. Retrieved from <https://ew.com/article/2007/01/08/history-popular-holiday-song/>

² Quoted in Senior, Jennifer. *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*. New York: HarperCollins, 2014. pages 244-245.

the present moment. The one I find myself doing now is happily imagining some future event, five or ten years off, a milestone in my family's life or my frequent daydream of attending the Olympic games in a decade, only to have that pleasant daydream shattered by remembering that climate disaster is looming. I hope you don't do this to yourself, but if you do, you are not alone. It's a fairly common thought pattern. Brene Brown labels this sort of undercutting of our own happiness 'foreboding joy.'

If you are among those who feel joyful this season, I hope you feel it fully, wholeheartedly. May your deep joy fill you up, make you strong and resilient, and spill out of you to bring more joy to the world. May you take the foreboding out of your joy, remembering that ruminating on the painful things that might happen doesn't serve us – it doesn't change outcomes and it strips us of happiness now.

Nearly every time I lead worship, I say, 'may the joyous be shielded.' Every week, I hope that delicate orb of joy is kept intact, safe, and whole for all our joyful ones. Some of you have asked what that means, puzzling over those particular words. The prayer that I say each week is adapted from the Book of Common Prayer, the worship book of the Episcopal Church, with some significant theological edits. When I adapted it, I puzzled over those words too. It feels like a strange juxtaposition to be extending care to the joyous alongside the weary, the sick, the suffering, and the dying. The joyful, in that fragile state, need our care too. Joy is so easily shattered by foreboding. Joy can be shattered by be shattered by one bad phone call, one unkind word, one glance at a television broadcasting the news.

In this season when we regularly tell one another to be joyful, merry, and happy, don't be happy because someone tells you to. But I encourage you to look toward your sources of real, deep, authentic joy. Perhaps that is with family or friends, the smell of a Christmas tree, the certainty that the days are getting longer, celebrating Yule, watching a spectacular sunset, or finding solitude. We need that joy and we need the joyful ones, Because, the poet reminds us, 'when there are two of them together their shining fills the room. Because you don't have to tell them to walk toward the light. '

In this time, may you be truly present to yourself and your emotions, whatever they happen to be.

May you know that your worth is not dependent on any sort of false face you feel compelled to show to the world.

May you be held and loved, seen and known for all that you are – joyful and sad, merry and muddling.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.