

Bringing



Christmas

Merry Christmas 2016



From Dr. Douglas Courtney

And may you know how to 'Bring Christmas'

Chapter 1

The election season had been hard. To top it off, neither I nor any of my preferred candidates had won. I was hurt, surly, angry and disappointed. Now, due to a late election date, Thanksgiving had come and gone and we were in full Christmas mode. I didn't want Christmas. I didn't want to be cheerful and jolly. I just wanted to be left alone to wallow in my self-pity.

"I mean, have you ever tried being nice when someone offers you condolences or even advice on why you lost the election?" I grumbled to my wife. "I just want to pummel their smug faces."

"You know they really care about you, dear. They are just trying to make the best of a bad situation," Emily replied.

"Yeah, I know. But I hate losing. How do you put that feeling nicely to someone?" Then a grin took over my face.

My fingers glided over the soft outer branches of a Frasier Fir. I stopped my hand in mid-stroke and looked at it as I held the crisp green between my fingers. My mind held the moment, and I could smell the sweet wonderful scent of live evergreens waiting to be turned into this year's Christmas trees. Even the tent perched on the parking lot pavement of another big-box store held that special smell of dirt, wind and heat. These common odors of working canvas combined with evergreen had become a staple and hard memory of the beginning of Christmas season.

Just the venue alone began to chisel away at the veneer hardened by my recent disappointments. I found myself wondering what I was going to get my favorite woman and lover this year. The



feeling was good and I held onto it a bit longer than usual. My hand dropped from the branch and a satisfying sigh escaped my lips.

“Better?” grinned my wonderful wife.

“Better,” I agreed.



I have to admit it was hard finding the Christmas spirit this season. It has been such an acrimonious year. Old friendships were strained. New acquaintances measured you against your recent political stance. Polarized was a common word tossed about, but it seemed oddly ill fitted to the times. Even the winning side seemed reserved in victory and cautious toward the opposition while celebrating its success.

“The basic yeah, we-won, now-what conundrum,” I told myself. Times were going to be difficult for the

opposition. No mandate. More than half the country didn’t want them. “We definitely need a bit of Christmas right now.”

“It begins with you, you know?” my wife’s wonderful voice said at my side.

I turned and looked at Emily. How could she know what I was thinking?

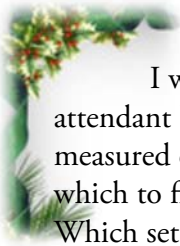
“Don’t look so surprised. It’s written all over your face and you have been bellyaching about only one subject for the past four weeks,” she said as she read my mind yet again.

“So, what do you propose I do about it? Since you seem to know everything?” I challenged her, but with a smile.

“What you always do, dear. Bring Christmas.”

With that simple comment, she was off to inspect another tree that had caught her eye. I was left standing alone, trying to understand what her comment meant.

“Bring Christmas.’ Like there was some store you could go to and buy a box of Christmas spirit and just pass it around. Bring Christmas. Ha, like Christmas was sooooo simple,” I thought.



I wandered among the trees. I watched my wife drive a poor attendant batty as she picked first one tree and then another. She measured each in her mind's eye for size, width, and fullness with which to fill the niche in our house. Of course, none would work. Which set her off to find yet another candidate, then another. I passed a red kettle at the entrance and reached into my wallet. I dropped in a fiver as I repeatedly muttered to myself about "Bring Christmas" and the worrisome state of my wife's mind. I noticed once again the exasperated state of the attendant as he pulled out another tree for my wife's inspection. She was grinning at me again. I still had little clue why.

My mind suddenly clicked on a tree as I passed it by. It had a sturdy root, the fullness was exceptional, and the height was right for the ceiling with an angel perched on top. I leaned down to feel the strength and flexibility of its branches. I could feel and smell that it was still fresh-cut and quite healthy.

"This will do nicely," I said to Emily as I stood it up for inspection.


My wife turned her attention from the attendant's latest offering toward my voice. She seemed oddly triumphant as a smile spread across her face.

