

One of the things that we are all searching for in life is happiness. But what we find as we go along is that what we think makes us happy can at times actually make us miserable.

Such was the case for Joe Eszterhas, who is a talented screenwriter, having penned Flashdance in the 80s and Basic Instinct in the 1990s, along with many other films, and for years lived the high life in California. As he put it in an interview, He wrote 16 films, had homes in Malibu and Maui, and would use cocaine and alcohol to excess, sometimes waking up the next morning not even knowing what had gone on the night before or where he was. All of this came with the fame, the money, and it seemed like this was what he wanted, because this road to stardom didn't come easy.

He is Hungarian by birth, but as Hungary was under the Iron Curtain when he was a child, and his family wanted a better life, they fled to Austria, where he would spend part of his childhood in a refugee camp. And among the most bleakest of days for him in the camp was Christmas.

There were no gifts either to give or to receive. There was hardly any food to eat. Dinner would be pine-needle soup, or flank steaks cut from the carcasses of starved horses, which caused him to become ill. And then there were the sights that he saw each day – knife-fights, black marketeers, or wives selling their bodies for Hershey bars with which to feed their infant children.

Despite this horrible setting, his mom always clung to her faith. She tried to teach him to pray, and about Jesus, who had died on the Cross to save him. This seemed to make little sense to young Joe though. In his words “Really? He came to save me? Then why am I here?” In his estimation, this Jesus, whom his mom talked about at length had forgotten him and left him off of the saved list. He also didn’t understand why on Christmas Eve, his mom and dad would bundle him up and walk him out of the barrack into a dark and frosty forest. They would stop by a pine tree filled with icicles. His father would take his violin out of his case, while his mom held a candle and hugged him. Then, his father would play a Hungarian song on the violin, a Christmas carol called “Menybol Az Angyal,” about an angel who came from heaven to be there at the birth of the baby Jesus. It moved his parents to tears, but Joe remained untouched. He was freezing, hungry,

and wanted to go back to the barrack they called a home. As for Jesus and the baby Jesus, he could care less about some infant born a long time ago, and much less about celebrating his birthday.

This view continued as he grew older. His family makes it to America, where the people in the camps told him the streets would be paved with gold. But there were no gold streets in the back alleys of the west side of Cleveland, where Joe says he “gladly brandished my brass knuckles and my zip gun.” Here, the situation wasn’t all that different than in the camps: there was no money, many people were hungry, and they drank cheap wine from brown paper bags on their doorsteps. People he says who were “hollow-eyes, howling in rage at their neighborhood and their world.” But still in America, in their poverty, the faith of his mom hadn’t waned. He says “My mother kept trying to tell me about Jesus – but poor and lost woman, she had become a schizophrenic in the refugee camp. She had lost her mind. She heard aliens chattering and screeching inside the electric outlets and kept insisting, wild-eyed, that Christ had redeemed the world. I thought: Poor, babbling, crazy woman that I love so much, what...do you know about reality? Christmas Eve in our three-room, linoleum-floored flat with the blinking red neon of the bar next door lighting up our darkness: my

mother stands there holding her candle and crying while my father plays “Menybol Az Angyal” on his new, second-hand rummage store violin. They are both crying. Not me. (Heck) no, not me! Nobody was going to catch me crying. I was the tough American street kid saddled with these pathetic and frightened Old World Hunkie parents! I didn’t want to be here listening to this worn violin! I wanted to listen to Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis on my little transistor radio. Jesus? The baby Jesus? I couldn’t care less about Jesus. I couldn’t care less about the baby Jesus, and even less about Christmas.”

As he grew up, he began to find his way out of the west side of Cleveland. He was able to get a job as a reporter for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, and wrote a nonfiction book, “Charlie Simpson’s Apocalypse” that was nominated for a national award. By his early 30s, he began to write screenplays, where he found money and success, and had a family. And in talking about this point in his life, he says that his family didn’t go to church, but did celebrate Christmas. But rather than church, they celebrated it by going to the Kahala Hilton on Oahu or the Four Seasons in Maui, and with loads of expensive presents. Jesus though, had nothing to do with the day – rather, he says “these were decadent Santa Claus’ spoiled-rotten

holidays.” His mother had died by that point in his life, and his father was ailing, unable to play the Christmas carol on the violin.

