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## *Holy Holiday!*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**Christmas Eve**

Live, from the Cathedral,..., it's Saturday night!

Actually, tonight is more than that. Tonight is more than a TV show, and more than mere entertainment.

I don't have anything against entertainment, and I don't have anything against Saturday Night Live, but church is more than that.

In the past several years, some of us have been getting our theology from churches, and some of us have been getting our theology from entertainment. Tonight, there is a difference between entertainment and church.

An entertainment center is a place you can choose to attend when you feel like it; it is a big screen you can switch on when you feel like it. It is a television program where you know you'll feel good afterwards. We Americans consume entertainment so that we won't feel bored or lonely. And the more entertainment we consume, the emptier we feel.

A Christian church may be entertaining, but we are something much more than an entertainment center. For one thing, entertainment centers are closed on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and we are definitely open! But the main difference is this: churches are living communities of ordinary people, broken people and healthy people, dying people and living people, where we learn holiness.

We do not attend church just to be entertained. We worship and pray and serve and learn together so that we can grow in holiness. A Christian Church is where we actually learn what it means to be holy.

Do you think Mary and Joseph got into this predicament just to entertain us! Do you think the shepherds considered the angels just another Broadway show? Do you think the wise men were watching just another fireworks display? No, these figures dear to our heart are showing us tonight, not what entertainment is, but what holiness is.

When was the last time an entertainment center offered us holiness?

Watch out! The distinction may be very slight! Sometimes it's a matter of pronunciation. It's a matter of how you pronounce "holiday." Entertainment centers watch for holidays. Churches observe holy days.

As usual around this time of year, some entertainment centers, including many of our news media, raise a commotion about the phrase "happy holidays." They are paranoid that there is some ominous "war on Christmas" out there. Enough already! War is not merely another way to be entertained. This year, we have enough real war to worry about. Peace on Earth! Let's not make everything a "war."

I got a sweet card in the mail last week. Amidst all the clatter of whether we should pronounce the word "Christmas" in

public, a holiday card came to me from a friend who is a Jewish rabbi. He is a good man. And do you know what the card said?

It said, "Peace." One word. That was the inscription. But inside, my friend had hand-written something else. My Jewish rabbi friend had written that he just wanted to wish me and my family a very Merry Christmas.

Holy people, of whatever religion, are not afraid to use the phrase, "Merry Christmas." Holy people should not be afraid to say "Happy Hanukkah" either.

Tonight, I have nothing against the use of the word "holiday." In fact, I would love for us to re-claim just what a holiday is. A holiday is a "holy day." It is not merely an entertainment day, or a vacation day.

We wish everyone tonight a "Merry Christmas," but I also pray for something else tonight. It's not a "happy" holiday that I wish; I want to wish you a "Holy Holiday."

Yes, holy holiday. Don't be afraid to use the word holiday; just remember that holiness does not always mean happiness.

The way to holiness for Jesus, for Mary and Joseph, for the shepherds and the wise men, was not always happy at all. "A cold coming we had of it," said the Magi, "just the worst time of the year" (T.S. Eliot, *The Gift of the Magi*).

We know by now that holidays are not always happy at all. Many folks find this season overwhelmed with anxiety and over-expectation and finally disappointment. We wait so anxiously for guests to arrive; and then we can't wait for the same people to be gone! We waste our time waiting for Godot, waiting for something that will never appear.

Holiness means sensing God tonight, right now, in your neighbor, in your spirit, without needing something else to entertain us. Holiness means that God shows up here and now, God shows up in the regular routines of our lives, even without a lot of preparation or baby showers, or movie cameras and flowers and new clothes. God shows up in our lives just like the angel did to Mary.

"Do not fear," said the angel. "Do not fear," God told the shepherds. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, even the kings, were all regular people doing their ordinary things when God showed up. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day, right here, in the city, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. To you is born this day, right now, a savior."

Holiness means living through the cycles of birth and death, health and illness, in graceful ways. As Christians, we believe that God is present in both birth and death, illness and health. God does not exist merely to entertain us. God exists to love us gracefully through the ups and downs of life.

And this year has brought its share of ups and downs, hasn't it? A holy pope, John Paul the Second, died, and so did the holy Rosa Parks. Rosa showed us how holy one simple act can be. Johnny Carson died and so did Peter Jennings. But other lives kept on. The Atlanta Braves won their fourteenth division title in a row!

And the star of the year has to be the ivory-billed woodpecker, born again, a sign for us that resurrection is always possible. New life is always possible! Lord, God almighty!

No, wait, that's not it. The star of the year is another kind of new life in the bayou. The stars of the year are really those who are re-building the city of New Orleans. Those re-builders are everywhere. They are citizens returning to a ruined city. They are volunteers from around the country. They are you and me. Holiness means never losing hope.

Jesus was born to provide us such hope. Jesus, whom we celebrate and adore tonight, was born to redeem us from death and despondence, and to save us from empty entertainment.

Consider one more reality of the past year: the bitter political divides that have sliced through our country and our friends. Folks say there is a culture "war," or a war between conservatives and liberals. Enough of that war! -if we believe in "Peace

on Earth."

Conservatives believe that values and traditions have been established and should be conserved. They believe so in the name of Jesus. And they are right. Jesus said "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them."

Liberals believe that life changes and grows; liberals believe that humanity should be free and liberated from what hinders us. They believe so in the name of Jesus. And they, too, are right. Jesus sets us free. Jesus liberates us.

Can both conservatives and liberals be right? Yes, if we focus on the hope and holiness of Jesus. Jesus is neither an entertainment that we can all use to our own devices and purposes, and nor is Jesus a weapon.

Jesus is not just another opportunity to argue about whether we should teach evolution in our schools or whether Christmas is a legitimate holiday. Of course we should teach evolution. Of course Christmas is a holy day!

Do you know who objected to the observance of Christmas in the early days of the United States of America? Long ago, it was the fundamentalist Puritans who objected to Christmas. It is always the simplistic Puritans who make Christmas a problem.

Away with simpleton Christianity tonight! Away with entertainment Christianity! Let's adore a God who creates rational and imaginative and beautiful humanity! Let's adore a God who then deigns to become that humanity, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus Christ, the Savior of all the World, is born this night, born that we no more may die, born to give us second birth.

This is a holy night. This is Christmas; a holy, holy day.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
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