



## A Note from the Pastor's Corner

Can you believe Advent has already arrived? Advent is the period of four Sundays before Christmas when we prepare our hearts for the observance of the arrival of Jesus on Earth. Advent means the arrival or coming of something that has been anticipated.

I don't know if you caught that phrase, "when we prepare our hearts". I point that out because, from what I see and experience, there's an awful lot of preparation that needs to take place. The preparations we usually see are those involved with our national Christmas tradition. And if you give it much thought, Jesus seems to be included as an afterthought. A squeaky-clean infant wrapped in brand-new blankets laying comfortably in what looks for all the world like a cradle in a dust-free, solid wooden structure surrounded by the calm, mature mother and proud father.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not clamoring for dirt, cow manure, grimy faces, and the 'Now what do we do?' look on the face of a 13 year-old girl. I don't even care that we usually see three kingly-looking visitors in top-drawer regalia and the entire setting lit up by the light from a star. Incorporating symbolism in this way helps us have a more complete story of Jesus, even though the portrayal is not true to life.

Neither is this about the overspending, overeating, overdrinking, and over-partying that usually accompanies the season. Sure, none of that stuff has much to do with Jesus and almost everything to do with our human desire to live it up. As far as I'm concerned – so what? Jesus liked living it up at times – and was blasted by the religious devotees of his day for it.

No, it's the on-going denial of who Jesus was/is and what Jesus stands for. Clearly stated, Jesus was a poor peasant. I don't mean he dressed in trendy 'peasant-chic' outfits. And I don't mean his family was driving a 1995 Pontiac in the year 2010.

I mean they lived in a village that had a hard time making a go of it. His dad was a carpenter. Don't get the romantic idea that carpenters were independent, self-made men that had a nice little business and people admired them. Their society was agricultural. Everyone was expected to bring forth produce from the blessing of the Land of Promise, be it livestock or crop. The acceptable offerings of the sacrificial system were brought forth from the land by the inhabitants. Those who had no land lost it for a variety of reasons – none of them socially acceptable – so they didn't fit in, didn't meet the expectations.

They weren't despised, but they did not have the status they do today. This may help explain why one of the things archaeologists look for to determine if an existing city had been taken over by the Israelites is a marked decrease in the quality of pottery, carpentry, construction, etc.

My point? Jesus lived a poverty-stricken life, relegated to the edge of society. And from the very outset, his ministry was aimed at the poor, the oppressed, those taken advantage of, and those pushed aside with contempt. The Good News was constantly announced to the likes of these. And Jesus never wavered from this. The 'fine, upstanding citizens' who were able fit in within the socio-political structure and got along to get along were tacitly supportive of this mistreatment of the poor. And when they had enough of Jesus trying to upset their applecart along with the applecart of the wealthy (imagine all those apples), they took action that would send a message to any other misguided soul who worked to empower the poor.

In our time and place, most Americans are those 'fine, upstanding citizens'. No? Well, what just happened in the year or so leading up to this November's elections? There was a non-stop push to defend the very wealthy and, for balance, to drive those who struggle to make ends meet over the edge and into poverty – and, naturally, keeping the already impoverished in their place. As always, there was no end of the offerings of supposedly pure, justifiable reasons and innocent excuses – and the type of conduct, name-calling, and distorted logic you would expect from self-centered 7<sup>th</sup>-graders.

This is the state of our nation. It comes from the leadership many of our fellow citizens supported, sent money to, and clamored for; the type of leadership that doesn't care about meeting the needs of the poor regardless of the form; the type of leadership that gives protection only to those who are still able to stand on their own two feet – and, of course, the wealthy.

I can't help but hear these words of Jesus echo through the ages, "And he will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.'"

I urge each of you not just to prepare your own heart for the coming of Jesus, but help your family, your friends, and your neighbors prepare their hearts. How can we do that? Model it. As I said to our young people on a recent Sunday: smile as you greet whoever you see. Be Jesus to everyone around you by finding some way to show love for them by having solidarity with them – which is, by the way, the true definition of compassion.

