

Joyous Dissent

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent 2015

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Oh come, Thou refreshment of them that languish and faint. Come, Thou Star and Guide of them that sail in the tempestuous sea of the world; Thou only Haven of the tossed and shipwrecked. Come, Thou Glory and Crown of the living, and only Safeguard of the dying. Come, Holy Spirit, in much mercy, and make [us] fit to receive Thee.—St. Augustine

“Can we be honest for just five minutes... even though this is Chicago?” Galesburg poet Carl Sandburg begins one of his little-known poems with that question, a poem criticizing the political corruption of the Chicago of his day.

Even though most of us are well on our way to Christmas, many of us since mid-November when the soul-numbing, holiday Muzak descended upon us like a thick fog, I wonder if we can be honest this morning, say, for fifteen minutes out of the four weeks of Advent.

I’ve been thinking that one of the reasons the *Charlie Brown Christmas* special continues to be so popular, even fifty years after its premiere in 1965, has to do with its honesty through Charles Schultz’s willingness and ability to tell the truth humorously about the human condition. Of course, everybody remembers the conclusion when Linus appears on stage to remind the audience gathered in the school gymnasium “what Christmas is really all about.” But in the opening scenes, Charlie Brown speaks powerfully to what many of us feel this time of year. As the children are singing the rather plaintive “Christmastime is Here,” Charlie Brown voices his holiday blues to Linus.

“I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming but I’m not happy. I don’t feel the way I’m supposed to feel.”

Charlie continues to sing his blues, “I just don’t understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I’m still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.”

You would never know it from all the glistening lights along Delaplaine Road in Riverside, but Charlie Brown is not alone behind those frosted windows. “Blue Christmases” abound for lots of reasons, including some very unrealistic expectations for the season—“We don’t feel the way we’re supposed to feel.” Add to this the self-reflection that focuses on our disappointments; the gnawing grief from the loss of loved ones; the deep-seated regrets about estranged family members; and then, that awful “dreaming of a white Christmas just like the ones we used to know”—the ones that we never really knew, except in our memories, and will never know again, especially if it never snows again!

Linus’ sister, Lucy Van Pelt, always one to be especially empathetic and compassionate (!), concludes that Charlie Brown’s problem is that he has *pantophobia*; he’s afraid of everything.

In a season when *we are supposed to be joyful*, singing “peace on earth... goodwill to all... joy to the world,” many of us find ourselves wracked with the blues, sadness, confusion, and a restlessness that we cannot fully understand; and we simply are not going to snap out of it and pretend that we are happy just because others think we should be.

Maybe Linus is right. The dissonance we experience during the days leading up to Christmas has something to do with not having a clue about “what Christmas is really all about.” Come to think of it, maybe we’ve been robbed of Christmas, and we’re not happy about it. Someone much

more sinister than Mr. Grinch has stolen Christmas from us! A very good reason for the blues—the Advent blues.

A telling moment occurred last Friday evening when the choir had finished caroling under “The Bean” in Millennium Park. As a young woman was passing behind the risers while the singers were filing off, she said clearly to us, “Thank you... thank you so much for singing about Jesus,” as though singing about Jesus in the public square was something peculiar to Christmas.

If Linus is right (who could ever dispute what Linus says?), that we don’t know “what Christmas is all about,” then we surely do not have the foggiest notion of “what Advent is all about.” I’m sure our neighbors across the street are completely befuddled, maybe even a bit miffed, by the austere, blue lights that are dimly lit in the parsonage windows—and no Christmas tree until next week. (We’ll probably get a violation from the Village for not being on schedule with having our Christmas lights lit!)

Advent, with its empty blues (Why isn’t the Christmas tree up? Why aren’t we singing Christmas songs already?) ...Advent is the lost season, a time like all those folks who feel very lost—even exiled—in the darkness of their souls, those whom some of us are so intent upon cheering up, except that they don’t want to be cheered up. What they want is to see the true Light shining in their darkness. Some cannot see.

As much as this season is one of celebration—and it will be soon enough—it is also a time of waiting in the blue dawn of a new day about to break upon us. As much as this is a time of great joy, the great joy will only happen through days of strenuous honesty, searching and waiting for the light. You won’t see that light as long as you are blinded by the glitz, the glitter, and the garish lights on every lawn. It must be dark before the dawn.

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” The prophets of Israel speak of joy and peace, of singing and exaltation, but they never neglect to address the dark, heavy burdens that people bear in their hearts as they long for the bright “morning star.”

Some of you may remember the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, written during the Civil War, entitled “Christmas Bells,” which eventually became a beloved carol:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

Then the verses that are usually left out:

*Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”*

If we would allow ourselves, we, too, could sing with Longfellow whose soldier son had been badly wounded in that war and whose wife had recently died when he wrote those words. We daily witness the plight of refugees, the mayhem of terrorists, the blood of violent gun rampages, the raving madness of people seeking power.

*And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”*

John the Baptist starkly reminds us that, if all we have to celebrate at Christmas is our human goodness (*ala* Charles Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*), then we have nothing at all to celebrate. If we are basically good people, who are quite capable of saving ourselves, together with the planet, then we have no need for God to take on human flesh as “a child... a child shivering in the night.” All we then are left with are the artificial lights, the lame office parties, and a bunch of stuff made in China.

The Spanish essayist and philosopher José Ortega y Gasset writes that “The [person] with the clear head is the [one] who frees himself from fantasy and looks life in the face, realizes that everything in it is problematic, and feels himself lost. And this is the simple truth—to live is to feel oneself lost. Whoever accepts this has already begun to find himself to be on firm ground.

Instinctively, as do the shipwrecked, he will look around for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere because it is a question of his salvation, will cause him to bring order to the chaos of his life. ...He who does not feel himself lost is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.”

In an old movie called *The High and the Mighty*, on a flight over the ocean, the pilot's voice grimly announces to the cabin, “There’s a problem. We can’t correct it. We’re not going to make it. I’m telling you this so that you can prepare yourselves for the inevitable.”

An elegantly dressed woman begins to remove the diamond brooch from her neck, the large ring from her finger. She peels off the false eyelashes and wipes the makeup from her face. A large, gaping scar, always concealed by the makeup, is now visible on her forehead. She is preparing herself for the end. She will go to the end, not as others perceive her, but as she really is—aging, wrinkled, scarred, really very unremarkable in her appearance.

As it turns out, the flight is saved and makes it safely to the airport. But the woman has changed. Honesty, truth, even repentance, have been offered to her, and she gladly accepted them, maybe even joyfully. She took off the mask, and she eventually received the joy of being who she really was.

Sometimes each of us has our moment of truth when we must admit that we are not really the person whom we and others think we are. Somebody like John the Baptist holds up a mirror to us, and we see our wrinkles, just as we are, and then we pray that he or someone else would take an ax to us, falling us to our knees.

Falling, we pray that God would start a fire and burn away the trash—the lies, the phoniness, the duplicity, the excuses, the secrets—begging for a whole new beginning, maybe even a birth, not just in Bethlehem, but in each of us—today.

*O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today.*

A joyous Twelve Days of Christmas to each of you,
Dennis Lauritsen