

Managing Holiday Expectations

While far from ideal, my childhood provided me with great memories of the holidays. It seemed a time when it was “all about the kids,” and being a kid, therefore, was pretty great. Even now, I love the lights and the decorations, and can honestly say that the holidays are my favorite time of year. This is despite the fact that they are also the hardest time of the year for me. Try as I might, my holidays don’t look like they do in the movies.

Only as an adult can we appreciate the stress that the holidays must have brought our own parents. It is as if, through our own experience as parents and adults, we can look back on those memories of childhood with a clarity we didn’t have then. Behind the bows and lights, and hidden in the dark corners where the candlelight didn’t reach, there were all the stresses and hurt I feel now as an adult.

That’s why my expectations of the holidays, shaped by the movies to conclude with a happy ending despite any difficulty, leave me confused and always a little melancholy as an adult. Intellectually, I recognize how silly it is to mourn the loss of an ideal holiday that never truly existed, but my heart longs for that happy ending and saccharine sweet Hollywood storyline. So, what should we do when we are stressed out, disappointed, or depressed at the prospect of the holidays with no sign of immediate relief? I have a few suggestions that have proven helpful for me.

First, name false expectations out loud. Sometimes just speaking the words, “I can’t have a great Christmas unless [fill in the blank]!” helps you see how silly it is. Our joy shouldn’t hang on the outcome of the weather, our family’s gratitude, or getting that item on our Christmas list. Joy comes from within, not without. Take a deep breath. It will be okay, and okay is good enough.



Secondly, manage moments and take time for people, not tasks. Some of the greatest moments during the holidays can be found in chance encounters. If you rush around getting tasks done, you’ll miss these moments of joy. Plan for connection with people, realizing that being together is what’s important—whether it’s over a store-bought cookie or one you spent hours baking in your kitchen. It’s about being fully present at your child’s concert or performance, not capturing it for social media.

Third, get outside yourself by serving. When our holidays are about our experience and how we feel about them, we’re setting ourselves up for disappointment. But, if we look for opportunities to serve someone else and brighten their day, we shift our gaze from our expectations to another’s need. It just may tap us into a deeper reality behind the holidays, especially as we celebrate the birth of he who came “not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45).

Lastly, if you take good care of yourself this holiday season you’ll be better equipped to provide that wonderful holiday you want for yourself and your family. Your children will thank you for it, and they will appreciate the tradition you build around a more balanced and relationally-focused holiday more than any present you could buy them.

- Chaplain Chris Haughee

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