Thirty more years passed, and Eszterhas was 57, seeing continued success from his writing, but gets a shocking diagnosis: he has throat cancer. The lifetime of chain smoking had caught up to him. He was terrorized. He says the reason for his terror was not only that he had a wife and four small boys, but that the doctors said he had to stop smoking and drinking immediately, and he knew he couldn't do it, for he smoked four packs of Salem Lights each day and also enjoyed a fifth of Tanqueray or Jack Daniels, and was an alcoholic. He had made it a month cold turkey, but knew he was at the end of the rope. And so he went for a walk one day, and sat on a curb alone, and began to cry, feeling helpless and desolate. In his grief, a voice inside his head cried out “Please, God, please Jesus, help me!” Recognizing the voice as his, he reacted with shame. “Jesus? I was asking Jesus for help? Me? Who'd never cared about him, who'd stood there impassively while my mother and father celebrated his birth each year? Jesus? The baby Jesus? And I was begging that same Jesus now to...help me. What shameless effrontery! What insane chutzpah! What self-

delusion! I was expecting Jesus to care about me when all of those years I could not have cared less about him?”

But, what Eszterhas learned was that Jesus did in fact care about him. As Fr. Dan Schlegel, who was the priest at the parish in Ohio that Eszterhas later became active in, put it, somebody wrote God comes through the wound, and sometimes it's not until we are really broken that God has an entry way into our lives. There were other gods, the gods that Eszterhas and so many of chase: money, power, alcohol, prestige; and when these things do not work and show us false happiness, there is an openness for God. And this was the door through which God entered; as Eszterhas put it, he did not so much find God as God found him. He managed to overcome his addictions, that he says “were not giving me life but killing me.” And through several years of treatment that followed for the cancer, he was cured, which his oncologist called a “miracle.” He still writes, but makes sure to spend each night with his family. And there still are Christmas celebrations, though the tree is a little bit smaller and the holiday isn't spent on the beaches of Hawaii, but at Holy Angles Church in Bainbridge Township, Ohio, where he says the highlight is Fr. Dan and Sister Susan scheduling him to carry the Cross to the altar at one of the

Christmas Masses. He reflects that he does not know why God singled him out and blessed him; that he doesn't deserve it, but God came to him anyway.

He has now come to realize that Christmas doesn't celebrate a God who was, but a God who is. It celebrates the birth of Christ, whose mercy knows no bounds, and who forgives even relentless sinners like him. And he says that his life began not in 1944 in Hungary, but on a cold day in 2001 on a curb where he had reached his lowest point. He can't play the violin like his father, but he did manage to find a recording of the carol his father played, and his wife holds a candle now as it is played while he holds his boys in his loving arms and cries tears of joy. He'd also write a book on his faith journey called "Crossbearer" that was published in 2008.

This is one of the darkest days of the year, and it's part of the reason we celebrate the birth of our Lord every December 25th. For while the days are pretty short, we are now past the winter solstice and ever so slightly light is creeping back in day by day. But just as the darkness increased the last 6 months little by little, so can it be for us. There is the suffering of daily life like in the refuge camps and on the streets of Cleveland that Eszterhas

knew growing up that hardened him. There are the experiences of the sins of others; of abuse, of bullying, of racism and hatred. There is the pain of loss, when we lose people who mean so much to us and aren't there to share Christmas dinner with this year. And there is the darkness of sin that for a moment looks good, doing what we want and things that bring momentary pleasure, but that ultimately lead to emptiness like Eszterhas found on that bench. So a starting point as we celebrate this feast is to look at our souls, and ask ourselves are we truly happy? Maybe it has been a hard year. Or maybe on the surface, things are going well and we have a good job, friends, money, maybe authority at work. Perhaps it's somewhere in the middle. Because most all of us have moments on the top of the mountain, and moments where everything goes wrong.

The thing of it is though is that all of us at various moments will find that without God in our lives, we will end up like Eszterhas on that bench.

Things that we think bring pleasure can often destroy our lives and relationships. Money fades away. Power and influence wane over time as we age. We all face hardships with family and friends, and ultimately our own mortality. We can like Icarus fly high in the sky on our own, but ultimately as the heat from the sun destroyed his wings, sin and life will

cause us to crash too. On our own, there are moments where we think we are happy, like Eszterhaus finally out of the camp and the slums of Cleveland and living the high life, but it's a fake happiness that does not bring lasting peace. So, are you truly happy? And if you aren't, know what this feast is about: God bursting in.