"Yes, I believe it will, dear."

The attendant's gratitude toward my decision was quite evident as he moved quickly to package and place the tree into the back of our pickup. I handed him a tenner for his efforts and time putting up with my wife's musings. I also offered a hearty "Merry Christmas" as I moved to open the passenger door for Emily. These small efforts seemed to soften the blow from having to deal with a persnickety customer. I received an equally hearty "Merry Christmas" in return.



From the driver's seat, I looked around me at the drooping headliner, dirt on the floor and broken seat divider and once again vowed to fix my ride as soon as the moment was appropriate. Still, the click of an actual key in the ignition, the sound of a well-tuned



engine roaring to life and the sight of my wife seated beside me brought a smile back to my face.

I found some Christmas carols on the radio and shifted into gear. I rested my hand on the broken console between us and began to hum along to “God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen.” Emily placed her small hand on top of mine and gave me a bit of a squeeze.





Chapter 2

I still hadn't resolved what "bring Christmas" meant when I went to the diner to meet some friends. It was a bit more than a week after we'd bought the tree and during which time I had gone on a decorating binge between stints at work. The tree was looking great and the yard decorations were palatable. I had long ago stopped participating in the yard decoration neighborhood challenge. I couldn't keep up with the time or money some of my neighbors invested in their efforts. Still, I made sure we had a few lights up for the holidays.

Barry was at the far table when I walked in. The door had one of those bells attached to the frame so that when anyone entered or left it clanged a few notes. That bell, like a lot of other things



about this diner, is what kept many of us coming back. The food wasn't epicurean, but it was made for good solid eating. The coffee was hot, black and didn't cost five dollars a shot. The chairs were metal with thick padding for those of us needing extra help in the posterior.

The diner itself was part of an old strip mall. It was a single long room, with a counter and stools on the right for those in a hurry. The kitchen was in back, through an old swinging door with a small window. Betty had been in charge since it opened some 30 years ago and always greeted you as you entered. That greeting and the overlaying smells of coffee, hot pie and warm chili made anyone "at home" as soon as they walked through the door.

Christmas music crackled almost coherently through speakers in the ceiling. A string of Christmas lights surrounded the

door and the large window with “Betty’s” written in faded pink script. A strand of lights found themselves precariously perched atop the menu boards behind the counter. A single small artificial Christmas tree sat on a table just to the right as you entered. On its branches sat numerous small ornaments and paper angels with children’s names on them.

The angels listed presents for needy boys and girls. The idea was that Betty’s customers would pick one angel off the tree and buy the listed gifts, then return them to her. She and her staff would wrap them and take them to the kids on Christmas Eve. I bent down to get a good look at the angels before crossing to Barry.



“Just one. Let some of the others help out this year,” Betty admonished with a grin.

“How about two?” I parried back with a smile. “One boy and one girl?”

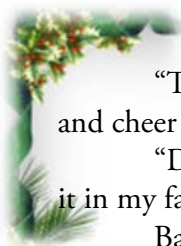
Betty nodded agreement. I grabbed a paper angel with “George” written on it and another with “Amanda.” I stuffed the angels in my coat and headed to the table. Betty already had my coffee in place with a menu tucked beside it.

“You playing Santa for everyone this year again?” Barry chuckled as I sat down.

“Nah. Just helping out. Been hard to get into the Christmas spirit with all that happened this year.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. There has been so much hate and fear. Hard to love one another when you feel a sense of betrayal by about half of the people you thought were friends.”

Betty came over and took my order of fries and a hamburger. She returned with a large slice of chocolate pie. I looked up in surprise.



“That ugly mug of yours cried out for comfort food. Eat it and cheer up,” Betty smiled.

“Damn. I didn’t know it was getting that bad you could see it in my face.”

Barry let out a small laugh.

“What the hell. You wear the world on your face. Everyone knows that.”

I shrugged it off and dove into the pie. It was delicious and fit the bill. My mood lightened up savoring each bit of chocolate. Betty always did make good pies.

