**Christmas as Benediction** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Fourth Sunday of Advent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:26-38; Romans 16:25-27 Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 24, 2023

I would like to begin by thanking Stacy Paleen and her family for guiding our Sponsor a Family Christmas program again this year. It is a monumental task even when we are not under construction. I gave the green light on it for this year without considering the HVAC project. As we all know, the usual drop off space is the Assembly Room which is now our one room Sunday school. Jim, who is always creative, cleared the hallway between the Portland and *port cochere* doors so it could be the collection point.

Now I did not witness this, it is only an assumption, but I cannot explain in any other way why four bins ended up in the balcony of the Assembly Room outside my office door. It was Sunday December 3rd and I know Phil was bringing some books in that morning so it is my assumption is that two donors followed a person who was carrying a box.

Stacy then quite rightly requested a sign by the door.

On Sunday December 12th the earliest of the early bird givers came all the way to the church office to ask where to put her bins so I walked her back to the hallway and showed her where to put the bins and pointed at my sign. After which I made a bigger sign and put up a second sign. And then about 45 minutes later, I happened to catch another donor at the top of the ramp almost to the Assembly Room and turn them around.

From all of this, I conclude three things:

Firstly, generosity and love flow from this place!

Secondly, in spite of the seasonal calling to do so, we are not looking for signs. It’s  like the shepherds sleeping through the angel’s song or the Magi dismissing the star; we have our heads down, just trying to get stuff done. We trust our experience and, dare I use the words, we trust the ways we've always done it. I did it when I gave the green light and others used their muscle memory as they made their deliveries which resulted in gifts lying around the building.

So, thirdly it makes me wonder if we are, after all our years of experience, in the pattern of thinking that we are the bringers of Christmas?! In a way, it’s easy to leave God out of it all, God did God’s part thousands of years ago and we now have our many traditions, activities, and décor to bring the season. I believe we do it to remember and recreate a sense of God’s great gift. But I still wonder where God is in the lights, the gifts, the gatherings and feasts. We are managing Christmas.

Christmas, it could be said, is the most public and visible Christian activity of the year but it’s also gone far beyond any religious identification to a season all of its own. It’s been distorted by advertising and human nature. Who gets what is linked into who deserves what? “You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town. He's making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty and nice Santa Claus is coming to town.” After decades of singing and hearing this song, I wonder, why is Santa the beloved, jolly man in a red suit while God is known as the judgmental one? It should be the other way around. So, some then call to “put the ‘Christ’ back in Christmas” but like many marketing campaigns, it’s too vague and is overly simplistic.

So this year I am doing what I have never done before and that is preach on this final benediction from Paul's letter to the Romans. I am not sure how it made it into the lectionary for the 4th Sunday in Advent without mention of angels or a donkey, but here it is.

Paul is not known for brevity and Romans is his longest, most complex epistle. But in these brief final verses we find a recap of his massive theological letter. Here he presents Jesus Christ as mystery, prophet, and source of wisdom. It quite simply says that faith is our door to respecting the ways of God. And it does it all in the form of a benediction or blessing.

As he concludes the letter, Paul names these as God’s blessings for us through the life and work of Jesus Christ:

* That, Jesus birth also births the Good News or what Paul calls the proclamation of Jesus Christ.
* That this Good News is for all people and is given to strengthen community and the well-being of the planet and all people regardless of nationality or beliefs.
* That Paul’s own writing is the beginning of many writings that offer continued revelation for generations to come.
* And that the Incarnation gives us a glimpse of eternity and in that depth of mystery invites each of us to respect and defer to the gospel in our daily lives for the glory of God.

 (The Working Preacher, [Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero).](https://www.workingpreacher.org/authors/kyle-schiefelbein-guerrero)

I know that we know this, that it is about the God who so loved the world that we have Christmas.  But I wonder if we extend this into knowing God With Us is not just at Christmas; are you keeping alert to watch for The Divine in your midst?

Pastor, David Hayward is now a full-time artist. His website is called the “nakedpastor.” He has beautiful landscapes and paintings but he also does simple, line drawings of Jesus, sometimes with the disciples or crowds or rainbow colored sheep. He has one now of the heavenly host singing from above and the shepherds asking them if they know anything by Taylor Swift. Advent asks for a check in on whether are we watching for God’s new creation or are we letting life be fully grounded to earth?

Jesus, like the Holy One of Israel, was deeply concerned for peoples and communities. What we are saying at Christmas is that the work of God-with-Us, the embodiment of peace and justice has a birth date and eternal life-span. The Incarnation of love has a birth date. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth make clear that this work continues today and that the manger, the Christmas tree, and the cross are just the tip of the iceberg. The church itself is the tip of an iceberg.

It is important that the life and work of Jesus not be defined only by what is visible above the water line or only by human practice or habit. As a friend in ministry wrote, “We do not get God’s Life by being correct. We get there, like Mary and her “yes” to the angel, by allowing the connection. The “connection” is a “being IN Love” connection, for “being IN Love” is being IN Christ, being IN the flow of a life that is larger than your little life. This "connection" is the Kingdom of God” (Gerald Wescott).

A few years ago, someone I think of lovingly as the Raggedy Woman came into this church. She was not homeless but neither did she look like she had a lot of resources. She had some kind of work and left her apartment to do that. However her landlord, as do most landlords, had keys to her apartment. She said that sometimes he went into her home while she was away and put rotten food into her refrigerator. Her sense of vulnerability and desire for justice was palpable.

Our American folklore says she should be able to better her life by “pulling herself up by her boot-straps.” Capitalism says our worth is in what we earn and what we spend. Empire says some people are simply worth less than others. The rampant individualism of our time says every person for themselves. The Prince of Peace was born to reinterpret all of this. Christmas, and Easter for that matter, are not outward activities, services, or events that we do or experience once a year, they are the marrow of our spiritual bones.

My dear Raggedy Woman did not ask for a penny, she asked to be heard. Professor and preacher Will Willimon was once asked to summarize the gospel in 7 words or less; he said, “God refuses to be God without us.” It therefore falls to us to realize how much we need God to be fully human.

Receiving Jesus as benediction and passing it on is our calling. At the end of the day on pilgrimage we offer one another this inclusive version of what is known as the priestly blessing or the blessing Aaron:

May the Holy One bless you and keep you.
May the Holy One shine light upon you and be gracious to you.
May the Holy One turn towards you and give you Shalom.

These are among life’s greatest gifts.

There’s something wonderful about taking the time to shop for people that you don't know and will never meet. There is something about being an anonymous lover of God passing on the love, that gives wonder and awe to this season through our Sponsor a Family Christmas program. Many thanks to all who send this generosity and love out into the world. Giving and receiving gifts in honor of Jesus’ birth can be truly holy and life giving–the very definition of blessing. But if we are honest, Christmas is still a one-day remembrance; putting the Christ back in Christmas pales in comparison to the real calling of putting justice, mercy, wisdom, grace, and love into practice each and every day of our lives.

Richard Rohr says, “Christ is the Divine Radiance at the beginning and the Divine Allure drawing us into a more positive future. We are thus book-ended in a personal love–coming from love and moving toward an ever more inclusive love.”

Our Christmas traditions give us roots, structure, safety, and love. Claim those blessings for the grounded well-being they offer–because God’s constant invitation and gift is below the surface of the iceberg in the transformation offered in the deeps. It is what Jesus was born to live and to teach. And it is our hope. Amen.