



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Change? Not if I Can Avoid It!” Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13 Healing Ministry

American humorist Tom Lehrer wrote, some years ago,

Christmas, after all, with its spirit of giving, offers us all a wonderful opportunity each year to reflect on what we all most sincerely and deeply believe in - I refer, of course, to money. And yet, none of the Christmas carols that you hear on the radio, or in the street, even attempts to capture the true spirit of Christmas as we celebrate it in the United States, that is to say the commercial spirit. So I should like to offer the following Christmas carol for next year as being perhaps a bit more appropriate.

Christmas time is here, by golly,
Disapproval would be folly.
Deck the halls with hunks of holly,
Fill the cup and don't say when.

Kill the turkeys, ducks and chickens,
Mix the punch, drag out the Dickens.
Even though the prospect sickens,
Brother, here we go again.

On Christmas Day you can't get sore,
Your fellow man you must adore.
There's time to rob him all the more
The other three hundred and sixty-four.

Relations, sparing no expense 'll
Send some useless old utensil,
Or a matching pen and pencil.
("Just the thing I need, how nice!")

It doesn't matter how sincere it is,
Nor how heart felt the spirit,
Sentiment will not endear it,
What's important is the price.

Hark, the *Herald Tribune* sings,
Advertising wondrous things.--
God rest ye merry merchants,
May ye make the Yuletide pay.--

Angels we have heard on high,
Tell us to go out and buy!

So, let the raucous sleigh bells jingle,
Hail our dear old friend Kris Kringle,
Driving his reindeer across the sky.
Don't stand underneath when they fly by.

As you can probably hear in this lyric, Tom Lehrer's jingle has his tongue 'way into his cheek. What do you think? No wonder "the prospect sickens" over "here we go again". Is something amiss? Whose birthday is it, anyway? Is JESUS getting anything out of his birthday celebration?

If Lehrer's lyric is NOT what Christmas is about, then what IS Christmas about? How can someone discover the treasure of Christmas—someone like you?

Our lead Scripture lesson for this Second Sunday in Advent helps us re-set our expectations about Advent and Christmas. Open your Bibles with me to Matthew's gospel, chapter 3. To read chapter 3 before we read chapters 1 and 2 seems out of order. We haven't gotten to the shepherds and Mary and Joseph yet, let alone the Magi, so why are we reading the words of the grown-up John the Baptist? It's because we need to know more about Whom we're anticipating in Advent, what kind of Redeemer we're getting ready for. So listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read verses 1-12 of chapter 3. *[text]*

John is giving out God's Word, and it's a word of CHANGE. BIG change! How do we usually react to change? Is it like this gal?

A message like this is a real test for us. We are tempted--pulled, snapped back as if by rubber bands--into our ruts, our comfort zone. If we don't have to worry about change, we can concentrate on fulfilling our current responsibilities and desires—which are often require all we've got. Who wants MORE to worry about, to adjust to, to draw our attention away from what we and others already expect? It's added stress, and who needs that—especially at this time of year? Maybe that's why we like traditional carols and customs of Christmas so much. They require less of us, less change. We know these things by heart, and if we celebrated Christmas as children, they also take us back to a simpler time when we were young, and the adults did most of the hard work to make the season pleasant.



Of course, a traditional Christmas laced with memories can be a mixed blessing. Many people find the decreased sunlight of the season every year makes them depressed. Many others find their childish dreams of Christmas cheer depress them, because their current lives, their families, aren't happy places at all, and they feel helpless when they hear, "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." Getting families together and expecting everyone to be happy can set us up for disappointment and conflict, which seems worse than at other times of the year, because

of our expectations. All those disappointments. Isn't enduring those enough of a burden, without loading on another demand for deep change? "Happy holidays"?

Stop. Step back. What if we were to make Christmas about Christ instead of about us? What would we do to make God's values visible, as a way to honor God coming to us in this little baby, soon to be born of a woman, to live our life and show us God at work and God 'at love'? How would we make God's values visible?

