

# **A Christmas Meditation**

**By**

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**As Presented and Amended**

**by**

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*[As always, when editing Dietrich's original sermons, much has been redacted for brevity's sake. Fortunately, it was his style to include redundancies and numerous examples of his points. So it is always possible to heavily redact them without losing any of his main points, while retaining his best illustrations and examples. It was also his habit, in this particular sermon, to substitute the term "Christ" with an "X", including in words like "Christian" and "Christmas," (Xian, Xmas). This is a habit which has been retained herein. Dietrich also used the term "man" as it was commonly used in his time, to refer to all of humanity, both male and female humans. The term is used frequently enough that I have left it as is so as not to detract from the eloquence and cadence of his prose.]*

It seems to me that in all these years of my ministry to you I have spoken about almost every phase of Christmas, and there seems nothing left to be said; yet the spirit of the season is so impelling that one cannot disregard it. The spirit of Xmas is inevitable and perennial—I say inevitable because it represents something innate in the heart of man, and perennial because all the changes of all the years have not been able to eradicate it or lessen in any degree its prominence. It has been celebrated since the dawn of man in every part of the northern hemisphere, regardless of his cultural stage or religious belief, and many attempts, such as the Puritan movement in England and America have tried to stamp it out, only to find it rising again in the hearts and customs of the people with renewed vigor. And because of its universality, it has gathered about its customs in legends representing every type of life and thought and culture. It is like one of its own plum-puddings, the amalgamation of many ingredients which have accumulated from various sources as it has come down through the ages. Some of these have their origin in Xianity, more of them have their origin in ancient pagan rights, while others come from an antiquity so hoary that we cannot trace their birth.

And while the source of all these customs and legends is interesting to know, we are not directly concerned. We do know that they represent something real and aspiring in human nature and we love to follow them, regardless of their source or their rationality. We do not ask why we hang up wreaths or holly and suspend the mistletoe bow, or why we bring trees into our houses and shout "Merry Christmas" to our neighbors. It is a part of Xmas to do this,

our fathers and mothers did it, and we love to do it. And I feel sure Xmas will always remain, because it is rooted and grounded in the needs of mankind. It is one of the few seasons of the year when man's duly prosaic life feels the thrill of poetry and magic, when his stern rationality is tempered by the imagination, and his striving after reality is flavored by illusion. All of which is good for man—and what is good for man, what really works out in the long run, survives the ravages of time and even man's own stupidity.

Christmas is good for us because it brings us joy—joy in a life which does not abound with this quality, but which needs it sadly. It is a festival of merriment, thrust in among dull and drab days. This is true of Xmas everywhere and in all time—both in the pagan days and the Xian days. Joy runs like a rippling brook through the old pagan customs and through the birth legends of the gospels. There is much tragedy in human life, particularly now. The pages of history make rather dreary reading, with only here and there a bright spot. Sorrow, pain, misery, despair are universal experiences ... The thought of our brothers who die or are maimed, of the women widowed of their Love, of the fatherless children, or childless parents, of the ravaged fields and burned villages and bomb cities resulting in homeless multitudes, of the vacant chairs at almost every hearth, does not make for merriment. And many who are not encompassed by tragedy, and who do not feel the sting of immediate loss, but who thank heavens have a social conscience, will be inclined to say “this Christmas will have to be a joyless one. How can one be happy when so many are miserable?”

We need something occasionally to lift us out of such darkness into light. Out of mourning into joy; and Xmas does it, at least temporarily; and even though it is only temporary it does for the soul what a good night's rest does for a weary body. Regardless of how dull and humdrum life may be, this temporary joy instills new strength and courage. From the moment we begin to think what we shall give our friends and members of our family, from the moment that blanket of secrecy falls over family affairs and little packages are hidden away here and there, from the moment the stately tree is brought in and we place a lighted candle in the window, our joy begins to gain momentum until on Xmas morning the ripples of laughter, the thrills of the appreciation, the shrieks of merriment form a joyous chorus of delight.

