

# Celebrate the light with joy, not fear

DIANNE RINEHART

On Sunday evening, after waking up to the news that day of the horrific antisemitic terrorist slaughter at Australia's Bondi Beach, I went to my first Hanukkah ceremony.

I went to stand up for my many friends and colleagues and former students who are Jewish, and under attack. I went to stand up against terrorism.

And I went because I could no longer give in to the fear that silences us all from speaking up for and standing with our Jewish friends and a community that is under attack by those who would terrorize all of us — and will if we let them.

One neighbour I spoke with about Bondi Beach said he is now afraid to take his children anywhere near a Jewish celebration.

I understood his feelings and fears. I feel them, too.

But the truth is none of us are safe when we let terrorists attack people at religious ceremonies of any kind, anywhere.

Not Christians, who are the target of what are now seemingly regular attacks at Christmas markets in Europe.

And not Muslims who experienced, a 94 per cent increase in police-reported hate crimes from 2022 to 2023, according to Statistics Canada.

It shouldn't be scary for me to express my sorrow to Jewish friends who are posting their fears and feelings online.

I am a Canadian, as are they, living in a democracy that values human rights, including and, maybe especially, religious freedoms.

But that is heartbreakingly the case now.

As Globe and Mail columnist Marsha Lederman wrote last summer, she cannot even mourn "the killings of two little Israeli red-haired brothers without being accused of being a genocidal Nazi."

So let me tell you about the Hanukkah ceremony up at Blue Mountain. It was beautiful and moving.

I could not believe the eloquence of Rabbi Berel Shur, who spoke solemnly about the events in Australia before bravely beginning the ceremony as a toddler excitedly ran back and forth across the stage, innocent of the day's tragic events.

Or of the inspiring speeches full of love and support given by both the mayor of The Blue Mountains, Andrea Matrosov, and the MPP for the region, Brian Saunders.

And here's what I learned: the lighting of the menorah is about lightness winning out over darkness, good winning out over evil.

That is, of course, what religions around the world celebrate.

And indeed, as Jews were gathered to light the first candle on the menorah at Bondi Beach, others there were celebrating their religious festivals of light.

A photograph taken by Associated Press photographer Mark Baker in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the beach captured exactly that. It was of an abandoned picnic.

In the middle of a blanket laden with food and drink, stood a small, decorated Christmas tree.

I do not want to worry about the safety of my Jewish friends and colleagues, including a 90-year-old girlfriend and another whose parents are Holocaust survivors.

Indeed, I do not want to worry about the safety of any community's safety in Canada, of all places.

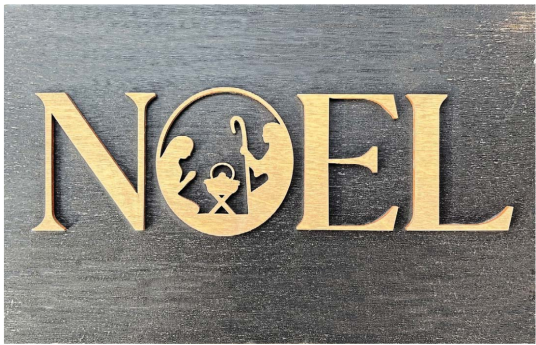
What, after all, would my British mother and Canadian father, who were stationed on an air force base in northern England during the Second World War, think about us allowing the freedoms they fought for to be trashed by terrorists, because we are afraid — as if they weren't?

So in wishing everyone in Canada the warmth and light of the season, no matter what your religion, may I leave you with a quote that one of my Jewish friends sent out on that first day of Hanukkah, as he tried to make sense of the tragedy at Bondi Beach: "Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering, there is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." — Leonard Cohen.

DIANNE RINEHART IS A JOURNALIST AND WRITER.



On Dec. 14 as Jews gathered to light the first candle on the menorah at Bondi Beach, others there were celebrating their religious festivals of light, Dianne Rinehart writes.



The sign on a front window ledge of the family home of Thomas Froese. Writing about things hidden in plain view, Froese notes "Noel" means "Christmas" and also "good news."

## Reflecting on humility, love



THOMAS FROESE  
OPINION

Sitting on our home's front window ledge these days is a simple sign that says, "Noel."

A nativity scene is carved inside the letter O. I found it in a country store.

The modest window in a window isn't much. Except it is. This is how it goes with things hidden in plain view.

Consider a game involving youth sent to a busy mall to find some adults dressed in costume, adults they know.

I recently learned about it. One girl doesn't recognize her own father when he sits on a bench beside her. He asks her for the time. So she tells him, stands up and leaves. The things we miss in plain view.

Or picture this: You're in the downtown core where a church opens its doors every Thursday for down-and-outers. Down because they don't have two nickels to rub together. Out because they're often outside mainstream society or outside their families or outside in the cold.

Here they have food, warmth and each other. This Thursday, they sing.

A man named Ben leads "The Joy of the Lord," a song he wrote while recovering after his wife's death. His world collapsed, he explains,

but prayer and music helped in his grief. "It's the Lord's joy that's our strength," he tells the gathering. "It's not ours." Then everyone decides to pray.

Someone's getting evicted. A woman talks about the monthly cheques that never arrive, money that won't make ends meet anyway. Then the kids on the street.

