

Order of Service – December 18, 2016
Christmas

Musical Prelude

Greeting

1st Hymn: Comfort, Comfort Ye My People, Green 55

Readings –

2nd Hymn: In the Bleak Midwinter, Green 84

Joys and Concerns
Musical interlude

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Introductions /Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting

Good morning Friends. We come together on this 4th Sunday of Advent to consider the celebration of Christmas or “God with Us.” For those of you who light advent candles, today you light the “peace” candle.

The Dalai Lama wrote:

“With genuine compassion you view others as more important than yourself.... If you think only of yourself, if you forget the rights and well-being of others, or, worse still, if you exploit others ultimately you will lose. As long as space endures, as long as sentient beings remain, until then, may I too remain and dispel the miseries of the world.”

And from Thich Nhat Hanh:

“Only through us can understanding and love become tangible and effective. When the energy of ‘the Light’ is in us, we are truly alive, capable of understanding the suffering of others and motivated by the desire to help transform the situation. We do what we can [in the spirit of humility or non-self] to benefit others WITHOUT seeing ourselves as helpers and the others as helped.”

The 1st Hymn is “Comfort, Comfort Oh My People” from the Green Hymnal # 55

Readings:

Our first reading this morning is from Luke 1: 46-54 also known as “Mary’s Song.” And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant...”

The second reading is lyrics from the song “The Rebel Jesus,” written by Jackson Browne and sung by the Chieftains on their “Bells of Dublin” album.

“The streets are filled with laughter and light
And the music of the season
And the merchants’ windows are all bright
With the faces of the children.
And the families hurrying to their homes
As the sky darkens and freezes
Will be gathering around hearths and tables
Giving thanks for all God’s graces
And the birth of the rebel Jesus.

We guard our world with locks and guns
And we guard our fine possessions
And once a year when Christmas comes
We give to our relations
And perhaps we give a little to the poor
If the generosity should seize us
But if any one of us should interfere
In the business of why there are poor
They get the same as the rebel Jesus

Pardon me if I have seemed
To take the tone of judgment
For I’ve no wish to come between
This day and your enjoyment.
In this life of hardship and of earthly toil

We have need for anything that frees us
So I bid you pleasure and I bid you cheer
From a non religious person
On the side of the rebel Jesus.”

The third reading is from James 2: 15&16:

“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If . . . you say to him/her, ‘Go. I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but do nothing about his/her physical needs, what good is it?”

Our second hymn is “In the Bleak Midwinter” in the Green hymnal #84

What “Joys and Concerns” do you wish to share this morning?
Music Interlude

Prayer:

Let us pray together –
Awaken my heart,
God’s reign is near;
The Peaceable Kingdom
Is in my hands.

If the wolf can be the guest of the lamb,
And the bear and cow be friends,
Then no injury or hate can be a guest
Within the kingdom of my heart.

Eden’s peace and harmony will only return
When first, in my heart,
There hides no harm or ruin,
For the Peaceable Kingdom is in my hands.

Isaiah’s dream became Jesus’ vision:
“Come follow me,” Emmanuel’s echo rings.
“Reform your life, recover Eden’s peace,”
For only then will salvation appear.

For Advent’s dream is the healing of earth,
When the eagle and bear become friends,
The child and the serpent playmates.

Arise, awaken, my heart,
The Peaceable Kingdom
Is in your hands.¹

The 3rd hymn is “Lord of the Dance,” Green hymnal, #115

Meditation

I liken Advent/Christmas to an onion; it has many layers, layers not mutually exclusive of each other. Each of us participates in at least one layer; most participate in multiple layers of Christmas.

Consider the words to the song written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on Christmas Day 1864 who still grieving the tragic death of his wife learned that his son who had joined the Union army without the blessing of his father lay severely wounded in a Union hospital:

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

When I was working at the treatment center for children and adolescents I annually lead a seminar for the staff entitled "Home for Christmas." We examined what we as staff experienced at Christmas then we discussed what the children in our care would experience at Christmas on their "home visits." We concluded our discussion with how we could assist the children as they experienced the disconnect between the Christmas messages they heard in church, on TV, from community members, from staff, etc AND what they would experience in their homes.

As we got into the seminar the staff identified their experiences and expectations of Christmas. First, they identified the fluffy, feel good, festive things of Christmas – what I call the outer layer:

Christmas dinner
Special foods
Gathered family
Christmas tree
Decorations
Lights
Gifts
Nativity
Santa Claus

And a number of other things that we are told should accompany the season and the Christmas spirit. This outer layer is what I call the merriment or gaiety layer. We all are familiar with the components of this layer – the “fun things” about Christmas. We all need this festive, celebrative element of Christmas. As Jackson Browne says in his lyrics:

In this life of hardship and earthly toil
We have need for anything that frees us.

