

MEDITATION

LUKE 3:7-18

**DECEMBER 17, 2006—ADVENT 3, SUNDAY SCHOOL CHRISTMAS STORY
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The closer we get to Christmas the higher the pitch of preparations.

This past week as I was putting electric candles in each and every window of our house—a process that takes about six to eight hours by the time you cart the candles and extension cords from the basement, replace burned out bulbs, and find ingenious ways to secure the little plastic tapers in the windows so that they don't fall over and burn the house down—somewhere in the midst of that process I asked myself, “Is this really worth all the bother?”

From deep in my subconscious came the resounding answer—Absolutely! “You know you love to see those candles lighted in every window on every floor driving around Colonial Circle,” I said to myself.

I was talking with one of our members at the candlelight dinner on Wednesday about Christmas preparations. She told me how she continues to observe the traditions she and her husband, who is no longer living, started years ago.

Her tree is decorated with silver balls, red ribbons and pretty fruit like cumquats and cranberries heralding back to the days when they couldn't afford real ornaments. She also has a collection of miniature crèches acquired over the years.

“This is Christmas for my family” she said, “when my daughter and granddaughter come to Buffalo this is what makes it Christmas.”

Each year our preparations for Christmas include the Sunday School Christmas pageant.

It must go back to our beginning. Somewhere in the archives is a picture of Jane Skinner—one of the saints of this congregation who died in her late eighties a few years ago.

There she was, a young, handsome woman during the era of Dr. Holmes, dressed as an angel with huge diaphanous wings, looking very solemn and holy which she was. But she was also one of the quickest wits I have ever encountered. The picture is priceless.

The costumes have changed, gotten simpler and cuter, but the tradition of the Sunday School announcing the good news of Jesus Christ lives on and holds a very special place in the heart of this congregation.

Carol Zaleski, professor of religion at Smith College, puts her finger on the thread that runs through our Christmas traditions: she says, “Christmas is the time for grace, not moralism; paradox, not parsimony; incense, not censoriousness.”^[i]

No matter how accurately scholars deconstruct Jesus and no matter how shrewdly retailers sell their wares co-opting the season of his birth, we still love to get ready for his coming for this reason: he promises to save us from ourselves. One colleague uses the image of survivors of a shipwreck for those who approach the rude stall on Christmas.

Alone and adrift on the open sea, clinging with life and death desperation to one solitary plank.

Maybe the desperation you feel this year is facing your first Christmas without a loved one. Or perhaps it's the specter of a troublesome diagnosis. Or worry and fear for a family member bent on self-destruction or a relationship jarred loose from the trust that once anchored it.

Not to mention those who struggle to survive in war zones around the globe.

The proclamation of Advent and Christmas is that into our dark, solitary world God comes. A vast invasion, a holy rescue operation is taking place among us. Ready or not here he comes, say the prophets and saints.

Paradox, grace, incense and irony. G.K. Chesterton said, "the hands that made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle."^[ii]

The plain and wonderful truth of Bethlehem's Babe is this: the dignity of human existence is founded on the comedy of divine self-abasement. If God is willing to stage such an audacious drama for the human family, then our Christmas traditions are given wide latitude: from solemnity to silliness, from asceticism to abundance, from play to penance all of it is appropriate and good.

You may also have noticed Christmas is no respecter of boundaries. It spills over into the secular realm, generates kitsch, wastes cash, invites indulgence and incites misrule. In fact, for a brief time Christmas was outlawed by the Puritans in England under Cromwell and in Massachusetts by our Puritan ancestors for igniting debauchery^[iii].

Survivors of a shipwreck. He saves us not just from our fouling the rich pageant of life with our moralism and hypocrisy but also our misguided attempts to disguise our debilitating loneliness and fear floating on this blue orb through the vast cold space.

A good friend of mine told an amazing story the other day. He recently celebrated his birthday and said he found a diary his mother—who died two years ago—kept on the day of his birth. "Entered the hospital at 4:30 am, Jack born at 5:18."

Strangely, on that day he got up at 4:30, couldn't sleep so he went to the kitchen to let out the dog and remembered this was precisely the time his mother entered the hospital 60 years ago. He thought on returning to bed he should stay up till 5:18. But he fell asleep. Then suddenly the phone rang, he picked it up and looked at the clock: 5:18. No one was there. He dialed *69. "Caller unknown" the caller id said. His heart skipped a beat. He smiled and said, "Hello, Mom."

God enters our world at Christmas like that beloved mother to tell us we are not alone, that we are each his children and of inestimable value. Just as we are. Not after we have cleaned up our act and paid our dues. But right now, full of debt and regret.

Maybe Tim Allen and Chevy Chase and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* and our boys and girls got it right: maybe it's time to hang gaudy lights and tons of tinsel; to put a light in every one of those darn windows; time to 'go tell it on a mountain,' and make disciples of all nations for this amazing infant savior.

The light of Christ can't be contained so why try? It stirs up our disordered hearts and unleashes our deepest passions even as it heals them and saves us—from loneliness and grief and brokenness and despair. Amen.

^[i] Carol Zaleski, "Christmas wrappings," *The Christian Century*, December 27, 2005, 33.

^[ii] Zaleski, 33.

^[iii] Zaleski, 33.