

Beside the weary road

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [January 31, 2001](#) issue

Even for those faithful souls for whom Christmas begins on December 25 and continues for 12 days thereafter, the season is over. Epiphany has come and gone, the trees have been carted out to the street, and the boxes and gifts have been put away. The dog days of January and February have set in.

Every year in early January, someone tells me that he wishes we could keep the Christmas spirit alive throughout the year. I heard it again a few days ago. I understand the sentiment, but I fear that it reflects more sentimentality than an authentically Christmas spirit.

After all, for many people the “season” of Christmas—that time from late November until Christmas Day—is actually a time of acute pain, loneliness and even despair. This is true of people who don’t fit into our culture’s celebrations of family, community, and giving and receiving expensive gifts. It is especially true for those who have experienced a death or tragedy during December in any year, as well as those who have recently lost a loved one. For these people, the culture’s unabashed celebrations only intensify the pain and grief that they have otherwise been able to manage.

A few days before Christmas my wife and I went to visit a dear friend whose husband died earlier this year. We went in part because of our own sadness that this was the first year in which our friend would not be alive on Christmas Day. We wanted to share some special time with his wife.

We arrived to find her in remarkably good spirits. Only later did we learn part of the reason why. A few nights earlier, she had gone to a midweek service in a neighboring city. It was called “A Worship Service for Those with Hurting Hearts.” She described how healing the service had been, and said that she now felt ready for Christmas.

On the cover of the worship bulletin was the third verse of “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” I had never pondered the significance of the beautiful words by Edward

Sears: “And ye, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low,/ who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,/ Look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing./ O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!”

Through a service designed for “hurting hearts,” sufferers could hear the angels sing in a new way, precisely because they had been invited to rest beside the weary road and acknowledge the crushing load of grief. They had not been left alone, nor compelled to pretend that they felt the same happiness and joy that others felt at Christmas parties and concerts. Their pain was acknowledged, providing a context for more authentic joy and peace.

Our friend told us that many people gathered for that service. I could only imagine the stories that brought people there—the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, a family breakup, a significant betrayal or deception, the pain inflicted by a violent crime, an accumulation of little stresses that finally had crushed the spirit. Or perhaps it was the sadness of not being able to conceive when so many people around them were celebrating family and the birth of a child. Or maybe it was trying to deal with having been an “unwanted child” in the midst of celebrating perhaps the most wanted child in human history. Whatever their stories, they gathered to listen for the angels to sing beside their weary roads.

A few days after Christmas we visited with another friend who had gone through a painful separation during the previous year. It had been a very difficult time, and she was struggling with feelings of guilt as well as sadness. She was trying to find a sense of hope for the future, but the “Christmas season” had been hard.

We knew this friend loved music, so we had given her a copy of the Duke Chapel Choir singing Handel’s *Messiah*. We did not realize how important the words would be to her celebration of Christmas. When we saw her after Christmas, she told us that the phrase, “He has borne our sorrows,” had offered her great consolation and comfort. Such phrases and the music had helped her to recognize again that the one whose birth we celebrate is none other than the one who bears our sorrows and heals our pain.

This is the spirit of Christmas that we must retain throughout the year and throughout our lives. What would this look like for us? What would happen if we believed that Christmas is less a day or season of the year and more a way of living

faithful to the God whose giving and forgiving love is manifest in Jesus Christ?

In part, it means following the tradition of Handel's *Messiah*, the carols, the pietà that show Mary's tears, the Gospels that draw together the story of the baby in the manger with the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. But it might also mean singing a hymn like "Love Came Down at Christmas" in the middle of July.

Perhaps, most deeply, it calls us to develop the capacity to hear the angels sing throughout the year, whether beside life's weary road or from the mountaintops of life's great accomplishments. In music and liturgies that touched their hearts, our friends found a deeper understanding of Christmas and of the God whom we worship. When we learn to listen for the angels amidst the full range of life's joys and griefs, hopes and fears, then perhaps we will also rediscover a profoundly Christmas spirit.