



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, peace, and love to you from the word who became flesh and dwells with us. Amen.

Happy Christmas everyone! You know, several years ago I met a British person who wished me a Happy Christmas and I was smitten. I have adopted it as my own seasonal greeting. For whatever reason, Merry Christmas, it just sounds so rote to me. It doesn't have that oomph. It just kind of easily slides off of our tongue as if it doesn't mean anything, Merry Christmas. But happy Christmas? Well, now we're saying something. Happy Christmas is a way of saying to someone, be happy, Christmas has come! Become happy, Christ is born! Embrace the happy that is in you and leave the sorrow behind, for Christmastime is upon us.

Now, it turns out that there's a little bit of controversy about whether to wish someone a Merry Christmas or a Happy Christmas. After all, we here in the States, we say, Happy Easter, Happy Thanksgiving, Happy birthday. But we don't say Happy Christmas. What keeps us from doing this? So I did a Google search and I discovered some hard-hitting reporting that was done on this controversy by that powerhouse news venue, Country Living in 2021. And they tried to get to the bottom of the origin of Merry Christmas.

Now in England, Happy Christmas is preferred because it's thought that merry would encourage the rowdiness of the lower classes and happy is a little bit more highbrow. And you know those English, they know how to do highbrow unlike us across the pond. So the Royal Family, when they send their annual Christmas cards, they have adopted exclusively in their Christmas greeting, Happy Christmas.

So who started this merry business? It was thought to be an Anglican bishop named John Fisher in December 1534, when he wrote a letter from prison to Thomas Cromwell, the minister to the king at the time. Now, Bishop Fisher was thrown into prison for denying the kingship of Henry VIII, and so he wrote a letter to Cromwell begging for a shirt in his jail cell because he had no clothes. He begged for some sheets, some food, some books, and a confessor to come as he lay rotting in jail. And so he writes this letter and he ends his plea for mercy with this:

"These things I beseech you to grant me of your charity, and thus our Lord sends you a Merry Christmas and a comfortable one to your heart's desire."

Now it turns out the letter from Bishop John Fisher wasn't quite successful because six months later they beheaded him. But over the centuries and here in the States, according to the astute reporter in *Country Living*, the word "merry" has become associated more with creating external experiences of merriment and mirth. And so we Americans, we prefer merry over happy because happy just talks about your internal state. And we, Americans, we like to make things happen rather than rely on people's internal states.

Maybe there's some truth to that because just this past week, two people objected to me wishing them a Happy Christmas. The first one corrected me because they never find Christmastime as a happy time for them. He said, I'm all alone on Christmas and I hate feeling sorry for myself, which is exactly how I feel. So it's not a happy time for me at all. I cannot wait for the holidays to pass so my life doesn't feel so pathetic. And the other person chided me. She said, how could you say that this time is happy given what is happening in our world? And when I asked specifically what is happening, the person said, don't you know they canceled Christmas in Bethlehem because of the Israel-Hamas war and the tragedy in Gaza? And indeed, this person was right. NPR, the Catholic News Service, and the Times of Israel covered it. The Deputy Mayor of Bethlehem said, Bethlehem, as any other Palestinian city is mourning and sad. We cannot celebrate while we're in this situation.

These very strong reactions of the idea of there being a Happy Christmas made me ponder whether they had a point. Should I remove Happy Christmas from my lexicon? Since oftentimes for so many of us, there's too much pain in our lives or in the world, and Happy Christmas ends up sounding like an oxymoron.

No way! And here's why I will keep wishing you a Happy Christmas because it is a mistake to think that the happiness that we receive on this day is from our world and everything in it. Instead, what makes this day happy, what makes it glorious, what makes it celebratory is that despite all the ache and brokenness in our planet, despite the pain in our own hearts and the agony of our warring countries, today God has chosen to intercede by becoming the solution to our unsolvable problems.

God has chosen to intervene by breaking through all the evil that besets us and mercifully saving us. God has chosen to interfere in our very lives, drawing us nearer to the sacred to make us more beautiful than we could ever imagine we could be. It is precisely because of the pain that those faithful souls shared with me this week that God has chosen the incarnation as the moment to celebrate in times of sorrow, despair, war, and hopelessness.

So please, beloved ones, never, ever cease to celebrate Christmas Day, because the word of the Father now in flesh appearing is the source of our happiness and ensures that the ups and downs of our lives cannot rob the power of what happened on that happy day called Christmas. And what precisely happened on Christmas Day that causes us to celebrate no matter what, nothing less than Jesus. The stunning revelation of God's never ending, never quenchable love for us, poured out in that small stable, into this complex world that sorely needs the healing salve of God to make us whole from our wounds.

What happened on that Happy Christmas day is Jesus, like a king who was disguised as a commoner, entered into the melee and started walking among us, drawing us closer to Him and to one another as He wandered into our villages, our cities, our suburbs, our homes, and our hearts. What happened on that Happy Christmas day is that Jesus taught the darkness to yield, letting light enter into spaces that seemed forever bereft of warmth and hope, including death. From the cradle to the cross, to the tomb, to the empty grave, there is nowhere. Jesus does not bring His shining glory and teach the dark spaces to embrace the light. The light came into the world and the darkness in us is learning to let go.

What happened on that Happy Christmas morn is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, interceded, intervened, and interfered in our lives so that we will never lose hope, even when bombs fly. We never have to stop believing, even when cruelty besets us. We never have to be afraid when we cannot save ourselves because Christ came into the world on Christmas day to give us hope, to give us faith and to calm our spirits. So I say to you again, Happy Christmas!

Happy Christmas to you all, for indeed, the word became flesh and dwells with us.

Amen.