

GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

--Thank heavens Christmas is over!

- All the decorations have been put up and now will soon be coming down, returned to their boxes, and stored away for another year (out of sight, out of mind--good riddance, I say!).
- All the shopping has been done, the gifts have been opened, and the crumpled-up wrapping paper and discarded fake bows thrown away (I just have to pay for all that stuff now, that's all).
- All the entertaining, and being entertained, have taken place--the company have come (which was good) and the company have all gone home (even better).

Sorry for sounding, well, downright "Grinchey" so soon on the heels of the holiday, but frankly we may be kind of relieved and delighted that all the typical rush and hubbub, all the busyness and expense are over for another year.

We may be looking forward to weeks without all the stresses and strains of the season, and to the return to the usual, predictable schedule. Yes, it will be good to get back to normal again!

--But, having confessed all that, wait a minute!

Let me think a bit about what we're asking for here. What exactly is "normal" like? There are good points to it, of course--otherwise we wouldn't want to go there!--but it also does entail some things that we're probably better doing without.

- Normal is being preoccupied and anxious about a lot of stuff that, actually, we haven't had much time to think about in recent days, and that we've probably been better off without.
- Normal is fretting about the past, regretting things that cannot be changed; or panting for the future, which, experience teaches us, can be the means of unwittingly setting ourselves up for all manner of eventual disappointment, disillusionment, and even suffering.
- Normal is having life hijacked by every negative thought that comes our way--obsessing over every wrong that we have had to endure, harboring deep grudges and grinding resentments towards all who have ever figured into any of those wrongs, daydreaming with malice in our hearts about what their just desserts would look like, if we had our druthers.
- Normal is being utterly engrossed in the small and cramped world of our narrow ego-selves--focused rather singularly on the cul-de-sac of our wants, our aggravations, our grievances, our aches and pains.

--You know, come to think about it, then, there are parts, even big parts, of what normal is that aren't really worth going back to. If that is what normal is like, we might as well go someplace else. Heck, if it's been a break from "normal," we might do better to stay right where we've been for these last few weeks! In fact, taking a second look at this past month, maybe there's something important that has been at work there in the build-up to Christmas that actually might be worth keeping!

Despite all the crass commercialization and unrelenting marketing that are inevitably parts of the holiday experience these days, everything seems to be subliminally aimed at diverting our attention, well, away from the normal. Maybe it's all those twinkling lights, or all that sentimental Christmas music playing in the background everywhere we go, or any of those Hallmark movies or Netflix specials of the season featured night after night. I don't know. Whatever it may be, it seems persistently dedicated to upstaging the normal, which--if we are pressed to tell the truth--isn't really all that great.

Those lights, that music, these movies, the hokey little Christmas stories, even the goings-on in churches, like ours, all contribute to the subtle lifting and brightening of the human spirit, effectively opening us up to something very different from the normal. For most, at least for these few weeks, worry gives way to hope; getting mired in the past or distracted by the future yields to a being better-grounded in the blessings of the present; the dark, negative lens through which we usually view life is replaced by a clearer, rosier, more optimistic one; and all that insistence on dwelling upon only one's own petty situation melts and recedes a bit, as something greater of gentleness and love and generosity irresistibly floats up into consciousness.

--In other words, there is something to this Christmas-season stuff which represents a genuine stride forward for human beings. Over these weeks, we somehow become better, bigger people. Interestingly, other spiritual traditions in other parts of the world offer their own holidays and rituals which are aimed at performing the very same function--suggesting that this stride forward is something to which the whole of humanity is being nudged. Wow, that's a big thought!

Normal, for many of us, does in fact represent a decidedly backward step. Going back to normal, indeed! But why would one actually choose going back to an old "normal" when, with a little more practice, there's a new and higher "normal" that obviously is available and apparently is quite do-able? After all, if we can successfully be this bigger, better person for two weeks, then we are fully capable of remaining that person for 52 weeks, right?

Surely, drawing on this morning's readings from Matthew, here we have an instance of the foolish versus the wise among even us. Is it to be burning lamps at the ready in preparation for moving on, or sleepily stumbling about in the darkness at the worst possible moment?

On the heels of a briefly-transformative Christmas experience--perhaps this is the day of which the evangelist speaks, and this is the hour when being fully awake and discerning pays off. Perhaps, for these few weeks, opening to us is the very passageway that leads ultimately to the kingdom of heaven! Another very big thought!

--Come to think about it, then, all things considered, it will really not be all that good to be going "back" to normal again, not all that good to be going "back" at all. It's not back but ahead to which God us, and apparently it's not beneath God to use even the most schmaltzy parts of the season-just-past to accomplish that objective.

So, I've changed my mind. If my wife can do it, I can, too. I do not thank heaven that Christmas is over.

In fact, among us, within us, long live Christmas!