

## *Christmas Eve*

Eventually my dad bought a silver artificial Christmas tree with a rotating color wheel, but I still remember the green Christmas trees from my childhood, decked with colorful ornaments, encircled in traditional lights, and dripping with tinsel. Most fun was watching the small pile of presents under the tree grow larger from day to day as Christmas drew near. How we longed to open them! Now, an artificial tree by its nature isn't alive, but even the green tree, plucked from the earth, was already dying. Sure, we watered it, but that only staved off the inevitable. The paradox was that a lifeless tree was giving life, throwing light into the room, and seemingly producing presents: fruits of one family's love.

Christmas is all about paradox. The all-powerful God enters our world as a helpless child. His mother is a virgin, his royal throne nothing but a rude manger. Christmas prepares us for the paradox to come: Through his death, Jesus rose to life. He promises that our death does not end our life, but escorts us through another door. Darkness leads to light; sorrow to joy. Paradoxes make no sense.

This particularly challenges people in a culture like ours. We are taught that if you work hard, you will succeed. If you present evidence, others will be convinced. If you seek truth, get data. Rationality paves the American way.

Yet, life is not as rational as we wish it were. Sometimes you work hard, but you don't get what you seek. You show evidence, and others still see things a different way. All the data in the world doesn't predict the future. Even the American way of life doesn't always make sense.

Comforting, therefore, is the Christmas paradox. Christ comes among us completely powerless, yet destined to influence the history of the world in this life and the next. Christmas makes us uncomfortably aware that we don't know it all, and we can't predict it all. Something mysterious is also at work, and that mystery lies at the heart of this day.

As the refrain for our responsorial psalm, we sang this paradox: "Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord." But a rational person would criticize the tense. It's more precise to say, "Today was born our Savior, Christ the Lord" because we are remembering an event that took place long ago. But the words the Church asks us to sing remain defiantly in the present tense: "Today is born our Savior." That doesn't make sense—unless you say, "OK, with all the magic that Christmas works—people going to church in greater numbers, decorating their homes inside and out, and putting presents under a tree—something is happening today, and in that sense, Christ is born in the thoughts, words and actions of this day. But it could mean something more: not so much that Christ enters the now of our world but that we enter the now of his. We stand present at his manger on this day, today, and we witness the moment he was born. Time collapses; the past is present—which is another paradox.

The moment we realize reason doesn't account for everything, the more we open ourselves to mystery. In that moment we appreciate better how each of us is a wrapped present in the pile beneath the tree of God—a precious wonder, a sign of hope in a world tempted to despair. You are a mysterious gift that Christ longs to open on Christmas Day.