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Dear Friends,

Christmas is coming When you hear that phrase, what is your first reaction? For children I suspect it will be excitement and eager anticipation—how many days still to go? For high school and college students the expectation will probably be more about vacation and maybe a trip or seeing friends. For young singles the prospect of Christmas may evoke more complex feelings—perhaps nostalgia for the simplicity of a child’s experience of the season, coupled with something like a barely acknowledged sense of loss that what once brought so much joy may not do the same now, and that going back to family has its own set of complications.

Then when one becomes a parent, Christmas may be largely about creating a season of festivity and warmth for children. And, as one gets older, there are the parties, the gifts, and the continuing longing for the season to be special, to be set apart from the rest of the year. There are many holidays throughout the year, but really only one Holiday Season.

We’re all fairly good at Advent As a church person, it seems to me that people often are much more adept at organizing their own version of Advent than their Christmas. People block out days for shopping, for decorating, they have deadlines for mailing cards and packages. In the retail world, Advent begins sometime in October with Christmas displays going up and advertisements taking on a Christmas theme. It is not difficult to promote the idea of preparing—we get that.

In the Church calendar, Advent is the four-week season before Christmas, and the first season of the Church Year. From that description, one might expect the readings and liturgical mood to be all about angels, shepherds, journeys to Bethlehem, and all the elements of the Gospel stories which lead up to the actual birth of Jesus—something like the liturgical version of the television schedule in which “holiday specials” begin as soon as Thanksgiving is past.

Why are we so out of step? But the reality of our readings in church in Advent is quite contrary to what one might expect. In the first week’s Gospel (Luke 21-25-36), Jesus foresees cataclysmic disasters and universal final judgment. The next week we hear of John the Baptist—but it is his preaching of the necessity of repentance (Luke 3:1-6), not the charmingly mysterious story of his birth. The third Sunday of Advent stays with John, and this time he is denouncing his audience as “a brood of vipers” and offering wide-ranging challenges to the established social and economic order

(Luke 3:7-18). For the final Sunday of the season, the story jumps back two decades to follow pregnant Mary as she visits John's mother Elizabeth, the Elizabeth for whom our parish is named (Luke 1:39-55). Having just seen how Elizabeth's son John the Baptist turned out when he grew up, that Mary seeks Elizabeth's guidance on child-rearing may give us some hint of the direction this story is going to take.

It's beginning to look a lot like... If you are expecting angels, shepherds, and a candle-lit manger, it's beginning to look a lot like we opened the Bible to the wrong section.

We walk a fine line here. If we simply go with the idea that our lives, individually and collectively, will be filled with joy, delight, and security by booming retail sales, gift giving, elegant parties, family gatherings, and elaborately decorated houses, we will be popular but finally unhelpful. We all know in our heads that life requires more than these superficial elements, but in our habits this season we tend to persist in actions which suggest that Christmas is actually something that we make and do.

Yet if we denounce all of the festive trappings and customs of the season, we risk presenting ourselves—or even God—as grumpy, humorless haters of good times who make Scrooge and the Grinch seem like half-hearted underachieving amateurs by comparison.

Send in the Puritans In the 17th Century the retrospectively maligned Puritans, with nothing but the best intentions, sought to direct people to what they considered the true meaning of Christmas by outlawing most of the cultural customs surrounding the holiday. They wanted people to be serious about seeking Jesus, fervent in their faith and discipleship, and indifferent to anything that would distract them from a single-minded theologically sound pursuit of eternal truths and goodness. It might look a little grim, but it was, from their perspective, for our own good.

And most people hated it. The Puritans were neither wrong, bad, nor crazy, but in this instance they were not smart.

The Anglican tradition, which may suffer from inconsistencies and the occasionally vague response to questions seeking simple answers, offers a different strategy. So we will read Gospel stories in Advent which would gladden the heart of any Puritan, and we will decorate the Church, sing music, and present a Pageant in those same Sundays, something which during the Commonwealth years of the 17th century would have certainly cost me my job, probably my freedom, and very possibly rather more.

The limits of wardrobe and makeup My hope is that if our hearts are fixed on where true joys are to be found, we may engage in all of the cultural celebration and recognize it for what it is—something like wardrobe and make-up, but not the substance of a person.

When one is looking for companionship, it may be that physical appearance and first impressions are high on the list of screening criteria. Are they pretty, handsome, clever, fun to be with, polished in their manners, and elegant in their dress? If that is the extent of the depth of one's investigation, things might turn out well, but that is leaving a great deal to chance. As we acquire more experience, we begin to explore if our potential partner is kind, are they generous, do they listen, are they trustworthy, have they developed empathy, do they really like dogs or are they just pretending. We need not seek out the direct opposite of pretty, handsome, clever and so on; we just come to realize that those are not the most important qualities for making the life, and the love, we most desire.

Whatever bumper stickers may say, Christ is in Christmas whether we keep him there or not. The better question might be whether we will be in Christmas. Or will we be in some stage-set mock-up made to look festive, holy, and joyous but, when the shoot is over, find ourselves surrounded by stagehands removing all the props and decorations until we are standing in a bare and empty space.

Very clever minds and many skilled in the production of illusion each year do distinguished work to try to convince you that the right clothing, jewelry, drinks, and parties will give adults what they need this season and the right toys and games will do the same for children. We know that is not true, and yet our actions, maybe even on some level our beliefs, and almost certainly our desires have been shaped by this repeated message.

Rather than undertake the almost impossible task of trying to censor or block all instances of that message this season, I invite you to use this Advent season to refuse to settle for superficial and inadequate responses to deeper and more complicated human needs. There is a place for amusement and frivolity, but what our hearts crave is comfort and joy.

This season I will shop for and give gifts, I will write and send cards, I will attend and host parties. I will decorate our house and delight in images of snowmen and reindeer and be glad to hear songs about roasting chestnuts or riding or walking through snow-covered landscapes.

But as I shop or write, I will be holding up to God the people who will receive the gifts or cards and pray that the outward and visible signs may convey something more profound and lasting. I will look at the decorations and imagine a life in which everyone could celebrate, feast, and be surrounded by the beauty we bring in from field and forest to give us the best of both indoors and out. And whatever the words to the songs, I will think of the power of music to take us out of our immediate circumstances and bring us to places of harmony and grace through the offering and the hearing of heavenly sounds. And walking through the snow I will think of Mary and Joseph and the long journey to Bethlehem. I will think of all the refugees this year whose homes have been ripped from them by violent men and whose very lives depend on the kindness of the spiritual descendants of the Good Innkeeper. I will think of my father who spent Christmas 1944 in the snow standing in an ice water-filled ditch to defend a crossroads in the Ardennes.

And I will give thanks for the deep blessings of the season, that God is not a remote force, a philosophical abstraction, a projection of my imagination, or a metaphor for good intentions to which we might aspire but need not actually take to heart. I will give thanks that the source of all that is, seen and unseen, took on human form, even the form of a servant, and showed forth true and eternal glory in a life of healing, feeding, teaching, admonishing, and self-sacrifice. That image and those stories seem to me to be real food for the hunger of the human heart, real cause for awe, wonder, and celebration.

Perhaps this year I will identify most with the shepherds—who know something wonderful is happening, something they cannot explain but know to be true. Their response to that wonder is to go, even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass which the Lord hath made known unto us. May we, like them, experience the wonder and make our own journey so that, like them, perhaps in the most unlikely places, we, too, may behold the radiant glory of God.

This year, settle for nothing less.

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