

1 Christmas – 27 December 2009 – The Rev. Madelyn L. Betz

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 • Psalm 147:13-21 • Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7 • John 1:1-18 •  
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For most of us, the First Sunday after Christmas is liminal space, a lull, a deep and slow inhale before the exhale of busyness that accompanies the beginning of a new calendar year. Remembering all the fuss and flurry that preceded the arrival of the year 2000, it seems incredible that we are already at the beginning of new decade. Time is a funny thing—it marches steadily on and yet our perception of it rushes or slows, depending upon our age, our circumstance, our perspective.

We've been thinking about time in our mid-week services during Advent as we have weekly sung a version of the *Magnificat* that includes the phrase, “the world is about to turn.” Those words remind us of the larger liminality of the space in which we live—always on the threshold of...we know not what.

Pausing with the lessons for today, I think we can find some perspective that may serve as a solid foundation for the days of the new year ahead.

Last Sunday, Fr. Guy told us in his sermon about an anti-Christmas book entitled *Scroogenomics: Why You Shouldn't Buy Presents for the Holidays* written by the economist Joel Waldfogel. Mr. Waldfogel's book is directed not at Christmas, per se, but at what he sees as the extravagant consumerism that Christmas in the twenty-first century has come to represent. His thesis is that most gifts are thoughtlessly purchased, unwanted, useless and wasted. As Guy alluded, the fact that this book hit the bookshelves just in time for Black Friday shopping is an irony that should not be ignored, the author's weak protest notwithstanding.

Waldfogel's main complaint is about the practice of gift-giving but, by focusing on the economic wastefulness of the purchasing practices of some, I think he has sadly missed the point, further directing the attention of his readers away from the true meaning of giving Christmas gifts. If people are wasting money on items that no one really wants, we need a book on thoughtfulness and sensitivity, rather than economics.

Waldfogel's unfortunate view of gift-giving assumes only the pre-dream Scrooge. It denies the possibility of the full story. Dickens of course was not advocating for the miserly Scrooge to be our model. Even though "A Christmas Carol" overtly has absolutely nothing to do with the coming of the Christ child, in writing it, Dickens certainly "defended the way in which Christian society has historically celebrated [Christmas]." [Steven D. Greydanus, "Joy to the World: A Christmas Carol"]

Ninety years ago on this date, December 27, in an article entitled “A New Attack on Christmas” published in the *Illustrated London News*, G.K. Chesterton wrote that in “A Christmas Carol” Dickens, although seemingly irreligious, was fighting for the essence of Christmas, a unique and transformative combination of religion with merry-making. Chesterton pointed out the distinctive jolly spirit of even the traditional English greeting “Merry Christmas.” We don’t say “merry birthday” or “merry Easter.” Christmas is uniquely a festival to be celebrated with an extravagance of merry-making and joy. When except at Christmas was the merriment so grand that the angels and hosts of heaven came forth to sing?

In our reading from Isaiah this morning, the author rejoices in what God has done and will do. Isaiah acknowledges that salvation has been accomplished in the form of the seeds of righteousness and praise sown, sprouted and brought forth before all nations. And he is describing what will be—not yet fully consummated. Isaiah envisions the fullness of salvation as something that must be grown into, not arriving fully formed, but full of potential, to the extent that it will have to be called by a new name. Jesus claimed a role in God’s gift of salvation and quoted from this passage as recorded in the Gospel of Luke [4:16ff]. His coming extended a familial relationship from God to all of us. When except at Christmas was there given such an extravagant gift?

Although I was advised at seminary not to bring this up in a sermon, I must touch a problem with this morning's reading from Galatians. Paul's letters are often written off as misogynist and are therefore, in my opinion, often translated out of all meaning in the name of political correctness. In the New Revised translation that we most often use, gender references to son and daughter are "corrected" to child, as in the reading for today. In these verses, the inclusive language actually obscures Paul's point.

In the full passage from which our verses this morning are an excerpt, Paul goes to great lengths to construct a proper and persuasive rhetorical argument for the superiority of faith over law. He uses terminology that would have been known to his readers, but which in translation we are apt to misunderstand. In Greek and Roman families at that time, there was often a slave whose role it was to oversee the boys aged 6 to 16. It didn't matter whether the boys were sons of the family or sons of family slaves. The boys were all treated the same way, as children. These care-givers for the boys were more than mere disciplinarians. They watched the boys at play, accompanied them to and from school and generally saw to their well-being. But their job was a temporary one until the boys came to fullness of age. At that time, the sons of slaves would take on a working role. The sons of the family would inherit position and wealth, with the firstborn having a special position as heir.

We have no English word to describe this particular kind of child-carer. Paul's analogy is that the law filled this kind of temporary position for us. More than mere rules to be followed for their own sake, God's law of old was intended to accompany us, protect us and see to our well-being until faith came. Like the care-giver for all the young boys, the law treated everyone as immature. But when Christ came, he brought the gift of the full status of son-ship for all. Paul's point is not about being included in God's family, but that we can be in the position of God's son and heir. We have been given the gift of adoption into the position of fellow-heir with Christ—the first born, the one with the closest relationship to the Father. The gift of love represented by the birth of Jesus was the extravagant gift from God of reconciliation and relationship that the keeping of the law could never fully provide. Through faith, we have the promise of God's very spirit in our hearts.

As the communion table is prepared, you may have observed water being poured into the wine. The two co-mingle so that they are indivisible one from the other. During the action a prayer is spoken, "By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share our humanity." With God's spirit present within us, we are indivisible from God and that is indeed a great and joy-filled mystery.

The Gospel reading today is a philosophical reflection on this co-mingling of God and man. Who better to serve as a witness for Jesus than John the Baptist, who knew him, who was in fact related to him? John recognized Jesus as the light that was to come into the world. The light was an expression of God's own glory, revealing without doubt, the way of God. Full of God, indeed co-mingled with God, Jesus came to show us God's grace and truth.

Love, peace, truth, reconciliation, justice and the knowledge and power to get there. All of these things from God's own heart came to us in the form of Jesus, whose light shines on our path, one step at a time, to lead us from grace to grace through faith.

At each communion service, the action of the offertory is all about gift-giving and receiving. We offer to God gifts from the earth as well as a portion of our money, the fruits of our labors. We say "walk in love, as Christ loved us..." He loved us with extravagant love because that's how God loves us. That's what gift-giving is about—showing love.

That book that I suggested about thoughtfulness and sensitivity has already been written. We read several selections from it here each week. May we find God's presence in its words; may we find God's strength in bread and wine; may we find the gift of God's love in our hearts. When, if not now, is it time to accept God's extravagant gift and with great joy pass it on?

Amen.