“So, what does Emily say about your mood?” Barry asked.

“She just said I should ‘bring Christmas.’ That was it. What the hell does that mean: ‘bring Christmas’? I have been trying to figure it out ever since she said it.”

“Bring Christmas,’ huh? Sounds like something Emily would say. She was always quick and to the point. Still, I haven’t a clue what that means.”

The fries and burger arrived as the last bite of pie went down.

“Hey, Barry. What church do you go to?”

Barry sat up with a start. It seemed an odd question, even to me. In all the years we had spent as friends, we had never discussed religion. Politics, yes. That was our shared interest, what brought us together in the first place. But religion? Not really.

“Not quite your usual question. You getting out of politics and moving on to religion? Were the results that bad?” Barry chuckled at his own awkward question.

“Oh, heck no. Politics is still the biggest real life drama you can find. All sorts of plots and intrigue. No. I was just thinking of Emily’s suggestion that I bring Christmas. I thought if I went to a couple of churches, I might find out how to bring Christmas. Sounds like a place to start.”

“I attend the Syriac Orthodox Church,” Barry replied with sudden seriousness. “And you are welcome to attend.”



“I’ve never heard of Syriac Orthodox Church. Didn’t know it even existed.”

I sat back and studied Barry. The tone of his voice had changed the conversation and I was curious to know why. There had to be a story behind it.

“Not surprising,” he said. “For most Americans, Christianity begins and ends at the shores of the United States. For way too many, it begins and ends at the steps of their own church. Syriac Orthodox Church was one of the first Christian religions.”

“First Christian religions?”

“Yeah, first. Did you think that Catholicism was the only religion that sprang from Christ? Syriac has some of the oldest surviving liturgy in Christianity. It had representation at the First Council of Nicaea.”

I whistled low and long. I was well aware of the various councils that had worked to resolve disparate issues of early Christianity. I was also aware that the first council was where the various religions had agreed on Christ’s divinity. But, for some reason, I had not conceived of branches of Christianity that did not spring from Catholicism or, later, Protestantism.

“Damn. The First Council. That is impressive. How did you become a member?”

“My family had always been members. It was what you did in certain sections of Syria. It was who we were.”

I stopped in mid-bite. I had never considered Barry as anything other than a natural born American citizen. I’d never questioned his place of birth. To look at him, talk with him and be with him, he was as American as, well, as I was.

I put down my sandwich and studied Barry a long moment. He looked back and smiled. I raised my hand and signaled to Betty for another round of coffee for both of us and leaned in.

“Alright, talk. The whole thing. And you know what I mean.”





Chapter 3

“I immigrated over 40 years ago,” Barry began. “It happened right after they killed my family.”


Barry’s head fell on his chest a moment and a quick prayer escaped his lips. I sat stunned. This was not what I’d expected. Barry raised his head and continued.

“Christians are not universally loved, especially in a Muslim-dominated country. But as the center of Christianity, how could one not expect to find Christians in the Middle East? Still, many Muslims only tolerated us. Many wanted us to leave. More than a few Muslims were our friends, mostly those who lived near us. We played together, ate together, talked politics together. It was often hard, but it was home.

“Syria had never been a world leader. But we suffered many of the same problems. One year, it became especially hard. Terror attacks, private militias, lack of employment. You name it, we had it. That year many of the people were scared. They couldn’t find jobs. Their families were hurting. Politicians began blaming the Christians for all their woes. In a fit of what I believe was fear, the far hard right took office. Shortly after, they began ‘resolving the Christianity problem.’” Barry actually used air quotes around the phrase. “Forced deportations, land grabs and a number of atrocities. One night they came to my neighborhood.”

Barry’s eyes teared up and his body stiffened. A look of terror I had never seen before filled his eyes. After a moment, he was back.