I have always felt sorry for the residents of Southern climes like California, for it is impossible for them to understand the real significance and experience the greatest thrill of Xmas. One must live farther north to really enjoy Xmas. To understand the basic ideas of Xmas, perhaps I should speak briefly of the origin of the festival, especially since so many people think that Xmas is a distinctly Xian festival—the commemoration of the birthday of the founder of the Xian religion. But Xmas, like every festival which takes hold of the popular mind, is a nature festival. It coincides with the winter solstice, or the turning point of the sun and the lengthening of the days. As far as history can take us we find early people holding a midwinter festival and rejoicing at this time of the year—due to the fact that the sun, after starting on

his southern journey and sinking lower and lower on the horizon each day, at last stops his downward course and, after a brief interval, begins to climb again, higher and higher as he makes his pathway across the heavens.

On this fact the life of Earth and the life of man depends. Without it no spring, no summer, no harvest—but only cold and death would be in store. With our knowledge of nature and our artificial provisions for light and heat, this fact does not disturb us; But to the ancient peoples it was a phenomenon of dreadful significance. As the winter came and the sun appeared to be sinking lower and lower in the heavens, the days grew short, the nights grew long and dark and the cold became more and more intense. And to these people the cold and the dark were veritable demons, which left in their wake gloom and suffering and death. So, at this time of the year, it seemed to them as if their god—the sun—was either leaving them or was dying. But at the extreme southern point of his journey, he paused and hesitated for a day or so, and then started upon his return, and the glad shout went up that he was coming back, bringing light and warmth and life in his beams. This was the rebirth of their god, and they celebrated it with every possible manifestation of joy. We know that these primitive ideas no longer prevail, yet Xmas is still symbolically the greatest festival of hope and cheer, especially if you live in a northern climate.

But there will be no Xmas this year anywhere if it is joyless. A joyless Xmas is a rank misnomer. It is a flat contradiction in terms. We owe it to Xmas, we owe it to ourselves and our families, we owe it no less to those in sorrow, to be merry this Xmas. For these latter, it will be at least a short reprieve from their worries—a day of exhilaration which will help them better to meet and bear their troubles. And for the former, there is so much to do, so many burdens for willing backs to carry, so many people to serve, that we shall do and bear and serve better if the joy of Xmas finds its way into our hearts. Let us therefore give ourselves over to the simple delights of this blessed season. When the bells ring out on Xmas morning, let them find a merry echo in our hearts. And when we gather round our tables, let it be with all the hearty merriment of old. If we remember the Scrooge of the first stave of the immortal carol, let us also recall the Scrooge of the last stave. When Dickens wished to draw his great story to a close, that story which rediscovered for his generation and ours the elemental joys of Xmas, and wished to show how completely Scrooge had redeemed himself, he wrote of him, “He knew how to keep Xmas well.” May this be said of us also; for to keep Xmas well will be good for us all.

And to have this spirit of Xmas and enjoy all its implications does not require the spending of much money. The real Xmas is in the heart, and not in the pocket; and its best expression comes from the heart and not from the pocketbook. The simplest expression of affection and good will means more than the expensive gift. As people seek to find happiness in that which money can buy, the world gives itself over at Xmas to an allergy of spending, which robs much

of its old time beauty and joy. All of this may be desirable in its way, but we must not let it rob us of the whole-hearted goodwill and kindness and love, which spell the real spirit of Xmas.

Xmas is good for us; it is good for us because we look at life poetically and magically. Our modern life has been robbed of its poetry ... I once read in a magazine that "in whatever degree poetry is cultivated, it must be at the expense of some branch of useful study." How ridiculous! Poetry represents something just as real in human life as prose; and when we think of Xmas, we think of the truth of poetry which Aristotle taught is more than the truth of history ... I am ready to accept every well-authenticated proposition that the rationalists make ... I agree with them that Xmas is not the birthday of Jesus, that every nation held a similar festival when the sun had ceased to wane and was returning in its power, that it was this date on which the Persian celebrated the birth of their God, Mithras, and the Egyptians their God, Osiris, and the Greeks their God, Hercules, and the Babylonians their God, Yule. I agree also that all these customs are the outgrowth of either Pagan or Xian superstition, that the idea of a virgin born savior is absurd; and that of all the myths, fables, and falsehoods taught the children of modern times, the greatest myth is that of Santa Claus, who weighing about 300 pounds, "with a belly that jiggles like Jelly," descends through an eight-inch chimney simultaneously into 100 million homes. But I still believe in Santa Claus, for Santa Claus is a poetic symbol of the spirit of unselfish giving. He comes under the cover of the night to bestow his gifts, and the charm of his coming is destroyed if it is hinted that some real person is responsible for the occasion. Santa Claus is a reality, the greatest reality perhaps that we know throughout the whole long year.