These people pray for many things. I was there.

You'd be forgiven for seeing it all as comedy, even as you'd be forgiven for thinking the God of Christmas has a strange sense of humour. Chief among the things he likes to hide, apparently, is himself.

Jesus once told a story about a dog, about a king at the end of time. "I was hungry," the king tells his audience, "and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me a cool drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you brought them. I was sick and you nursed me to health. I was even in prison and you visited."

Waiting for the punchline, his listeners say, "No, no, you're mistaken. Not us. We'd remember that." The king says, "You actually did this for me when you did it for those needing it most."

More things hidden in plain view. And now a king who plays like a child.

It's like the joke about a teacher who tells her class, "Draw anything you want." One boy goes for it.

He says he's drawing God. The teacher says, "No, you can't. Nobody knows what God looks

like." The little boy says, "Well, they will when I'm finished."

And isn't this Christmas?

A window. A picture of God having great power and humility, both. Mary and Joseph, poor as they come. The newborn Jesus laid in an animal feeding trough. Scruffy shepherds, the outcasts and outsiders of the time, given the news before anyone else.

"Don't be afraid," the angel tells them while their knees knock and their faces shine with wonder. Then the holy heavenly host goes strong about glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace and goodwill to, well, everyone.

This is not just a birth, but a death to all my gods. It's a profound understanding I once heard, one that might come from some emperor as much as you or me.

This is the first Noel.

It's not anyone reaching up or performing. It's the maker of all things coming down to reassure humankind of his unusual and unending love, that nothing can separate us from it.

This is why Christmas rolls around every year.

To remind us.

Noel, by the way, means "Christmas" in French. It's also "good news," from the phrase "bonnes nouvelles." God apparently knows that the world needs some good news.

Blessed are those who see it.

FIND THOMAS FROESE AT THOMASFROESE.COM AND THOMASFROESE.SUBSTACK.COM

## Listening for hope at Christmas

DAVID PFRIMMER

Simon and Garfunkel's 1966 song "7 O'Clock News/Silent Night" was both eerie and unforgettable.

It blended a traditional Christmas carol with a grim, disturbing news broadcast.

Paul Simon explained, "I wrote a news thing to that (song) because at that time the news was always full of really grim things. The world was in a state of turmoil."

This year seems just as grim.

In 2025, the carnage in Ukraine, genocide in Gaza and humanitarian disaster in Sudan, along with climate-driven wildfires and floods, rising homelessness, growing hunger and the uncertainty sparked by Donald Trump's attack on Canada and the world, all cast a shadow of despair.

Nonetheless, Christmas still carries a quiet, miraculous magic — felt most deeply by children, as Charles Dickens observed — because it is "when the world's mighty founder was a child himself."

A story that begins with no room at the inn unfolds into the birth of a child in a stable, first welcomed by poor shepherds, then honoured by foreign dignitaries bearing gifts and soon fleeing as a refugee from a corrupt and immoral king.

Christmas is a profound paradox that overturns the world's assumptions about power and worth. God

arrives not to the mighty or celebrated, but to the vulnerable and powerless. We often find hope in unexpected places where we encounter the divine.

It is a story that echoes across centuries and faith traditions. At the heart of most religions are two enduring teachings: the Golden Rule, which calls us to serve and care for one another and the Green Rule, which urges us to safeguard God's good creation.

Many lament the increasing commercialization of Christmas.

Today, a greater threat comes from Christian Nationalists who want a different Jesus story. These Christians want to "make America Christian again."

They fight for a powerful Jesus that can impose a regressive (distorted) version of Christian values, beliefs and way of life on all of society. The Guardian's Bill McGibben writes, MAGA Christians have "turned a figure of love (Jesus) into a figure of hate who blesses precisely the cruelties that he condemned."

This phenomenon is neither new nor exclusive to Christianity. In the 1930s, a loud minority German Christian movement sought a theological takeover of churches to support Hitler. In the United States and Canada, similar toxic minority views were expressed through the Ku Klux Klan and other organiza-

tions. Today, religious nationalism is resurging not only in the U.S., but in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Russia, Hungary, Israel and Myanmar, among others, sowing division and hatred.

In our compassion-challenged world, to paraphrase comedian John Fugelsang, we need fewer religious culture warriors "who want to fight for Jesus" and more people with the courage to "listen to him."

The original Christmas story challenges and comforts us each year. It offers hope we can rise above our selfishness with humility and selflessness. It encourages us to love, serve and care for others. Christmas invites us to embrace the world as God did — with compassion, not fear.

Christmas is about joy, love and peace: rekindling relationships, mending the broken parts of our communities and resolving conflicts in our world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed for opposing Hitler, described Jesus as a "man for others."

Christmas encourages us to be open and urges us to build bridges rather than close doors. There is space at this inn for everyone, especially the least, the lost and the left out.

The late journalist and former war correspondent Eric Sevareid famously said it best: "Christmas is a necessity. There must be at least one day of the year to remind us that we're here for something beyond ourselves."

Merry Christmas.  
DAVID PFRIMMER IS PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF PUBLIC ETHICS AT MARTIN LUTHER UNIVERSITY COLLEGE AT WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY IN WATERLOO.