Grace and peace, *Pastor Bud (continued below . . .)*



## Another Note from the Pastor's Corner

I want to depart from my typical Corner writings to share what the Christmas season, or Advent, has meant for me in my life.

Christmas can mean so many things to us. Like all words, 'Christmas' is symbolic – meaning it's a stand-in, representing a thought or a concept. Mostly, words are inaccurate and, so, usually miss the mark for what we wish to convey. But, they come close enough for most purposes. And if we find the need, we invent new words.

Each language is different and those differences can be determined by culture, geography, religion, etc. For example, I've read that the language of the Inuit people have seven different words for that white, crystallized form of water that we call 'snow'. Since moving to Central Square, I've been surprised by hearing a few words used to describe that stuff that I had never thought had anything to do with snow. But, I digress.

Speaking only for myself – because I'm the only person that I can speak for on the meaning of 'Christmas' – there are a variety of things that are brought to mind when I consider that word. Memories of those bygone days in the home of my childhood are prominent among them. Baking Christmas cookies, dabbing Glass Wax through stencils on the windows, opening Christmas cards and hanging them on the door ways, displaying a Santa Clause that plugged into the light fixture of the front porch.

There were the evenings we'd hop into the family car to ride around the area and look at all the different decorations people had displayed. There was the excitement of walking downtown to the local stores to buy gifts for my parents – and even sometimes for my brothers and sisters. The excitement came from the atmosphere of anticipation that seemed to be in the very air I breathed, no matter where I was. Our art class activities at school and my Cub Scout den meetings often involved colored construction paper, library paste, pine cones, tempera paints, blunt-point scissors, etc. – and a challenge to Mom when we'd bring our creations home as she had to find a place to display them.

As the day got closer, a Christmas tree would mysteriously show up on the side porch, and we were told that Santa's helpers dropped it off to make it easier for Santa to set up and decorate when he arrived. (As time went by, we were allowed to help Santa take care of this detail – but that's another story.) Wrapped gifts would be sometimes discovered – and with those discoveries came the explanation that they were for friends and relatives. At the same time, my own wrapped gifts to give were hidden – if it was possible to do that in a small house with seven other people living in it.

There would be the special Christmas programs at church and school, learning and singing beloved Christmas carols – and then the impossibility of going to sleep on Christmas Eve after hanging up our Christmas stockings and leaving milk and cookies for Santa Clause. Since my bedroom was in the (unheated) attic, I was certain that I would hear Santa's arrival before I fell asleep. And more than once, *I really did!*

When daylight broke – actually, way before dawn – my siblings and I would start gathering in the upstairs hallway, running from bedroom to bedroom as we waited for Mom and Dad to get up. (I wondered why they weren't as eager to get out of bed as we were – and why they always stayed up so late the night before.) Finally, Dad would go downstairs to make sure that Santa had already come – and gone – so we could file down.

Even though I knew what to expect – a decorated tree, both an American Flyer and a Marx train set ready to be played with, filled stockings, and presents neatly arranged for each person – walking through the door into our living room was an awesome moment. But the very first thing was for us to gather around a little manger scene with a lit candle as we sang Happy Birthday to Jesus.

As we took turns opening our gifts – admiring what others received was almost as exciting as enjoying our own gifts – I saw only what I can call 'the magic of the day' in the eyes and faces of our parents. I didn't understand what I was seeing back then, but I do now. As far as I know, our language doesn't have words to accurately describe what I saw in their expressions.

We'd have a special breakfast and before anyone could become totally absorbed in anything else, we'd all get dressed to go visit grandparents, aunts and uncles (and cousins), and be treated to the type of candies that we only ever saw at Christmas time. Family gatherings and special meals are all added to the mix of my childhood memories. Different memories from other times in my life all live in the same space in my heart and mind – but there isn't the space here to share them.

So when I wish each of you a Merry Christmas, what I'm really saying is that my wish for you is that your heart may be as full of blessed memories of hearth and home as mine is.

Grace, peace, and merry Christmas ... Pastor Bud