

Is It Christmas Yet?

From a precursor (1992) to the daily *Principal's Diary*
(E. Keith Dodd, Principal, Radnor Middle School)

School let out only yesterday afternoon (12/23), the end of a short but stress-filled week. Late yesterday in cloudy dark weather (I think the song "In the Bleak Midwinter" must have been written in Philadelphia), we packed the car so we could leave early the morning before Christmas to spend the special day with family in West Virginia.

Bleak midwinter continued on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, over icy Pittsburgh freeways, and into soot-covered week-old snow as we drove into the Ohio Valley. The aroma of Mom's ham in the oven did its best to overcome the effects of a rough week and the tense six-hour drive, but it was only partially successful. It wasn't Christmas yet.

My brother and his family arrived, and we ate Christmas Eve dinner together, Christmas candles on the table. Later, we exchanged and opened presents, grumbled that the church service wasn't starting until 11:00, Dad declaring that he'd be in bed long before that. To help us stay awake, we tried to figure out how to set up nephew Nate's new word processor. It wasn't Christmas yet.

Around 10:30, my mother insisted we start walking to church. (Only a five-minute walk, but "we don't want to go in late and make a scene like some people do!"). We walked across the field, which showed some brown grass through the patchy snow, and down First Street's dirty sidewalk to the church I grew up in. New snow was just beginning to spit from the dark sky.

The bright sanctuary lights made even the holiday greenery on the walls seem stark, and cruelly made faces of the older congregation seem drier and with more wrinkles than was necessary. After a few carols, the mandatory collection, and the preacher's meditation, we lit candles we had pick up from a basket when we entered. They were white and had small circular cardboard wax catchers around them.

The organ began "Silent Night", and someone snapped off the lights -- as well as reality, it seemed. With the same flip of the switch, the candles' glow gave flickering warmth to the decked walls, and all I could see were faces. Orange-cast faces seemed smooth, almost angelic. Although we have been taught that on this special night the Divine became Human, through these faces I got a glimpse of the Human as Divine. The angles sang, "...sleep in heavenly peace." When we walked out, a snow squall had covered the ground and streets with a fresh white coat. There were a few "Merry Christmas" exchanges, but we walked back to my folks' place in silence. It was already Christmas.