

A SERMON PREACHED ON CHRISTMAS EVE, DECEMBER 24, 2017, AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

The parents began to assemble the special Christmas gift they had for their children. With great anticipation they had ordered a kit for a tree house and received the plans for it. However, the materials they received were for a sailboat. They wrote the company to complain. The company's reply: "While we regret the inconvenience this mistake must have caused you, it is nothing compared to that of the man who is out on a lake somewhere trying to sail your tree house."

So here we are after many, many weeks of anticipation: the season of Advent finished up this morning, the tree is fully decorated, the crèche is near to capacity, lights are blazing, candles are lit - - all in readiness for the arrival of the Christ child. We received the last of the Christmas cards yesterday (though I know a few more will trickle in as folks find the time and energy to mail greetings despite the deadline - - or if you are a true Advent believer, they should not have been posted before this afternoon - - that's what happens when Christmas falls on a Monday). I'm always amused at who gets the first card out; this year we got our primary message on the Friday after Thanksgiving from a friend in Rehoboth Beach, and then a second one the day after from someone in Westchester County, New York (where we used to live). There certainly is a variety these days (though we did not receive any singing cards for a change), everything from the standard snow scene to cardinals and what I assume are nuthatches playing among the branches of some ice-covered landscape. There are the more silly ones from Snoopy and Mrs. Claus, with a few Grinch-themed cards snuck in. Of course there are the obligatory photo cards with pictures taken from exotic places while family members vacationed sometime earlier in the year. Since we are nature lovers, there were some wolves, and a lot of cute dogs and cats. And as one expects for a minister and his family, there were a lot of cards with churches, icons, biblical quotes, and manger scenes. Then there were those four page letters snuck in between the folds that elucidated all that had happened since Tim was one to when Newell was 96! I don't know where folks find the time and energy to write these missives that take forever to read! However, I can say without a doubt that I am up-to-date and well-informed!

Each year I read every card for its message; some are better than others, to be sure. There are the typical Seasons Greetings and Happy Holidays for the interfaith crowd, a choice I know was intentional and perhaps essential for this day and age. My three favorites were a) a card of silver garland and blue bows that wished "May the closeness of friends and the comfort of home renew your spirits this Christmas; b) a holly berry and cardinal card quoting the Letter of Paul to the Romans, i.e., "Faith comes from what is heard of the good news of Christ; and c) a small hometown scene that asks "Let Christmas come into our world and bring us warmth and cheer, Bring us Faith in place of doubt and strength in place of fear, Bring us Hope and bring us Love to guide our hearts forever...Let Christmas come into our world and bring us all together." But my very favorite card had a night scene with a church in the background and a greeting written by hand: "Welcome to your new family. May you and Anthony feel at home as the days pass. Much blessings - - Bethany Beach Congregation." Thank you all for your warm and kind and lovely thoughts this Holiday Season....

The arrival of the Christmas cards on a daily basis made me ponder what it is that folks really want for Christmas. We've examined the wishes behind Love, Peace, Hope, and Joy these past four Sundays, and I've regaled you with a Top Ten List every week in an effort to try to flesh out what is really important to us as we begin the Christmas season tonight. On a secular level, according to a survey of thousands of consumers published just on Wednesday, there are some surprises, and some of what one might expect. "Predictably, gadgets are a hot commodity this Christmas. Seventy-six percent of people surveyed have them on their wish lists. Apple products top the charts—40% of the respondents are lusting over the brand's numerous devices. Nineteen percent want an iPhone, 14% want an iPad or an iPad Mini, 8% want one of the iPod's many incarnations (the fifth generation iPod Touch is a favorite) and 6% want a Macbook Air.

Samsung is a favorite too—16% of people surveyed want different models of the Samsung Galaxy.

Cameras are also a hot item—17% want a new one. Some are hoping to get new DSLRs from Nikon or Canon while others want Fujifilm XE1, the Digital Harinezumi or the Fuji Instax 210. Other gadgets on people's list are laptops (8%), gaming consoles (3%) and Kindle (2%).

Four percent of the people surveyed are also hoping Santa will give them free Internet connection.

Surprisingly, after gadgets, the most desired gifts are shoes. Thirty-four percent of men and women surveyed want footwear for Christmas. And they all want different kinds—flats, heels, boots, sneakers, Adidas, Cole Haan, Doc Martens, Christian Louboutin... (the list goes on and on).

Clothes are also on people's lists at 30%. They want shirts (8%), dresses (4%), jackets (4%), jeans (4%) and even swimsuits (3%).

Trips or vacations also rank high on people's wish lists. Twenty-six percent of people surveyed want trips either for themselves or their whole family. The dream destinations vary—from Boracay and Batanes to Europe, South America, New Zealand, and the Maldives.

