

December 19, 2004

"The Message of the Candles – JOY"

Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 2:8-14

Preached by Rev. Dr. Richard E. Nye

INTRODUCTION

Our journey of the spirit called Advent is now near the blessed destination of Christmas. Three Sundays ago the candle of "Hope" gave focus to us as we began to think and feel our way through these December days. Paul's words in Romans fed our longing spirits: "...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, for God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (5:4)

On that second Sunday of Advent, by the light of the candle of love, we heard John's Gospel proclaim, "for God so loved the world that He gave his Son..." (3: 16) Gary nurtured our thoughts and emotions by exploring the human and divine dimensions of that second candle. The words of that old Isaac Watts hymn often fill my heart and find expression from my lips: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul my all..."

LAST SUNDAY MORNING

Just last week we turned our attention to the candle of peace. I tried to suggest that "peace" is more than an absence of conflict and surely more than the complacency of comfortable denial. But, may I confess to you that last Sunday afternoon I felt a turmoil of spirit about my homiletical effort of the morning, particularly the message at 10:30. I share this with you not to seek your affirming, "Oh, Pastor, that was a good sermon." I have been about this privileged business long enough to know that what I think I am saying and what I think you are hearing are almost always different from what you think I am saying and what you think you are understanding. I think one of you said after that 10:30 sermon, "...Good message, Pastor." I refrained from responding, "Oh, I feel like I lost my focus, and I can't believe you thought it was a good message."

I don't know what to suggest to you about responding to us who have stood at what John Stotts calls, "This sacred desk." One friend in Hinsdale was very creative in greeting me at the conclusion of worship. He would say, "I like your tie," or, "...You got a haircut this week..." "How could you tell," I would retort.

The communication that occurs after the message called the sermon is a subject of interest and humor, for me. I was privileged to study with George Buttrick, when he was a guest lecturer at Harvard Divinity School.. He told us about a parishioner who came to him one morning after worship at said, "Oh, Dr. Buttrick, your sermons your sermons! Each one is better than the next..." Buttrick said, "I knew then it was getting close to the time to retire."

If preaching is "truth through personality..." and if it is true, as Phillips Brooks is reported to have said to one preaching colleague, "What you are speaking so loudly we can't hear what you are saying," then conversation about the preaching experience from both sides of the pulpit may be more important than we have thought.

So, let me say a brief word about what was going on in me last Sunday morning. First, there was a gnawing anxiety about our financial support of our church. Our giving these past several months has been discouraging. Oh, I know this is a time of uncertainty. We are between Pastors, so some among us, or some who are not among us, are taking a wait and see posture. But, one observation I would make about Colonial Church is that we have strong lay leadership in place, we have strong clergy, music, program and support staff, and a very capable Search Committee is diligently at work. What is needed now is for each and all who have a connection to this family of faith to include the church in your prayerful generosity.

All right, I have said it, and I do not apologize for saying it again. I lay it on your hearts and just remind myself that God's Spirit is the lively, enlivening reality here. The matter will be taken care of. You and I will do what we need to do. I am making peace with my anxiety. I am ready to move on and allow the candle of joy to burn brightly now, leading us on toward the deep, wondrous promise of Christmas.

THE CANDLE OF JOY

This morning I will conclude the spoken part of our worship – the organ postlude is really part of worship and sends us on our way with the empowering encouragement of God's self-expression in the gift of music – with these words which I have adapted: "May the joy of Christmas fill your days with gladness..."

The candle of joy promises us so much more than a mindless greeting. There is something about this season that is problematic for some of us. "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year," is a well meaning way of reaching out. But for many it may feel like insensitive carelessness. Some among us and around us are walking through the valley of grief, or the shadow of some deep heartbreak, or some issue of great disappointment or anxiety. To say, "Merry," to you feels like an assault on the reality of your emotions. So, I have preferred to say, "a blessed Christmas and a joyous New Year," because no matter how deep your despair the message of Christmas can bless you and a joy that is far deeper than giddy pleasure can fill your heart. Someone has said, "it is easy to hate Christmas. Although it may be the best season for some, for many it is the worst...The celebration gap between the happy and the sad tends to grow wider during Advent and Christmas than at any other time of the year. As the spirits of some people soar, the spirits of others, instead of soaring, tend to diminish and to depress. When all you feel like doing is crying, it hurts deeply to be expected to laugh..."

What is there to celebrate in the midst of affluence, if you are poor? In the midst of family reunions, when you are alone?

In the midst of love, when you feel rejected?

What is there to celebrate about the sparkling eyes of children when you are trying to deal with the deep scars of your own childhood?

