

But Wait! There's More!
Christmas 1
December 27, 2009

Psalm 148
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

After 28 years of ministry I learned that if you skip any of the Christmas Carols in the hymnal, that will have been someone's favorite, and it's not Christmas without singing it, and they will be unhappy. So I do my best to make sure we sing all of the Christmas songs at least once during the Christmas Season. I was struggling to put together a balance of lesser known and old favorite carols together over a three service period (which is not as easy as it sounds) and I kept finding songs I hadn't used yet, and in my head I heard the voice of that announcer on the infomercials saying, "But wait! There's more!"

My neighbor was out at 8:30 yesterday morning taking down his Christmas lights. There was a cartoon in the Sun last night that showed the difference between 12/24 and 12/26. In the first square two shoppers are in a store and one is holding the door for the other saying, "Please, let me help" and the response is "Thank you!" In the next square the same two shoppers are struggling to beat each other through a door and one growls "Watch it!" while the other responds, "Watch it yourself!" Rite Aid and Walmart are filled with frilly valentines and heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, and the preacher in me wants to cry out, "But WAIT! There's more!"

Indeed, there is more. Until the rise of the market economy, Christmas was celebrated as a season. The Twelve days of Christmas reflects that practice, starting on December 25 (and NOT before~!) going through January 5 which was designated Twelfth Night (for those of you who had to read that obscure Shakespeare play in high school). Then on January 6 is the feast of Epiphany, celebrating God's revelation in Christ, a day which Hispanic countries continue to celebrate as the Day of the Kings, the coming of the magi to the home of Mary and Joseph and the toddler Jesus. (Despite all the nativity sets you see, no where in Scripture is there ANY indication that the wise men kneeled at the manger!).

Celebrating Christmas as a season invites us to avoid investing all our expectations in one perfect day of peace and cheer, but to strive for a *season* celebrating and practicing peace on earth. Oddly enough, the extension of the season makes it easier to consider our efforts to do so. Really, is a Christmas greeting mailed on 12/28 received with less gladness than one mailed 12/23? Those who love you love to know that you are thinking of them anytime!

The Sunday after Christmas has often been a celebration of the Holy Family, and the lectionary compilers didn't help us maintain a Christmas Spirit this year – we've jumped from the manger to the almost teen Jesus in the Temple. And after all, on the scale of immediate embrace-ability and symbols of peace, few could be further apart than a newborn infant and a young adolescent. Few people with a 13 year old in the house experience long periods of peace and quiet. But the lesson from Colossians is a

wonderful example of what it means to live a Christmas life style – to live in a holy family of the community we call Church.

There are two parts in this passage. The first has to do with discipline. Not punishment, but discipline as in practice. It speaks of the practice of “putting on Christ”, practicing what is not necessarily natural for us until it becomes second nature. We are invited to put on compassion, kindness, meekness, humility, and patience. Now, those may be qualities we praise in theory, but in fact they are NOT what we practice. In our culture we want toughness and strength. I reflect on the fact that for over 30 years there has been an unsuccessful effort to get Congress to establish a Peace College. The argument is made that after all, our tax dollars support four military academies and a War College. But we cannot afford to teach our citizens how to work for and establish peace.

We laugh at cruel jokes and put-downs. We excel at finding ways to make things go faster and are personally insulted when there is traffic, or the line in the store moves too slowly, or a person (who may well have a handicap) crosses the street so slowly we miss the light. Manny and I often joke about waiting “endless seconds” for things to happen while we working on the computer.

But in our lives in the world, where we are Christ’s ambassadors, Christ’s representatives, and perhaps more importantly, in this community where we claim to live the kind of life God intended for us, are we living lives that are clothed in Christ-like attitudes and understandings? Are we easily annoyed? Do we make fun of each other behind closed doors? Are we unhappy when we don’t get our own way? Are we able to accept each other’s humanity and to forgive in the way Christ has forgiven us? The history of Church says that we have not met these standards, and there are often no more bitter and even bloody battles than those between people and groups that were at one time “family”. There have been ads for a new PBS series called “This Emotional Life” where a well-known comedian is relating the story: “Someone asks, ‘Why did you bring mashed potatoes?’

‘You told me to.’

‘No I didn’t, I said sweet potatoes.’

‘No you didn’t, you said mashed.’

‘I said sweet potatoes!’”

And he says, “Boom! That’s it, 45 years, they don’t talk to each other.”

I served a congregation that had been through a split, and it was a small town. People who had been part of the split would turn and walk down a different aisle in the supermarket when they saw each other. Long standing relationships and hearts were broken, and the only visitors to that church were newcomers to town, who did not know the story of the split.

Above all, put on, practice, clothe yourselves with, train yourselves in love, which holds the whole thing together.

The second part of the passage deals with what happens when we practice Christmas living. The peace of Christ begins to rule our hearts (which is the reason we are called together to begin with, to demonstrate what it means to live in Christ's peace!). We acquire an attitude of thankfulness and gratitude that is not dependent on what is happening from nano-second to nano-second in our lives, but which is based on a deeper understanding of who we are and how we are beloved in God's cosmos.

If you were looking for a New Year's Resolution (and I am a firm believer in resolutions: if you don't know where you're aiming your never going to hit the target) – you could do a lot worse than to adopt Colossians 3:16-16 as your resolution for the coming year: *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

Begin by memorizing it (if you read it once every morning and every evening you'll eventually memorize it). Look for the Word of Christ, the power and message of Christ in your life. Sing songs and psalms and let them shape you. One of the lessons of Benedictine spirituality (and Benedictines have been very “hot” over the last few years, particularly as Kathleen Norris has reflected on them) has been as the monks reflect on the power of singing and chanting the psalms to shape their lives and the way they view the world, not because they study and debate them, but because they let them seep into their spirits and infuse their daily activities.

And when you are making choices, make the ones you would be proud to offer to Christ as an offering of love – and like Ebenezer Scrooge, you will honor Christmas in your heart and celebrate it every day of the year.