I can say the same about the legends encompassing the birth of Jesus. All these picturesque details may be physically impossible, but they have a poetic meaning rich in value ... The story poetically contains the crystallization of a long plaintive hope for the future for many who have been oppressed—hope, expectation, dreams and consecration to a greater purpose. The divine miraculous birth symbolizes the divinity and glory of every birth, and the hope that every child may become a savior. It is your own mother-love that croons the manger song. It is your own fatherhood that kneels with Joseph and prays in thanksgiving and consecration for the babe that lies so innocently in the manger. It is your own rejoicing that pictures the heavenly host. Not as history, but as poetry, as symbol, it is good for us to contemplate these things and to rejoice on Xmas day.

Christmas is good for us also because it takes us back to childhood. Adults are too generous when they think that Christmas is only for children. It is for adults who very much need this excursion back to the land of make believe, to the land of poetry, and romance, mystery and song. If life's radiance is lost, it is largely because we have moved out of this world, priding ourselves for having put away childish things. Yet how wistfully we remember the years of long ago when Little Red Riding Hood, the Wizard of Oz, the fairies, and Santa Claus with his turkey red suit and fat rosy cheeks were as real to us as our own father and mother. Scarcely

a Xmas Eve passes that I'm not haunted by an old memory of a little boy, his nose pressed against the frosty pane, his eyes looking out across the white fields and up into the clouds where he saw in perfect clearness old Santa driving his reindeer from star to star, and finally down across the clouds toward the earth. What imagination! What a world to live in! No wonder Wordsworth called it heaven.

Some of us have sold our childhood birthright for a mess of adult pottage; and Xmas offers us a chance to recover that birthright. We cannot remain children. We want no scourge of Arrested Development. We are glad for all the knowledge and experience that has given us the judgment and wisdom of age; but I am sure we could have a better world, less prosy and more poetic, less matter of fact and more romantic, less cruel and more gentle, if we had more people who were childlike in this better sense, who had a delight in simple things, a keen sense of the beautiful, a merciful tenderness for all dumb animals and all fellow-travelers in need. "Except ye be as little children, ye cannot enter the kingdom of Heaven" ... It is good for us therefore to throw ourselves with abandonment into the Christmas spirit and live like children again.

But above all else, Xmas is good for us because it is a festival of hope, whether you hold to the Xian or the pagan interpretation. The particular charm about this festival is that it takes place when nature's face is cold and cheerless. The leaves have fallen from the trees, the earth is covered with snow and ice, and the air is no longer mild; but instead, a sort of rigidity and harshness and inhospitableness settles down upon the outer world. It is as if nature were aging, as if she had exhausted herself, as if she were shrinking and fading ... Somehow the end of all things is brought before our minds. Of itself, it is not a time of rejoicing, but rather of mourning. And yet in the face of all, there occurs at this time, the brightest joyfulest festival of the year. We see and feel the wintry chill, yet something takes place which makes us disregard and triumph over it. The sun which has been sinking to the southward, and so stripping the earth of warmth and life and beauty, sinks no more. Winter indeed continues; outwardly nature is the same yet looking forward we know that the power of the cold is broken, that in due time it will yield to spring and summer.

Our joy then has this peculiar quality, that it is in the midst of a time that on its surface would make us sad, that it is mixed with faith and hope, that it is a kind of triumph over what is immediately around us. It is like the captive who makes light of his prison walls, not because they are not there, but because he is assured that he will eventually be freed from them. Life and warmth are far away, yet we know the power that time will bring them, and we are assured that they will return. And Xmas is simply the burst of this faith into song. It is the festival of that faith which in the present ill describes the far-off features of the coming good. Through the snowstorms it sees June. Above the howling blasts of December, it hears the birdsongs. Beneath the snow, it recognizes the thrill of seeds that promise harvest.