About angel choruses of peace on earth when you are haunted by headlines on billions of dollars spent for continuing warfare?

About preacher-talk of 'goodwill on earth' when you have just lost your job? "What is there to celebrate? Maybe nothing-if the spirit of celebration is reserved only for the lighthearted and the lucky..." (Melvin Wheatley, *The Book of Christmas*, p. 71)

Melvin Wheatley also tells about Clarence Forsberg, a Methodist pastor whom I knew in the Pacific Northwest, who stopped one day in a little roadside chapel. After a time of prayer he paused at the door to sign the guest register. Taking an additional moment he leafed through the little book to see if he recognized the names of any other visitors. His eye lit on this anonymous entry: "Thank you for a place to cry."

Could it be that in a world of tears having a place to cry is something to celebrate-especially when that place celebrates Christmas, and what Christmas celebrates is a promise not of mindless happiness but of indomitable hope, love, peace and joy?

Every Christmas I think of my elderly friend, Mark Ricker. He was a retired policeman who had spent his life in Haverhill, MS, where I served on weekends during my seminary days. One Sunday after worship Mark waited until I had greeted everyone else. Then, he said, "Brother Richard," he always called me "Brother." "Do you know the most important word in the Bible?" Well, I was concluding my seminary career, surely I knew the most important word in the Bible.

So, I said, "God or love." Mark shook his head, smiling with self-pride. Well, I played along: "Christ, salvation, Holy Spirit, atonement, forgiveness..." Mark's smile grew broader and he said, "I'll give you a hint. It is a preposition." Well, it was lunch time and I was feeling a little impatience with the game. "Mark," I said, "I give up. What do you think is the most important word in the Bible?" Well, he thought for a moment and I guess he finally decided he was going to have to tell this dumb young preacher the most important word in the Bible. "It's a preposition," he said again. "The little preposition, 'with...'" Though that morning occurred more than forty years ago, I have never forgotten it. The truth of my aged friend's insight struck me with all the weight of heaven. "With...God with us..." Emmanuel, which means literally, "God with us..." with us, in all of life's uncertainties, all of life's unevenness, the ups and downs, the good and bad, the happy and the sad...God with us, leading us through the dark nights of sorrow and with us, intensifying the moments of fulfillment... God with us – here is joy beyond words to express.

A JOY TO SHARE

Can we be joy sharers in these days of such promise and emotional peril? What if we invite that wondrous reality who once again and perhaps more decisively than ever, entered the stream of human history in that Bethlehem infant to find expression not only within us but through us? What if we listened with our whole hearts to those angels who seek to sing again for our hearing "...fear not, for behold we bring tidings of great joy..."

May we never forget that in the years of his ministry no words were more on his lips than "Be of good cheer," "Be not anxious," "Be not afraid," "Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice," "I have said these things that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be complete."

Jesus saw all the sadness that was and always is present around this world. But he did not sadden life – he gladdened it. He did not believe he could eliminate gloom by adding to it. It's not likely he would have attracted and appealed to children as he did if he had been a dour, gloomy, and morose person.

Jesus' chief criticism of the scribes and Pharisees was that their interpretation of religion had become savorless – dull and plodding, mechanical and routine. There was no spontaneity, no joy. The greatest foe of Christianity is not agnosticism or atheism, but men and women who, having entered the Christian life, have never had the life of Christ enter them enough to help them to be the joyful, radiant and attractive people they were intended to be.

Though Charles Schultz is no longer with us in this world his work lives on because his themes were timeless. One of my favorite strips is the one in which Lucy decides that Linus (her little brother) has to grow up and learn to live without his security blanket. So when Linus falls asleep, she slips the blanket out of his hands, takes it outside, and buries it. When Linus wakes up and discovers his blanket is missing, he panics and falls to the floor. He can't breathe! He gasps and screams, "I've got to have that blanket. I can't live without my blanket."

Then Snoopy sees Linus's dilemma and rises to the occasion. He goes outside and, with his trusty nose, sniffs out the blanket, digs it up, and brings it back to Linus.

Linus is so relieved. With one arm, he grabs the blanket, and with the other, he hugs Snoopy, saying, "Oh thank you, thank you, Snoopy. You have saved my life!" The last picture shows Snoopy lying on his back on top of his doghouse, looking contented, and thinking "Every now and then my existence is justified!"

Expressing Christ in our relationships is indeed the justification and joy of our existence. Every time we express hope, or love, every time we seek reconciliation or act on peace we are giving flesh to the spirit of Christ, we are sharing the Savior, we are living the Spirit of Christmas.

Burn brightly Advent candles and set us on fire for living God who enters our world and lives in that birth we are almost prepared to celebrate once again.