I was happy to see that books made it to people's lists. Twenty-two percent want something new to read this Christmas, and 4% want *Vogue* Magazine Grace Coddington's memoir.

Sixteen percent of the respondents want bags, 15% want watches, 15% want cosmetics, perfumes and bath products, 3% want cars. Ten percent want jewelry.

And here's an eye-opener. Only 13% of respondents wished for intangible things—5% want to be able to celebrate Christmas with their family, 2% want good health, 4% want world peace.

Seven percent want money, 6% want new jobs while 6% want a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Five percent wished for things that weren't for themselves—donations to charity, gifts for their families. (Ah - - at least there is some hope here....)

Two percent wanted more intimate gifts.ⁱ (Ahem!)

It does make one wonder if the folks who took this survey had ever pondered the meaning of the Christmas story as we heard it read from the *Gospel of Luke* just a few moments ago. A baby, a visitation from angels, a simple home - - where do they appear in the top ten lists of our generations? What do folks need to hear or buy into in order for the story to have some meaning for them? How do we make it real? What is the best that Christmas brings, can bring to them to make room in their hearts for a new message whose spirit changes the world?

Some would say that it is the miracle of peace; others that God became human; still others that a virgin conceived, or that kings among men met the King above men. When I was living in New York, I recall a story from a neighboring church, at Newark's House of Prayer, where an act of Christmas faith carried its own message.

Urged on by his Sunday school teachers, the pastor, James Snodgrass, organized a pageant and procession, even though the only place to process was a grim, desolated playground littered with broken glass in the midst of abandoned burned-out buildings. "Sunday came and we gathered a procession of 60 adults and children," Snodgrass remembers. "I had spent the whole week raising bail for a gay man who'd been arrested. He played Joseph. His sister-in-law, who was eight months pregnant and had an 8 month-old child, played Mary. Her baby played Jesus. As we walked along we gathered junkies and everyone else - you name it - until we had 120 people. When we got to the playground it was occupied by 21 tough kids playing football. But they stopped to watch. At the end of the pageant, every last person knelt down on that asphalt, and sang *Silent Night*. Now that's Christmas! That's preaching! That's the Word!"

The Word in tonight's story from the *Gospel of Luke* comes from Mary, and we take our lead about what we are to feel and remember about Christmas from her. She has already spoken with bold determination in the days leading up to the birth at the announcement from the angel Gabriel, the Annunciation, where she claims she is the handmaiden of God remembered in poetic form that we call the *Magnificat*. She has wrapped the babe in swaddling clothes, she has decided where to stop and rest to give birth to the child; she cuddles him, allows the shepherds to visit, contends with the noises and movements of the night with angel visitors and strange lights and stars in the sky. She keeps the child warm and healthy and nurtured and loved. She is the first to say his name as had been proclaimed to her while he was still in the womb. And it is she who presents him to the world in full knowledge of who he was and what he was to offer to those around him. This leads me to think, therefore, that the real miracle of Christmas was not the stellar light show or throngs of angels or shepherd visitors from near or wise men who travelled years to find the child, but that Mary, taking all these things in, assessing their worth and value in the most unusual of birthplaces away from home and family - - the miracle of that night is that she believed in God's Word to her, gave birth to **the** Word through the actions of the Spirit; understood the prophecy that he was Wonderful, Counsellor, Almighty God, Prince of Peace; and because she believed in who her son was, we can today believe in who he is for us, in a way that allows for all the celebration and gift giving and exchanging of peace and good will. A mother's love and understanding nurtured him, and by extension nurtures us tonight, allows us to believe as she did, and for that we can be quite thankful, and say, Merry Christmas, and to all, a good night.

As you leave for your homes this evening, I'd like to share one last story from a friend of mine in his travels as a young minister. He was in a small Maryland town near where he grew up when he encountered a Nativity Scene that showed great skill and talent had gone into creating it. One small feature bothered him, though. The three wise men were wearing firemen's helmets. Totally unable to come up with a reason or explanation, he left.

At a "Quick Stop" on the edge of town, he asked the lady behind the counter about the helmets. She looked at his license plate and exploded into a rage, yelling at him, "You New Yorkers never do read the Bible!" He assured her that he did, but simply couldn't recall anything about firemen in the Bible. She jerked her Bible from behind the counter and ruffled through some pages, and finally jabbed her finger at a passage. Sticking it in his face she said "See, it says right here, 'The three wise man came from afar.'"

However you tell the story, may it be full of good cheer as you share the joy that only Christmas can bring to the heart.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
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ⁱ <http://lifestyle.inquirer.net/79783/what-do-people-really-want-for-christmas/>