For some answers, we pick up the Isaiah passage, which Christians have long applied to Jesus. Find Isaiah 11 in your Bibles, just past the half-way mark. I'll start reading at verse 1. Hear God's voice in these words of the prophet. *[text]*

Isaiah 11 shows us God values peace among people and in creation. Isaiah speaks for God, drawing us a picture of the world as God created it to be. Peace in the animal kingdom may be a reflection of peace between social classes (the predatory lion and the weak little lamb). How might we make real God's value of peace, today?

In Romans 15, from verse 4-13, we hear Paul working out the message he has been given by God about including all people in the reach of God's care, as targets for the Gospel of Jesus. Listen for the Word of God. *[text]*

Paul shows us God values all people, Gentile as well as Jew, and calls all people to respond to Him, not just His "Chosen Nation". That's not news; it's simply a restatement of the covenant God made with Abram 'way back in Genesis 12. But Paul puts an edge on it, and updates God's promises for First Century Judaism.

If God were writing to us through Paul today, what "Gentiles" might God put in that passage, to specify how God's value of universal love is to be expressed? To whom might God point us, that we must stretch to include --because God already does? God wants to bless "outsiders". How might we make real God's value of blessing "outsiders" today?

Peace, and blessings of those who don't know God, are two of God's values made real when God came to live among us as a baby in Bethlehem, and a man of ministry who was an ambassador of God's peace and blessing for all. Peace and blessing of those who don't know God ought to be the core of the gifts we give at Christmas.

But if we just make peace and bless those who don't know God "out of the goodness of our own hearts" without wrapping these gifts with the Giver, we have cheated people. When we give such gifts without God, we make the giving all about ourselves, to show off our virtue. Making peace and blessing those who don't know God--if it comes only from us--this year is like giving people toys made in China with lead paint. They look good, they fill the bill, but there's a danger that we expose people we love to hidden spiritual injury and death. We need to wrap those gifts in God, tie them to God who is the Giver, the Covenant-maker, the one who fills us with the Holy Spirit so that we want to make peace and bless those who don't know Him. How will you make your gifts--ordinary things and the values of peacemaking and blessing--speak of God this year?

Parents--train your children every year. Ask them, "Why do we give gifts at Christmas?" Make that tie for and with your kids. You could say, "Because God gives us everything we have, and He gave us Jesus as His best gift. We give good gifts to others because we're trying to do like God did when He gave us Jesus." And if you're including Santa in your

Christmas, tell them about St. Nicholas, who gave gifts to the needy because he was trying to do like God does, blessing others. USE the reason the season raises!

When it's adult-to-adult, you can go through the gift-giving ritual--but don't stop there. Look for a moment during your holiday gathering to have a gentle conversation about where they need peace in their lives, or how they connect with God (or don't). The season—even the shallowness and silliness that it's come to for so many—provides the reason to start such conversations. USE the reason the season raises! If you're not meeting face-to-face with the one who is getting your gift, include a note with the package. On the little gift tag, write: "TO: (Cousin Fred) FROM: God, c/o (Cousin Ken)". Your gift is now a prayer, connecting Cousin Fred with God. USE the reason the season raises!

These are simple things, little changes--but oh how they enrich "the season", filling it with a purpose far beyond the "here we go again". As people know God is blessing them through you, they are more open to learning what you know, and getting to know WHOM you know. People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care. As they know WHOM you know, they are open to joining in transforming "the season" into a "celebration of God among us." You could be the start of a big change in someone's life, through a little change in how you "do Christmas". It's a change, though, in the way most of us do "the season". You can avoid it. But why would you?

Archimedes said, "Give me a lever and a place to stand, and I can move the whole world." You could move someone's world with the little lever of these blessings, standing on the promises of God.

How merry do you want your Christmas to be?

Transition to Healing Ministry: Today after the Blessing we take up the Healing Ministry of Jesus. During our closing song, I will take light from the Communion Table to the Healing Stations. After the Benediction, those who are leaving will leave quietly, and we ask all who will stay and pray to move to the center section, and all who wish to come for healing—for yourself or for another—to likewise move to the center. The gentle music at the end of the service is to help us make this transition, so those who leave after the blessing, please keep your conversation down until you are fully outdoors, for the service in here continues. Now let us sing our final song, then the Blessing, then the Healing Ministry. (KW light candles)

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on December 9, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]