Inevitably someone in my seminar would share that Christmas was the time of a past painful experience. The season was depressing. They could not wait until it passed. Others acknowledged that there was family dysfunction and it was easier not to gather and celebrate. We learned that some felt isolated and alone. And we recognized together that these situations and feelings, experienced by some of us, were what the children in our care predominately experienced at Christmas.

So we peel away those first several layers of feasting, merriment, and gaiety and we begin to see that Christmas becomes an especially difficult time for some, accentuated by the disconnect between what we hear should be the expectations of the season and what is really experienced. We see the layers of depression, loneliness, despair, isolation, anger, discord, etc. Consider the homeless, those in prison, the mentally ill, those in poverty, those who have lost loved ones, those who have no one, those who like Longfellow acutely feel the pains and despair of war. For many, Christmas is not a joyful time; rather it is a time of loneliness and isolation, a time of despair and depression, a time of anger and discord. And even for us who think we feel joyful, when we look deeply, we may find a degree of ambiguity.

I recall as a youth in my late teens leaving the house after our family had dinner and opened gifts on Christmas evening. I met up with a friend whose family had just completed their Christmas. We were two 19 year old lads hanging by that thread between childhood and adulthood. We no longer felt the close connect with our families of origin, yet we had not reached the point of striking out and forming our own lives separate from our parents. We didn't really know what to do that evening. The restaurants and bars were all closed (it was Kansas). Nothing was open in the small town where we lived. So we decided to drive to Wichita and look at the lights. After several hours of meandering through the wealthy sections of Wichita we returned to our small hometown where we, two lonely, disconnected kids sat and talked. After a while we decided to go home – there was work tomorrow. Our parting words were, “Christmas sucks.”

This experience/feeling quickly passed for both of us. By the next Christmas I had Kay and an exciting future to look to. My friend found Karen and was also planning for a bountiful life. While the experience did not have a traumatic or long term impact on either my friend or I, it still lingers in the back of my mind and, I hope, enables me to empathize a bit with those for whom the “layers of Christmas beneath the gaiety is an ongoing, struggling reality.” I have also learned never to assume another person's joyous celebration of the season. As I often discovered in the seminar, “Home for Christmas”

behind what appears to be a joyous front, might be sad or painful memories and experiences that create feelings incongruous with what is expected. Further, I discovered those individuals are among us – in our communities, in our places of work, maybe even in our churches and in our families. Sensitivity to these feelings and experiences is necessary for all to traverse the Christmas season.

As we continue to peel away at the Christmas onion what else might be found in those inner layers? You may know the early Christians like the Quakers did not celebrate the birth of Jesus. They were focused on Jesus' second coming in which they believed he would establish his kingdom here on the planet earth. Plus they believed celebrating birthdays was a heathen custom. But that all changed when Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire – well it wasn't actually Constantine who made Christianity the official religion; it was a later emperor, but Constantine started the whole thing. The Christians, now in control of Roman religion, had to figure out how to co-opt the population used to celebrating many heathen holidays and feasts. So they boldly declared the "Feast of the Nativity" to be celebrated at the winter solstice in lieu of celebrating the "Invincible Sun" and the return of light. It was an ingenious decision – the population celebrating the return of light merged with the church celebrating the birth of "the light of the world."

The "Feast of the Nativity" was wildly popular. Not only could the people celebrate the birth of Jesus, but they could also feast, sing, and dance. As the celebration move into other cultures, more and different practices were layered onto the celebration, practices not connected to the birth of Jesus. For example, we have Kris Cringle giving gifts to children. What started as a way to help/serve poor children, we capitalist Americans, always looking for a way to make a buck figured out how to morph ole Kris into Santa Claus who flies to each house on Christmas Eve and gives everyone a gift or two or three. Of course we need to purchase the gift in the retail stores and have them under the tree on Christmas eve to help Santa. And with that Christmas became the biggest retail sales event of the year in the Western world. So we have the merchandizing layer. For many merchants the Christmas season is crucial. It determines their income for the year. But it also risks pulling us into making Christmas a celebration of materialism.

Jackson Browne identifies what I label the political layer of Christmas. In the song "The Rebel Jesus" he observes that with locks and guns we guard our fine possessions, and once a year we give gifts to our relations. He goes on to say that IF generosity should seize us we give a little to the poor. But the underlying theme here is that Jesus, whose birthday we celebrate, is concerned about why there are poor. Note that Browne says that if anyone of us should interfere with the business of why there are poor we will "get the same as the rebel Jesus." In other words, we will be crucified/executed/killed. Mary, the mother of Jesus, sings about God lifting up the humble and filling the hungry with good things while the proud, the rulers, and those with plenty are brought down a notch. We are talking here about a serious political reordering of society.