“You know, it wasn’t so much they forced us out of our beds and into the streets. But they made our Muslim friends do the dirty work. It was their ‘rehabilitation,’ as they called it. I remember the look in one of my friends’ eyes. He was so ashamed. They had forced him to leave the naked bodies in the street. It was a terrible



sight. My mother, sisters, father, brother all lying dead in the street. They weren't allowed to bury them for two days."

Barry paused again, took a deep breath and continued.

"I woke up in a hospital across the border. No one knew how I'd survived or who had brought me in. A gunshot wound on my skull was the only evidence of what I'd been through. After two years, I was granted asylum in the United States. Some other Syriac members sponsored me. I was naturalized four years later."

I was stunned. I had read such tales on the Internet. I'd read stories in the newspaper. But I'd never known anyone personally who had experienced such things. Or at least, didn't know that I knew. Barry looked over at me with a mix of pride, anger and sorrow. It was as if there was a challenge hanging over our relationship. I reached over and hugged him. As tight as I could, I hugged that friend. Two old men sitting in a back booth in a lonely diner for anyone in the world to see, and I hugged him. To hell with my dignity. And Barry hugged back. Tears silently flowed as we broke apart. Our heads fell to our chests and we said a silent prayer for Barry's absent family.





Chapter 4

It was getting close to Christmas and I still hadn't figured out what "bring Christmas" meant. Emily just shook her head whenever I asked. It seemed I didn't have a clue about anything as far as she was concerned. But how was I supposed to "bring Christmas" if I didn't know how?

If anything, Barry and my friendship had grown stronger after our talk at the diner. I did spend time at his church and spoke with many members of his community. I asked Barry if he had ever forgiven his friends in Syria and what they had done. He told me it wasn't his forgiveness they needed. It was their own, and he had no idea if they were ever able to provide that comfort. It was an enlightening experience, but my task was still at hand. I had to bring Christmas.



I was out shopping at the mall, engaging in some old fashioned American Christmas consumerism. Maybe here I would find the Christmas to bring. I always enjoyed buying, wrapping and giving presents. It was quite often the time I thought most about the meaning of Christmas. Besides, Emily needed a nice present. After all, she did have to put up with me.

Wandering around the center fountain took me straight to this year's main Christmas display. Santa in all his glory was taking orders for the big day. A few elves that looked suspiciously like some of the local high school girls were keeping young ones with parents in tow in an orderly line. The smell of chocolate chip cookies wafted from the ovens at the cookie emporium, successfully tempting me to take more than a sample. It was there I saw Joe.

Joe was a longtime friend from the opposition. We had hardly spoken since the political season had started and it was more than a little difficult for me to overcome my post-electoral emotions. But he suddenly donned a Santa hat in the middle of the mall for his grandkids. I overheard the giggles and excitement and couldn't help but remember the times we'd spent together giving selflessly to our community. Politics hadn't mattered. Doing good mattered. I remembered him as the good guy he was and realized it was my issue not his. I shuffled up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Santa know you stole his hat?" I grinned.



Joe turned with a start and when he recognized his tormentor he reached out. We embraced and held each other a bit too long.


"God, it's good to see you," Joe said and gave another, quicker hug.

We sat down to share a big chocolate chip cookie and some milk while the grandmas, moms, and grandkids went to the toy store for more presents. Between

bites, we found a bit of laughter and parted with a heartfelt "Merry Christmas." Joe also assured me that he didn't know what "bring Christmas" meant either. We agreed it had to be a woman thing.

Time and companionship had lightened my heart and my mood. It probably also led to the additional funds spent on Emily's special present. Before I knew it, I was heading out to my car. The recent end of Daylight Saving Time meant that what I'd hoped would be an early exit in daylight was now a search in an poorly lit mall parking lot for my car. Being a bit of a car freak, I knew I had parked in the farther reaches of the lot hoping there would be one less scratch on its finish.

It was while on this quest that I saw three young men surrounding a small woman wearing a hijab. Two of the young men were in their early twenties. One was definitely in his late teens. The woman was obviously terrified. The racial slurs caused me to forget my current search and move quickly toward the scene.



