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sh while being pursued by  
PD, tackled and arrested



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bus in gruesome crash  
Union Square: NYPD

OPINION

# Why we need Christmas now: Traditions passed down from family and church still have much to teach, even in the darkest times.

By Eileen Markey  
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On Christmas Eve, my younger son set an extra place at the table. We laid out the fanciest plate, scattered with pieces of straw. In an echo of the Catholic communion ritual, my husband and I held a piece of dry wafer; the Polish word is *oplatek*. As our guests stepped forward and snapped off tiny pieces, we gave them blessings for the coming year.

My husband's parents used to do this, but his father is gone now. When we were younger it was his grandparents, shaky and frail, giving us blessings: I hope you find what you want to study, I hope you have success in your work, I hope the baby grows up healthy. I hope, I hope, I hope.

We didn't eat until the first star was seen in the sky, a reference to the star of Bethlehem. The meal is called *Wigilia*: vigil, a waiting.

It is simple — penitent even — fish, pierogis, cabbage soup from a recipe my husband adapted from his grandmother and she from hers, the smell of mushroom and sauerkraut stretching back generations to a long-ago Polish village. This and the oplatek and the empty seat and their hope for a star as guidance, they carried with them on slow boats to someone else's country.

To tell the truth, this year I could do without Christmas — or as it has come to be called in my head “unnamed end of year consumption Holiday.” Bah, humbug. A good friend died just before Advent and I’d far rather cry than sing.

But Christmas came again, unbidden. We've been walking deeper into darkness all month, the curtain of night falling earlier each evening. Our church music turned to minor key while the readings spoke of preparing the way and psalms sang of a king come to set the prisoners free and heal the broken-hearted.

The Christmas trees behind the altar in my parish are caged in wire, to remind us of the kids at the border. The world seems in a terrible state of upside down, the country grown more mean and stupid, a small, filthy man, a wicked Herrod — or maybe Caligula — animating something ugly in the nation.

But still, we wrapped lights through the railing on the stoop, colorful against the dark night. When I walked to work I saw brave little crèches in the air conditioner wells of apartment windows and in the postage-stamp, paved Bronx front yards, my neighbors from everywhere carrying what they could: Mary and Joseph, the sheep and the cattle, the shepherds and those wise men from distant places staring at the empty manger, waiting.

The family turned away from the inn isn't hard to see in contemporary terms: a crowd of brown-skinned Marys and Josephs staggering in the Southwest desert. No room, America says, like a wary innkeeper. A baby, like so many in this city, arriving into desperate circumstances.

St. Francis of Assisi introduced the crèche in the Middle Ages because Christmas had become all decadence and glitter (the big red bows on new cars of his day). He was making a point, reminding people their God had a body, that this king arrived not powerful but in need of care, poor and hungry, with nowhere to dwell but in us.

Sore and aching, foot-swollen and frightened, what is Mary pregnant with?

It's hope. For a battered world.

This hope is a defiant, necessary thing. Without it we'll accept defeat, sink into nihilism. We need hope in order to build. My friend who died had that kind of hope: subversive. She knew that God arrived all the time, in chaos and fear, always needing to be birthed.

On Christmas morning we put the little toy Jesus in the manger. I look at it and think, *Aw, kid. It's gonna be so rough for you.* And yet you came. Pull up a chair. We set a place. We're trying to make it worthy.

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