

Christmas Preparations

December 7, 1986

“Visit to the Post Office – “
I only went to get some stamps
Greeted there by lines, nay, throngs,
I winced at sight of early birds,
parcels touted in their arms,
Christmas presents going off
to friends and grandmas, aunts and such.
I must confess: It was too much.
It gave me such a start, a scare,
to picture all that readiness
for Christmas concentrated there.

Ellen T. Johnston-Hale (Durham Moring Herald Dec 5, '86)

“all that readiness” – !

But that’s what “Advent” is all about, isn’t it? – getting ready for the “Feast of the Nativity.”
Well are you ready? Indeed – how do you prepare properly for Christmas? And not end up exhausted
and unchristian as you may have felt last year?

Sometimes we Presbyterians gets burst of Puritan guilt. (and one must confess – Scrooge like
stinginess – may be) and decide we’ll be more (ahem!) “Conservative” this year. And we’ll pretend
that’s more Christian.

As the youngish Scotts woman wrote (years ago now) to my dear friend and mentor (Jim Cleland
– dean of the Chapel at Duke):

“We are turning about-face this year and celebrating without cards, parties or expensive gifts.
We’ll have our tree, of course, Christmas cookies, the children tree for the birds, and a family creche
which we’ll all help to make; but we’ll cut out every commercial and tiring extra, to create something
simple and fitting for the season.”

How dear and sweet we say – what an appropriate way to prepare for Christmas – and yet – as
the good dean pointed out in his waspish whimsical Scotts ascent “the dearrrr girrl was writing that on
her knees under the hairdryer in an Edenborough beauty parlor getting herself all gussied up for
whatever simple pressures just might come her way with the festive season!”

So – we all get a bit mixed up – confused – even the most pious – on what is the proper
preparation for Christmas...

I. Let’s put it like this – there is (in the first place) the merchandising approach. It starts early –
all the way back to Macy’s parade on Thanksgiving Day – to our very own parade this very afternoon at 3
pm. (30 floats we’ll have this year – a brand new route – dancing girls and prancing horses – bands and
Karen Bloomquist and Indians in full Native American dress – + of course – St. Nick) – Don’t miss a bit of
it. And pre-Christmas sales at Northgate Mall:

Ah yes – ‘tis the season of Christmas, and all through the house
St Nick and his helpers begin their carouse.
The closets are stuffed and the drawers overflowing
With giftwrapped remembrances coming and going.
What a joyous abandon of Christmas glow!
What a making of lists! What a spending of dough!
Come checkbook! Come personal loan!
Come mortgage, come credit card! Come one and come all!” (Source Unknown)

Regretfully a retailer’s dream!

(True, the children may get the baby Jesus and Santa Claus slightly confused) like the year we played “Silent Night” with the hand bells at the door of Belk’s – and I heard a child ask “mama, what denomination is South Square Mall?”

Well – don’t jump on the merchants about starting so early – the church also takes 4 long weeks of Advent preparation for Christmas (this being the second)

No wonder church parsons and musicians (in particular) are almost nervous wrecks before it’s over. I recall a weary chorister (not so much complaining as explaining) “No wonder we are all tired and cross – even the angels only sang it through once – and we’ve been singing it a whole month!”

So – if the great Feast of the Nativity – turns into a 30 day Fiesta – don’t blame the merchant – it was the ancient Romans who invented the whole thing – who saw the need of a winter carnival to celebrate the return of the sun – “S-U-N” to the Northern hemisphere and the feast of Saturn the Saturnalia.

And the Christians baptized it into the church in C.1325 AD – when Christianity became the empire’s official religion. The Christians tried and are still trying desperately and never all together successfully to convert it into a celebration of the birth of the “S-O-N” of God. Who brought new hope + new life (nor just to Nature – but to the Nature of mankind.) And along with the felicitous choice of the pagan’s day and month Dec. 25 for the birthday of Jesus came all the frolicsome + festive trappings of the ancient Roman feast already many centuries in progress.

But there is more than ancient Roman history here – there is what the Germans called “heilsgeschichte” - i.e. “The history of salvation.”

So – what (we Christians must ask) was God’s preparation for Christmas? That’s a difficult question – for – as Second Isaiah warns:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,
saith the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8-9)

And St. Paul adds this cautionary note

“Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements, and his ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who have been his counselor?” (Romans 11:33-34)

But... though leaving the incarnation stranded in *mysterium tremendum* – St. Paul does offer this suggestion about God’s preparation for Christmas: In his Galatian letter, Paul writes this about the 1st Christmas: his only mention of it – “but when the fullness of the time was come, God sends forth his son, made of a woman” (4:4) St. Paul’s sole reference of Mary.

And no one knows what that phrase “the fullness of the time” means. But it was the perfect time:

for – Rome had provided one-world gov’t
+Greece has supplied one world language
+Judaism had given the world monotheism – one God of faith.

A perfect time – i.e. – God’s timing!

But God’s Christmas preparation

choose (1) a strong setting - for his Ad-venture into time and

(2) a most surprising message.

The setting was strange, indeed. Joseph + Mary – God’s odd couple. The...¹

The world over – HOPE. Hope in the midst of all hell.

Hope was born anew in that manger cradle → in the faith that God still care for mankind – no matter how terrible – still loves us – that peace is still possible among persons of good-will.

Come tension

Come horror

Come pain + death.

God still loves you – that’s the shocking Christmas message – you are not alone – not alone in this dangerous and demonic old world –

Not now

Not ever

God is no longer – a *deus absconditus* (a hidden God)

So come, come – enjoy the whole glorious winter festival – it will warm your heart + lift your spirits – go on – revel in the festival of the rising sun – (Santa Claus, parades – cards – gifts – parties – the whole kit and caboodle)

¹ Page 8 of the handwritten sermon was missing and likely not deleted intentionally by Dr. Bennett. There is an illegible word before “odd couple”.

But ... as you prepare for Christmas – remember also the feast of the soul – the Feast of the Nativity – the coming of the Son S-O-N of God – + his coming again – for Advent does – like Janus – face both ways – Christ’s coming and his coming again.

So remember this Son of God that you may share a most lasting – and eternal – faith + hope + love with family and friends –

In short – sit beneath your Christmas tree this year and hear the angels sing – once again of “peace on earth – good will to man.” Amen

Let us pray

Oh God,

Who in the fullness of time didst reveal Thyself in Jesus of Bethlehem and Nazareth:

Help us, in this Advent season, so to meditate on this revelation of thyself

That thy love may become known to us, and thorough us may be revealed to others;

in the name of Jesus, our Lord

So we shall prepare ourselves to worship this Christmas. We shall send Christmas cards that really are cards for Christmas. We shall do unusual acts of service, each of us like a twentieth century Good King Wenceslaus. We shall give gifts to those who can make no return except “Thank you,” rather than exchanging presents only with our families and friends. We shall do so in the spirit of the Offertory prayer in the Midnight Mass: “Accept, Lord, this day’s festal offering, and in Thy gracious bounty grant that through this interchange of sacred gifts, we may grow to be like him in whom our human nature is made one with Thine.” I like that phrase: “this interchange of sacred gifts.” God gave us Jesus; we gave to Him and to the least of these, his brethren, our acts of love. Yet, what is the most precious gift we can offer Him? Christina Rossetti has told us in very simple language:

What can I give Him,

Poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd,

I would bring a lamb;

If I were a wise man,

I would do my part

Yet what can I give Him –

Give my heart.