As I came around the last car in the row, I saw a man on the ground bleeding from a wound to his head. The thugs were laughing at him as he lay unconscious before them. One went over and kicked him in the face.

“No more freebies, freaks. Time to go back home,” one of the more brutish thugs yelled.

Everything I worried over this recent election cycle was being played out before me in a darkened corner of a mall parking lot in my hometown. My gut wrenched and bile filled my mouth. I was angry and hurt all over again. Everything I had worked for was being torn asunder by hatred and fear. Then I heard it.

“Go ahead, man. Let them know who’s boss now,” one of the older attackers egged on the teenager.

I saw the teenager’s eyes. They were filled with shame. But they were also filled with terror. This, I thought, in the briefest of moments, is what Barry must have seen on the face of his friends on that horrible, horrible night so long ago. It chilled me to my bones. I did not want to let this young man feel this torture for the rest of his life. I did not want to have this woman and this man feel unwanted in my home. So, I brought Christmas.

“Enough,” I said as I stepped between the teenager and his victims.

“What the hell? We say when it’s enough,” one of the fools yelled at me. He stepped forward in a rage and swung at my head as hard as he could.

Old age prevented complete avoidance of contact by his fist on my jowls, but experience ensured it wouldn’t leave much of a mark. Experience also commanded a sharp knee in the nether regions of my assailant. He fell with an agonizing scream and a thud. I heard the next attack from his partner before I felt it, but the pain never came. I turned around just in time to see Joe holding the



guy's arm and twisting it. He drove the bastard into the ground and kneed him in the kidneys as he pinned him to the asphalt.

"I did not vote for tyranny, asshole. I voted for freedom. You better learn the difference," Joe shouted as he crunched the man's arm one more time.

I heard the sirens before I saw the blue and red lights. Joe's wife had called the police. She was angrier than Joe, and I feared for the men if they dared move before the police got there. Joe's daughter had gone over to the woman and moved her to the safety of their car. I turned to help the man on the ground only to find someone already checking him out.

"Barry? Where the hell did you come from?" I asked in bewilderment.

"I was following Joe out the lot when we saw the commotion. Saw him inside. We were going out for a quick dinner. You alright? You're bleeding."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Nothing that a few stitches, alcohol, and some serious pain pills can't resolve. You know I am not as young as I used to be."

"Ain't that the truth. Why'd you get involved?" Barry asked. "Could have just called the police and let them handle it."

"Couldn't let the kid feel alone. The shame and panic in his eyes. He wanted to do the right thing, but..." I trailed off. "Let's just say he needed an ally or at worse an excuse. He wanted a way out. I provided one."




Barry nodded his understanding.

"So, what you are saying is you brought Christmas." Barry smiled.

"What? No. I mean," I started stammering.

Barry stepped up from the man on the ground as paramedics arrived.

"You provided love and caring when no one else was around. You were willing to sacrifice yourself for those around you



that you did not know, and do it for their sake, not yours. You provided love when no other offered it. Seems like the meaning of Christmas to me. Let's face it. You brought Christmas." Barry grinned.

"Oh, hell. Don't tell Emily. I will never live it down," I replied as Barry, then Joe moved forward to embrace me and each other.

"Not from me." Joe replied.

"Me neither," Barry laughed

"Merry Christmas, guys." I replied.



Chapter 5

Emily was not pleased to be called to the hospital to pick me up. She was more than ticked off when she found out I was in a brawl in the middle of the mall parking lot. I would have driven home myself to avoid all of this but the amount of pain-killer they gave me prohibited driving. It also took the sting off Emily's stare as we arrived home.

Still, I was in the doghouse when I awoke the next morning. While Emily allowed that she was a bit proud of what I'd done, my actions had scared her. She thought an old out of shape man like me should know better. I promised to be more careful in the future.

After another pain killer and a nap, I headed out to the diner for a cup of coffee. I was at the usual table with two large packages



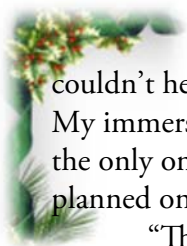
from the big box store plopped in front of me. On the top of each sat one of the paper angels I had picked up earlier. Betty came over with a cup of coffee and sat down across from me.

