

# Christmas

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 20, 2000](#) issue

Unsolicited, unwanted or unforwarded Christmas cards and gift catalogs keep coming to my temporary abode in the president's house at Minnesota's St. Olaf College. I paged through some of them the other day and found that the almost universal greeting now has nothing to say about Christmas. Just "Happy Holidays!"

Then I heard the deservedly famed St. Olaf Christmas concert. The words the choirs sang couldn't have been more different from the blandness of the card and catalog greetings. They were creatively jarring, realistic and, hence, Christmassy. I mused about what the anthems address and the catalog greetings avoid.

*Tree of David terribly cut to ground lay in her ashes.* In the catalogs, all the terror necessary to the plot disappears in an unthinking "Happy Holidays!"

*His Name shall be called Wonderful!* Where can the wonder-filled, mysterious good news shock in a culture of well-meaning greeters who reduce everything to the jaunty prose of "Happy Holidays!"

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand.* Shepherds once feared when angels spoke, and then ran to bring others the startling news. Now, wanting to be decent to everybody, those who are Christmas-minded and those who aren't reduce everything seasonal to a banal "Happy Holidays!"

*No night could be darker than this night, no cold so cold . . . in this dark lung of winter.* But the winter presented on the Christmas market is domesticated, tidied and warmed, portrayed on gift wrappings that read, brightly and safely, "Happy Holidays!"

*And every stone shall cry. And every stone shall cry.* What cries, who cries now to let salvation's shout be heard? And what is heard when the well-intending chanters muffle the message and come up with nothing more than "Happy Holidays!"

*Then we will chide the sun for letting night take up his place and right.* Night is present on the greeting card covers, but it comes in rich blue hues and provides an

unobtrusive background to pretty pictures. Nothing is out of place, all is in order, there is no chiding. We cheerfully chime in, "Happy Holidays!"

*He comes . . . as though within a heart of stone or shriveled seed in darkness sown.* We know, yes, we know, that in a pluralistic society we want to be inclusive in our sweep. While Jews do Jewish things for Hannukkah and Muslims do Muslim things for Ramadan, Christians avoid doing Christian things at Christmas. They try to merge into the land- and soundscape with whispers of "Happy Holidays!"

*Thou . . . deigned to be clothed in flesh for the sake of the lost ones.* What if we lost ones could find ourselves in our flesh because of the en-fleshment, the in-carnation of the Other? But we are cozy in our lostness, urged to find only enough of the God within to be able to pass on this greeting: "Happy Holidays!"

*The stars are cold at Bethlehem . . . The heart is tired at Bethlehem.* But here and now the heart is made more tired by the rounds of contentless greetings such as "Happy Holidays!"

*You peacemaker and warbringer of the way you took and gave . . . You, whom we both scorn and crave.* The programs printed this line of the song "Christus Paradox." The fire of faith is fed at the point of paradox. But what is the point when all we hear is a pointless "Happy Holidays!"

Sensitive as Christians may and must be about the holidays of those who do not share theirs, couldn't we free ourselves to greet others with something like "Rejoice! Christ the Savior is born. . . . The Word has become flesh"?