

I found myself tearing up the other day in the car listening to the ridiculous Johnny Mathis song, "We Need a Little Christmas." *For we need a little Christmas right this very minute/Candles in the window, carols at the spinet/ Yes we need a little Christmas right this very minute/ It hasn't snowed a flurry, but Santa dear we're in a hurry.*

Not exactly a tearjerker. Why did the light little ditty bring tears to my eyes? Of course, Christmas evokes heavy duty nostalgia. But, there is more to it than that. It's no secret that the holidays are tough on many people.

You get the LL Bean catalogue and wonder why your actual family doesn't exactly match up to the pictures. (We don't have the cute Yellow Lab puppy on the dog bed in front of the fire; we just have dog hair everywhere, even after we vacuum.) And somehow, those grey flannels just don't have the same slimming effect on me that they have on the guy smiling by the Christmas tree.

Christmas cards can have this same kind of effect. People used to send a card from Hallmark with a manger or Santa on the cover. Now most people send a card with a collage of pictures of their children, usually taken in beautiful vacation spots from the past year. Christmas cards are the adult version of Facebook: all image control. "There we are in the Alps! And here we are in the Bahamas! Sometimes there is a yearly update letter enclosed, with news like, "Elizabeth made the Dean's list at Harvard for the 4th year in a row and John's Hedge Fund doubled in size this past year while everyone else's collapsed. Merry Christmas!"

I've often wondered what would happen if we had truth in advertizing laws that applied to the annual Christmas card. You'd have pictures of your children fighting with one another. The letter would say things like, "Mike's lost yet another job and our credit card debt is 5 figures now as we keep buying things we don't need. Here's hoping for a Happier New Year!"

The image of a perfect Christmas has power over us. This time of year, many of us chase the elusive "Christmas spirit" – whatever that is – that you felt as a child, but somehow it evades you, no matter how much you decorate. I remember being in my early 20's and inviting some English friends over to watch Rudolph and Frosty the Snowman – Christmas specials I'd watched every year since I was 3 or 4. Our friends wondered why we were watching children's television shows and what exactly was wrong with me! Christmas seems to evoke a yearning for something...something more.

So, I've noticed that this quality of yearning is in many of our best Christmas carols, from I'll Be Home for Christmas (if only in my dreams) to "O How a Rose Ere Blooming" (O Savior, Child of Mary, who felt our human woe/who dost our weakness know, bring us at length, we pray/ to the endless day.")

The yearning is there because most of us do need a little Christmas, right this very minute. In other words, we do need what Christmas brings, or represents, or promises. We do need peace on earth, good will to men right this very minute. We do need hope that we are not alone. We need God to be with us right this very minute. We yearn for something more to help us right now. As Mathis sings,
For I've grown a little leaner, grown a little colder, grown a little sadder, grown a little older. / And I need an angel sitting on my shoulder, Need a little Christmas now.

In our gospel reading today, we see John the Baptist yearning for something more. He needs a lot of Christmas now. He's in prison as a political prisoner. King Herod – ever paranoid – seized him because of his popularity with the people. John sends his disciples to ask Jesus an extremely loaded question: “are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?” Talk about yearning. He's asking Jesus – “Is this all? Really?”

And it is especially loaded coming from John the Baptist. Just think: he baptized Jesus a year or so before, witnessed the Holy Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus as he came up out of the water. He heard the Father's voice saying, “This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

John himself told others that he wasn't the Messiah but that he prepared the way for Jesus, whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. And although he wouldn't remember it, just before the very first Christmas, John leapt in the womb when newly pregnant Mary came to visit her relative Elizabeth, John's mother. What child is this? Mary wondered again. Surely that story would have been told and retold at family gatherings as John and his cousin Jesus grew up.

So given all of that personal evidence, why did John ask if Jesus there might be something, someone more to come? Obviously, John wants something more, personally. John is asking the question from *prison*, where his life and ministry have fallen apart. He'd grown a little leaner, grown a little colder. And, although, he doesn't know it yet, his head will soon be chopped off and served up on a platter at the King's dinner party.

Are you the one to come or should we look for another? I find this question easy to relate to, and not just at Christmas time. Haven't there been times in your life – maybe one of them is right now – when things have just fallen apart and you've wondered about God? Is He there at all? If He is there, then why doesn't he do something to help?

Jesus answers John's disciples by saying – “Look around! What do you see? The lame walk and the sick are healed.” He's referring to a prophecy in Isaiah that point to the Messiah's coming. And He is also saying to John: God comes on His own terms and not on yours.

John, like many Jews, was looking for the Messiah to come in power and liberate the Jews from the oppressive Roman government. He wanted the Messiah to come in strength. But the Messiah doesn't come in strength. He comes in weakness to the weak.

He doesn't come to start a political program; he comes to people in need. As we see in the passage, He comes to the blind, lame, lepers, deaf, poor, and dead.

God comes on His own terms, not on mine, not on yours. It is interesting what Jesus does not do: He does not get John out of prison, which is what John naturally must have wanted. My life hasn't really panned out; what a disappointing Messiah.

So often, I yearn for more, I look for another god, when what I have does not meet up to my own desires for my life. And I think it is God's job to do my will. An article in *Christianity Today* talked about why people leave church. One young man who changed his name to "Morninghawk" explained why he became a Wiccan.

"Ultimately why I left is that the Christian God demands that you submit to his will. In Wicca, it's just the other way around. Your will is paramount. We believe in gods and goddesses, but the deities we choose to serve are based on our wills."

It is not God's job to do my will. It is not God's agenda to make my life look like an LL Bean Catalogue. It is not God's purpose to get me out of my own personal prisons. God has a deeper design and a broader agenda. It is His agenda, according to Jesus' response, to heal the whole world of its woe and bring us at length to the endless day. Part of that healing will surely be my healing, but healing on His terms, not mine. God's terms are odd. The poet W.H. Auden speaks of how the gift is always bound up in "*the thorn in the flesh/both are given together/And the nature of the one depends on the other.*"

Not only did Jesus not save his cousin from prison, He did not save Himself from death. He refused the victorious agenda to save His people from political oppression. Instead, He chose the defeat and loss of the cross, in order to save all people from the oppression of sin and death. And yet the sign of His coming, He says, is that the dead are raised. But the nature of the one (raised) depends on the other (death). He did not come to start a program of personal improvement; He came to bring a Kingdom of death and resurrection.

Still, it is true, that we need a little Christmas now. We need the One to Come. And yet maybe the One to come has already come in your life as it already and actually is – you just might be looking for Him in the wrong places: in the Perfect Family Christmas, the ever-elusive "Christmas spirit," or on Catalogue Covers. But as Jesus says, "those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces." The One who comes to save the blind, the lame, the sick and the dead, is born on the cold, scratchy straw of a manger, with no crib for a bed. Amen.