"I heard you finally found out what 'bring Christmas' means." Betty smiled as she sipped her coffee.

"Barry has a big mouth." I grinned through a pained jaw.

I paused, took a sip of coffee. Betty simply sat and waited.

"I've been angry, scared, and frightened since the last election. I felt betrayed by those I called friend because they voted for a man whose character flaws we all swore to despise. I worried for myself and my country. Worst of all, I felt that those outside my social spectrum considered these feelings trivial and out of place, not important in the grand scheme of things. You know life, love and, well, paper angels. But it was important to me, and try as I might, I



couldn't help but worry about the future for my family and friends. My immersion in the process was so deep that sometimes I felt I was the only one who saw the threat. It colored everything I did and planned on doing. I didn't trust anyone anymore.

"Then Barry told me his story. He described the look in his friends' eyes. As I listened, I could feel the hatred and deep hurt Barry felt. He didn't express it in words, but you knew it had a profound effect on him. At a time when he really needed a friend, no one was there. He had to feel he couldn't trust anyone ever again as well.

"I thought I saw the same look in that teenager's eyes last night. I know I saw the fear in the woman's eyes. They just had to know someone cared. They had to know hope was out there. They needed to know there was someone you could trust. So, I stepped in. But then a strange thing happened. When it got too rough for me, someone else stepped up. That very friend I thought betrayed me stepped forward. He had my back. I felt so much stronger for it. No longer alone. No longer without hope. No longer afraid."

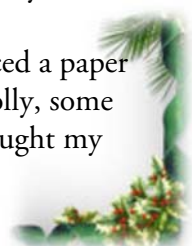


I took another sip of coffee and stared out the window. Betty placed a hand on top of one of the packages and picked up the paper angel.

"When I was just starting out, I fell in love with this wonderful man," she said. "A boy, really, now that I look back. Well, anyway, we were deeply in love. It wasn't too long, we were married and I had my first child. Times were tough, but we got by. Until we didn't. He died way too early in one miserable December. I found myself alone, in a cold one-room apartment I couldn't heat. No friends, no family, and no money. I was looking at losing my child to social services. My beautiful baby."

Betty began to tear up. I leaned forward and took her hand. She gave mine a squeeze. Her tears started to flow more freely. I ached for her. She took a breath and recovered a bit.

"Then some random person I will never know placed a paper angel on one of these trees. It listed the simple things: a dolly, some treats, a warm blanket. A stranger picked my angel and bought my



daughter these trivial things. My daughter, someone they had never known.

"I remember getting the gifts as clearly as if it were last night. A young man knocked on my door at about 6 that evening. I had only a candle for heat and light. How they found me is a mystery.

But this young man did.

I was so scared when I heard the knock. I thought they were coming for my baby. I crept to the door and cracked it open.

"There in that dimly lit hallway stood a tall Middle Eastern man with an armful of gifts and treats. 'Merry

Christmas,' he said to me, smiling. I stood in shock. Then, with a lot of coaxing from that savior, I finally opened the door and let him in.

"He'd brought food, presents and a small Christmas tree. He'd also brought hope. But what he brought most of all was himself. An unknown friend when I needed one. He brought Christmas."

"Barry is a deeply unusual man," I said.

"Yes, he is and was," Betty confirmed.

Betty and I paused for a moment, but we still held each other's hand.

"But he sure knows how to bring Christmas," I said as I sat back in my chair. I listened and smiled as one more Christmas carol crackled to life in the overhead speakers.

"I guess when times are really tough, we all need to remember to bring Christmas," I said.

"We do," Betty replied with a warm smile.

Betty picked up the bags with the paper angels attached.

"Merry Christmas," she said with a broad smile.

"Merry Christmas, Betty," I replied.









Merry Christmas
and
Happy New Year

Hope all your wishes come true!





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