

Holy instincts

December 15, 1999

Christmas is coming. I know this not because of the weather, which is still balmy, nor the date. I know it because yesterday I saw the county prisoners putting up Christmas decorations in the town square.

Usually I see them by the side of the highway, filling orange plastic bags with litter. They wear matching, short-sleeved jumpsuits with zippers up the front and "county prisoner" stenciled on the back. A much better-dressed guard walks behind them with a rifle propped on his forearm and a broad-brimmed hat on his head. I drive far too fast to see any of their faces. Like everyone else, I whiz past them with a blast of exhaust that sets their pants legs flapping against their legs.

Slowed down by the four-way stop in town, I can see the prisoners very well. They have changed into their winter outfits, which look like baggy gray pajamas. Most of them are white men, which is surprising to me until I remember how few people of color live in this county. According to the arrest report in the weekly newspaper, their crimes range from breaking and entering to assault and battery, but the majority have been picked up for public drunkenness and possession of illegal substances.

Some of them are pretty rough-looking, which makes what they are doing seem all the more incongruous. Two men are adjusting green wreaths on utility poles so that the red bows hang straight. A big guy with thighs like holiday hams is holding one end of a string of lights while another inmate winds the strand around the tree in front of the post office. Three more prisoners squat around a large cardboard box, reaching in and pulling out shiny colored balls to add to the tree. Only two of them are really working. The third is making faces at the ball in his hand, in which he has discovered his own reflection.

It is not Christmas Eve and these are not children, but for a moment they could be—large children in baggy pajamas, transforming the square with color and light so that law-abiding people like me almost envy them. I wave and move on. It will be weeks before I haul my own Christmas decorations from the attic, but many of my

neighbors are way ahead of me. I wonder if their calendars are printed with a date that mine is missing, since they all seem to swing into action at the same time.

I never see the decorations going up. One evening during the week before Thanksgiving they are simply there: lacy icicle lights dripping from the eaves of roofs, plump plastic snowmen in black hats with their arms around giant candy canes, and heavily laden Christmas trees clearly visible through windows that are curtained the rest of the year.

Contrary to expectation, the poorest homes are often the most spectacular. If I had judged a contest last year, first prize would have gone to a house trailer by the highway just south of town. It is part of a mobile home park adjacent to the Catholic church, which is why so many Latino families live there. The women and children can walk to church, and the Spanish-speaking priest can interpret U.S. law to those who are still learning it the hard way.

The trailer I admired was an eyesore by day, with dented baby blue aluminum siding and tiny sliding windows that stayed steamed up with all the breathing, cooking and living that was going on inside. Gaudy plastic kids' toys littered the little strip of grass out front, which was dominated by a satellite dish and a late model Ford truck under a makeshift carport.

By night, the place was Wonderland. The satellite dish had so many colored lights on it that it looked like a beached spaceship. The carport was also rimmed with lights, and the roof of the trailer had become a landing strip for Santa's sleigh, drawn by a full complement of reindeer. I imagine that there were better uses for all that money. I imagine that there were children in that trailer who needed new shoes more than they needed a plastic Santa, as well as adults who needed justice more than they needed a fantasy of colored lights.

But what I am noticing this year is the holy spark that smolders underneath all this gratuitous tinsel and voltage. At least that is what I think it is. While true believers lament the crass commercialization of Christmas and the loss of Jesus as the reason for the season, the Holy Spirit haunts the most secular ceremonies: a string of cheap lights to illumine the darkness, a day off from the highway litter patrol to remember that the way things are is not the way they must always be.

These are not religious activities, but they strike me as the kinds of things Jesus might have worked into his parables. The kingdom of heaven is like a bunch of

inmates set free to wreath the town square for a party. The kingdom of heaven is like a broken-down house trailer made beautiful for a child's eyes.

There are all kinds of things wrong with the way we celebrate Christmas. We eat too much, we spend too much, we sentimentalize too much, we worry too much. Those excesses cannot douse the holy instincts that underlie them. We really are hungry. We really do want to give and receive. We really do want to feel deeply, live peaceably, sleep soundly and rise renewed. As the season moves toward its apogee, those of us who believe we know where the instincts lead may do more good by wading into the culture than by separating ourselves from it. God is in the midst of it, after all, still hunting new flesh in which to be born.