And this midwinter festival is a kind of parable which finds substance in the mental and moral realms. It means, at bottom, to take it broadly and spiritually, that in the straits of life there is always a resource. As in the midwinter darkness there is light and a spring of joy in the future; so, as in every situation of life that seems at first sight dark and dreary, there is a way out and happiness ahead. This is merely saying that in the moral world as in the natural, the resources of nature are great, that unless we are ourselves at fault, fate does not often shut the door of hope upon us ...

Of course, we do have terrible periods of darkness and grief ... It would not be surprising if we heard rolling up from the masses of people, like thunder from the heavens, the old cry of Scrooge, "Christmas? Bah, humbug! Every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart" ... But it is well to remember in those times that just as winter is followed by spring, so there are happier days ahead. No matter how severe our condition, we should remember the line of the old Persian poet, "Even this will pass away." Or the words of that old revival hymn which we used to sing so lustily, "sorrow may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning." There is always a morning following the night. Of course, it is difficult, while in the midst of sorrow, to remember that there are brighter days ahead—even days when we will look back upon the tragedy as a valuable experience ... I look back upon some of the grievous times in my career, *my heresy trial and excommunication*,<sup>1</sup> times it seemed almost impossible to survive, real tragedies that darkened the sky, and made life for the time being a horrible thing to face; and now time has removed all the sting, and I calmly view these instances as valuable, if not pleasant experiences. What time has done, time will do again, and the day will come when the present affliction, which may seem more than one can bear, will be transmuted into the pure gold of invaluable experience.

And so it is with the powers of a society, a community. It takes a great deal to doom a people. And this Xmas message of faith in the oncoming better times is particularly needed today. Every part of the globe is in distress. We are indeed experiencing the midwinter of our civilization ... But we know that the sun has turned on his path, that in time the snow will melt, the earth soften, the seeds sprout and the flowers bloom; And so we may be assured that there will be a resurrection of the life of our civilized world. Remember that this is not the first period of darkness humanity has encountered and successfully endured. Many times, humankind has looked upon what appeared to be the impending destruction of the world; and in spite of every indication of universal calamity, in what triumphant persistency has man succeeded in surviving. So let us remember the real heart of this Xmas celebration;

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<sup>1</sup> I have inserted this italicized line assuming it reflects the specific incident in his life that Dietrich is referring to; an incident with which I can sympathize.

and in these dark times of the world's life, let us never think that this is the end—let us believe the way is open for brighter happier days.

So we need Xmas, in its broadest and most human sense. For Xmas is more than the pagan celebration of sun-worship, it is more than the birthday of Jesus, it is more than the wild orgy our commercialized world has made it. It is a festival of faith and hope and joy, of kindness and goodwill and love. It is a day when poetry comes in to take the place of the humdrum prose of life and transforms it into lyric beauty. It is the day when we can safely give ourselves to harmless illusion, and in the spirit of the child, regain some of life's radiance. It is a day when human hearts feel the upsurging's of a deeper nature, urging them on to better things; and the promptings of the spirit of goodwill which includes the whole world.

Xmas comes to cheer us, to soften us, to lift us above our cares, to open our hearts to others, to stir within us the flame of fellowship, to put an end to scorn and envy, to rise above our miserable jealousies and croakings, to reunite estranged friends, to fix in our minds the sense of a radiant life. It brings in its arms warm-heartedness, mutual trust, a belief in the essential worth of humankind, a desire to see others happy and a conviction that love is still the greatest thing in the world.

I know no better way to express the ideal of the Xmas festival than in a kind of prose poem which I recently saw, entitled "A Christmas Rosary":

"In the sanctuary of the Christmas spirit I have found a rosary strung on the silken thread of love. So I count each bead as I reverently pray: Teach me that love was in travail when infant stars were born and virgin suns groaned with maternity; unstop my ears that I might hear the love story of the wooing atoms, plighting their truth forever and aye; show me that love hath made big stars my brothers, little flowers my sisters, and vesper-souled birds companions of my soul; let me feel a deep enchantment in the celestial symphony of human suffering, with hopes for notes, dreams for bars, unselfish love as instruments; cause me to know that love and truth are always born in lonely places, and simple lives, humble minds and contrite hearts, and grant me when my little day is done the lingering joy of having loved as an oft repeated echo of the Xmas story—the romance of Eternal Love."