

**“Thank God for Advent”**

**Luke 12.32–40**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 9 December 2007**

I’d like to start by asking all of you a question. Now, I know that for most of us, Sunday morning is a pretty relaxing time, so how many of you felt stressed out during the past week? I’m right there with you!

And I think this is particularly endemic this time of year among people who have kids and who work either in or outside the home. And it’s especially true among those of us who think that we – all by ourselves – make Christmas happen. How do you make Christmas happen in your family? Are you the parent who feels pressure to buy a lot of toys and technology for the kids? Are you the host or hostess who has to ensure that the Christmas party comes off perfectly – that everything is “just so?” Or maybe you are the husband who needs to find the perfect present for his wife. Or maybe you are the child who is trying to be so incredibly well-behaved that you’ll get everything on your Christmas list. And you are expected to do all of this and make it look easy, so that no one will know how hard you are trying.

I think the American consumer machine is fully aware of Jesus’ statement: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Think about it. (Thank God for the alternative giving fair!)

Sometimes, I think the way we Americans celebrate Christmas has turned into a Walt Disney production, instead of a time to remember the birth of Christ. It’s all about making sure there are “chestnuts roasting on an open fire” and ensuring that our mood reflects “a holly, jolly Christmas” when we’re “home for the holidays.” Sometimes, I think we miss the point.

Have you ever thought about Christmas TV specials that a lot of us grew up with in the 60s and 70s, and how little most of them say about *Christmas itself*? Rudolf and Frosty and the Grinch are great. And 19th century classics like Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol” and “The Nutcracker” are terrific. But they say absolutely nothing about the birth of the messiah. (Two notable television exceptions are Linus’s recounting of Luke’s birth narrative in “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” and also “The Little Drummer Boy.”) And a lot of “seasonal music” has nothing to do with Jesus. And if you haven’t ever stopped to pay attention to it, I’d ask you to do an experiment and listen the next time you listen to the radio or hear Muzak in a store. I’m not saying that we shouldn’t sing “Up on the housetop, click, click, click” or enjoy Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas.” But, I would invite you to ask yourself about the original meaning of Christmas and then be attentive to what you are hearing or seeing in the media...beside the ads.

My problem with secular Christmas specials and music – and with a secularized Christmas itself – is that it doesn’t deliver the goods. Instead, it routinely falls short...it often disappoints, because there is never enough.



I can remember in my 20s, I kept thinking that I should be able to capture that almost indescribable mood that we call “the Christmas spirit,” which is something that is most clearly described by Charles Dickens in the way he has Ebenezer Scrooge go through a process of transformation and redemption in the course of his novella. (Ebenezer, by the way, was a huge rock mentioned briefly in 1 Samuel.) I wanted to feel the spirit of charity, or good will toward men (and women, too!), and to feel that Christmasy feeling that Scrooge knew. You remember how it was for old Scrooge after the visits of the three ghosts and his promise: “I will honour Christmas in my heart; and try to keep it all the year.” And

the outcome you also remember: “Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.” There was a lightness and a jollity about Scrooge.

I’ve never been visited by the ghosts of Christmas present, past, and yet to come. And as much as I want to catch the Christmas spirit in the manner of Ebenezer Scrooge, I don’t always pull it off. Sometimes, frankly, I’m disappointed in Christmas and in my inability to catch the ephemeral Christmas spirit that Dickens defined.

Please don’t misunderstand me...this is one of my very favorite stories of all time, and I could listen to Patrick Stewart bring life to Scrooge time and again. It’s a great story with a great message. And I love Christmas, too, but sometimes I feel like I can’t quite pull it off by feeling the way “I’m supposed” to feel. (And I’m guessing that some of you feel this way, too.)

And the parallel story of Christmas redemption from my childhood was Dr. Seuss’s classic, “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” The basic message is wonderful: that Christmas isn’t about the “stuff,” but about something immeasurable. Can’t you just hear Boris Karloff narrating these lines: “He hadn’t stopped Christmas from coming; it came! It came just the same. ... How could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes, or bags. He puzzled and thought until his puzzler was sore. And then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t thought of before: maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more. What happened then was, in Whoville they say, that the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day. And then the true meaning of Christmas came through, and the Grinch found the strength of ten Grinches, plus two.”

Okay, Ted Geisel was a great storyteller and a fabulous writer of children’s literature, but a Christian theologian he was not. “The true meaning of Christmas” is not that your heart will grow three sizes or that you will find 12 times your normal strength. **You** know the true meaning of Christmas.



And that’s why I love Advent. Madison Avenue has kept its greedy mitts off Advent. Hallmark has left Advent alone. Hollywood doesn’t bother with Advent, and Toys-R-Us hasn’t yet discovered Advent.

Advent still belongs to the church and to us, as Christ’s followers. Advent is all about Christ, and not about the culture. And that’s why I love Advent. It’s a time for watchful waiting. It’s a time when we get to keep our hearts and our eyes open for the opportunity to see Christ in our midst. It’s a time when we get to be the church together in celebration of the Great Mystery of Christ.

Yesterday evening, my son Christopher and I were driving across town in the snow to pick Cameron up from his Debut Theater rehearsal, and while driving down Prospect, we saw an elderly man trying to make his way along the snowy sidewalk using a walker. It presented us with an opportunity to see the face of Christ in a stranger. We pulled over and offered him a ride, home, which he accepted. Now, his name was George, not Jesus, but it still enabled me and Christopher to see the face of Christ during Advent. And for that, I am truly thankful.

Thank God for Advent! It is our time not to freak out about buying the perfect gift or throwing the right kind of party or getting along with your family of origin or selecting the perfect tree or even putting up the least offensive “holiday display.” Advent is our time

to eschew the disappointment of secular Christmas in favor of being in communion with the Christ – who never disappoints.

We can have the beautiful tree and the wonderful presents and still place the emphasis on Christ's birth, so long as we take time to be intentional about our celebration. As Christians, we are given the opportunity to "Make purses for ourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys."

We can still sing carols and enjoy the company of friends, strangers...and even family...and "Be dressed for action and have our lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks." Who knows...we may have the opportunity to see Christ in the face of someone unexpected during the season of watchful waiting.

So, let us keep awake! Let us be aware and conscious of our faith during this season when it is so easy to give into the culture.

I leave you this morning with a prayer that I first heard my mentor, Bruce MacKenzie, use years ago:

For every good and gracious gift of the season  
We give thanks to you, O God:  
for long-awaited reunitions  
for hospitality and hugs,  
for love which weatherizes us against cold and darkness.  
With your love protect us from our self-imposed pressures  
by times of tranquility,  
that our spirits may yet find  
the spirit of the child born for us and for all.  
Deliver us, O God, from the last minute:  
the last-minute tasks and the last-minute guilt.  
Deliver us from our compulsions,  
as if we alone make Christmas happen.  
Deliver us from the spirit of the culture  
to the spirit of the child who invites us to be at peace.  
We pray for those who keep Christmas  
in contest with circumstance:  
For those who work two jobs and find themselves exhausted;  
For those in the valley of the shadow of death,  
and for those in the valley of the conflicts of life.  
God, grant us in these hasting days  
to accept one another and ourselves,  
to forgive one another and ourselves,  
to enjoy one another and ourselves.  
Grant us the spirit of the child in celebration of whom  
we sing and pray. Amen.