Malcolm Guite, an English poet and Anglican priest, wrote a poem called "Refugee." It begins:

*We think of him as safe beneath the steeple.
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want*

This is God; our God, coming as a frail infant to dwell with humanity and be with the downtrodden, the homeless, the poor, the sinners, those in pain. Like Eszterhas, Jesus is born a refugee. It's why we have a nativity scene in many homes, and have several here at the parish, including the one just built this year out front. As Pope Francis wrote: "in its genuine poverty, the creche helps us to rediscover the true richness of Christmas and to purify ourselves of so many aspects that pollute the Christmas landscape.' It's a time for presents, for dinners, and celebrations; but above all else a time to ponder how God saw us in pain and decided to do something about it.

My hope is that first and foremost no matter where you are at, you remember just how much you are loved by God. If there is something you battle in secret, turn it over to God and do not beat yourself up. If you are going through challenges, invite God into your heart. Or even if things may be going well, remember as Frank Sinatra said we can fly high in May and be shot down in June, and maybe at a deeper level, we might find we aren't really content and something important is missing, namely peace. As G.K. Chesterton, a Catholic writer and apologist from the late 19th and early 20th century, Christ is not merely a summer sun of the prosperous but a winter fire for the unfortunate, so may the fire of His love warm your soul, and fear not being found. Warm yourself by this fire of the Eucharist, and know you are always welcome here at Mass and that you always have a home with the Lord who wants to dwell with you by committing or re-committing yourself to coming to know Him every day.

And with that, let us also not forget so many people out there are looking for hope and are people in need. Dr. William Lynn Weaver, who was a regular contributor to the show "StoryCorps," which gives people the chance to interview friends and loved ones about their lives, before he

passed in 2019, told a story of Christmas Eve in 1967 and a lesson he learned in seeing the good in humanity. He was 18 in 1967, and walking in Knoxville, Tennessee, when he saw a boy gliding down the street on a bicycle. He thought to himself that looked a lot like his brother's bike. When he got home, he asked his younger brother Wayne where that bicycle was. His younger brother told him it was down the steps. But, it wasn't.

The Weaver brothers tracked down where the boy lived - an unlit shack in an alley - and planned to confront him.

Weaver reflected that he and his brother were going to beat the boy up, but his father was there, and he said "Just shut up and let me talk."

An elderly man with a cane answered their knock on the door. The home appeared cold and dark, and he had a single candle for light. his grandson, Weaver learned, was the boy who had stolen the bike. The boy was 10, about the same age as Weaver's younger brother. The boy started to cry and said he just wanted something for Christmas. The Weavers took the bike and walked home.

Weaver then says “My father tells my mother and she doesn’t say anything. She just starts cutting the turkey in half and all the fixings. She started packing it up. My father went to the coal yard and got a big bag of coal. And then he told my brother, he said “You’ve got another bike, don’t you?” William’s younger brother said he did.

And the 3 returned to the shack in the alley, this time with food, some coal to provide heat, and the bike.

The little boy was in tears, and what William remembers the most about that Christmas was his dad giving him \$20, which was a huge deal in 1967 to a lower class working family, and he says to him “Merry Christmas.” The elderly man broke down in tears.

Looking back on Christmas 1967, William reflected “My father was a chauffeur, my mother was a domestic, so we didn’t have a lot of stuff. And that Christmas, I don’t even remember what gift I got, but I do know that made me feel better than any Christmas I’ve ever had.”

In our world there is so much suffering, and we just need to open our eyes to see it. There are people in poverty and need like that boy and his grandfather. There are people beaten down by life who are depressed or sad. There are people who are lonely who have lost their loved ones. There are people who have been transformed by anger or hatred. There are people who are stressed out by the pressures of school or making it in the view of the world. And there are people who may seem to the eyes just like Eszterhaus in his prime - successful and having it all, but deeper down are miserable. Maybe these people are on a bench. Maybe they are a coworker or a neighbor. Maybe they are the people we'll see at Christmas celebrations with extended family, or maybe they are the people we see every day right under our own roof. We need to open our eyes like Dr. Weaver's dad did and remember we can do so much when we talk to someone rather than judge them or trash them online; when we change the conversation from gossip to positivity; when we forgive and reach out; when we give the gift of our time for a meal or a conversation; when we listen, and when we look deeper into the eyes and soul and realize a person is not defined by their race, their politics, their status in life, their ideology, or what they can do, but who they are - a child of God, loved by

God, who needs to see that love. May we reveal it to them by letting Jesus open our eyes, hearts and mind to others in need and seeing it.

I'd just like to close with a short reflection from GK Chesterton, the closing lines to his poem "The House of Christmas."

*To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.*

May you have a blessed and joyful Christmas, and a safe journey home to happiness and peace.