Whether you identify Jesus as rebel or King the subject is politics – the advent of a way of relating to each other and to the powers based on distributive justice – sharing what we

have so others will have enough. Jesus himself at his inaugural sermon in Nazareth stated that he had come to proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor.” In other words the Jubilee, that great political instrument of societal leveling outlined during the exodus from Egypt, when the land goes back to the original owners, when slaves are freed, when debts are forgiven, when the 1%, the 5%, the 10% relinquish resources to the 90%.

Finally as we further peel the layers away the political dimension begins to change to a spiritual dimension of Christmas. At this level we no longer see the feel good cuddly baby in a manger scene – that is the merchandizing angle on the birth of Jesus. What we now see and celebrate is the birth of a holy person, a king, or a rebel (again depending on how you see Jesus) whose focus is serving the poor, the immigrant, the disenfranchised, the marginalized. Because as Jesus said, “When you serve one of these; you serve me/God.”

Humbly serving, as Thich Nhat Hahn noted, doing what we can to benefit others and transform situations without seeing ourselves as helper and the other as helped has a spiritual dimension. Addressing needs as equals, human with human, helps us see the light in the other and inserts the divine presence into the situation.

In the seminar I led “Home for Christmas” we concluded with a discussion about gift giving – a dominant theme of Christmas. The children with whom we worked did not have money. Most came from homes struggling in poverty. So what could they give. We continually came around to “The Little Drummer Boy.” He had no gifts to give the king; only his ability to play the drum. The gifts the children could give were not material gifts, but gifts of themselves, for example helping parents with household chores, or giving a teacher a smile and a thank you. These are gifts we can give - gifts of **service and acknowledgement**. Giving these kinds of gifts engages us in the spiritual dimension of Christmas.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor does he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will toward men.”

Till, ringing singing, on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

Longfellow ends his verse with HOPE for humankind – the wrong shall fail, the right prevail and the world keeps singing peace on earth good will to men. Hope emerges - through humbly serving others, as compassion/love endures, as we see and relate to the light in others, when distributive justice prevails, and as we work to ensure that everyone has enough – enough food, enough clothing, enough adequate housing. All are endeavors that insert the divine presence into the situation – Micah 6:8, What does God require: act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly....

I recently published Mustang Tales, a book of short stories, vignettes, and poems. I want to conclude with poem which I wrote entitled, "For Merissa."

Our family gathered early for Christmas. What a grand celebration;
a beautiful tree strung with bubble lights,
lots of gifts, and
oh the food!
The table was dressed for a king, adorned by
a smoked baking ham,
mashed potatoes,
sweet potato soufflé,
peppernuts,
poppy seed rolls,
pluma moos,
pies,
candy, and
many goodies.

But the fun and celebration seemed to be over before it began.
Suddenly, everyone was gone!
Reality sunk in; Kay and I were home alone for Christmas.

So on Christmas day we found ourselves babysitting for a single mother with a marginal income. She needed to work that day. I realized that Christmas for the little one who spent the day with us was probably different than the celebration we had earlier in the month. This thought led me to reflect on our grand festivities. I began to wonder,
"What does Christmas really have to do
with the birth of the Christ
for whom the season pretends to be celebrated?"

The traditions seem so grand,
but the festival of lights rooted in the pagan desire for the return of the sun,
the jolly fat man filling our whimsical desires with an abundance of gifts,
the glittering Christmas tree, and
our many other customs
just did not point to a loving Emmanuel God who "lifts up the humble and fills the hungry with good things."

When God came to live with us two millenniums ago he came to a poor marginalized family.

His entry wasn't clean;
it didn't smell good; and
it wasn't pretty.
Celebrating this event with
bright lights,
evergreen trees,

a jolly fat man dressed in a red suit,
polished ceramic Jesus',
the nice sounds of Christmas carols, and
the pleasant aroma of the foods of the
season,
surrounded by those we love and
hold dear
created an incongruity between what we celebrate and how we celebrate.

I realized that we have to look hard if we want to find Jesus in our Christmas festival and celebrations. And if we aren't looking we might miss Him. I almost did.

But, at the last stroke of the season's celebration
I saw the face of God –
in the bounce,
the jabber,
the laughter, and
the bright face of the little one
who spent Christmas day with us.

The 4th hymn is # 323, Good King Wenceslas

Benediction:

Go boldly.

Look for the light in humankind.

Bring peace with your presence.

Serve others,

Especially –

The poor

The hungry

The sick

The refugee/immigrant

And those who are marginalized.

For in serving others

You serve the divine.

And in that service

You enter holy space.

You come into

The presence of God

And truly celebrate Christmas.