

“Preparing for a Changing”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
November 27, 2022

*Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, and Matthew 24:42-44*

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It has become common among a certain kind of Christian to criticize the secular trappings of Christmas. I understand the criticism, but in truth, I love Santa and wreaths decked with ribbon and colored lights that shine beneath globs of snow. I love the songs on the radio and the stockings that hang from a fireplace and the movies we watch every year (and yes, *Home Alone* does count as a Christmas movie). It makes me feel as if a child again, as if I could believe in miracles again. Surely, that is important to Christmas.

I remember how, every year, my family would go downtown (this is in Cincinnati) the day after Thanksgiving to see Santa. I remember the line my parents waited in, so that I could get my stuffed reindeer, which I clutched the rest of the day. I remember the winter wonders displayed in the windows of shops and restaurants, as I watched model trains zoom through candy cane forests and over snowy bridges. I remember, as the dark of evening came on, the huge Christmas tree lighting up the center of downtown.

I love these memories, and I love that I get to create new ones for my children, even as I know that Christmas is about so much more than hot cocoa and Santa Claus.

Our Scriptures today remind us of just how much more there is to Christmas. Because of course, not everyone has memories like mine. And even as wonderful as those memories are, they could not save me from the loneliness that settled within my skin; they could not save me from discovering the injustice and cruelty of the world or my own capacity for such things.

I don't care about any war between secular and religious celebrations of Christmas. I love the lights and the parties. I have no desire to take that joy from anyone. I just want to give them so much more. I want—and I think our Scriptures want—the fun trappings to be but the tip of an iceberg, which dives deep into the oceanic meaning of Christmas, a meaning that is in fact capable of saving us.

Let the lights on our homes be but expressions of the Light that shines in the darkness. Let the parties be but expressions of the community that gathers around the Christ child. Let the gifts be but expressions of the greatest Gift of all.

This is serious business, says Isaiah, say Paul and Jesus. God is coming into the world. Light is breaking over the horizon. The mountain of the Lord is rising where there shall be peace and learning and the presence of God. Something real and wonderful and yes, even terrible, is happening. For Jesus describes this moment as someone breaking into your house. It is a disruption. God, says Isaiah, will “judge” the people. We will be seen for who we are. For this light, this intruder, this view from the mountain, exposes the truth. But this judgment, says

Isaiah, will not lead to hellfire and wrath; it will lead to transformation. The tools of war and violence will be turned into the instruments of food and life. The people will learn sin no more, but will rise as God's people.

God's fixing to change us, and we've got to get ready.

We are called by these Scriptures to prepare: to learn God's ways, to walk in God's paths, to be kind and righteous, to create space in our lives for paying attention. Jesus says we will not know the time or manner of Christ's coming. Who knows when Christ will at last knock on your door, when you will experience the coming of God into your heart this Christmas? So, Jesus and Paul say, be alert. Don't let this season's fog of busyness and shopping make you miss it.

To make sure we don't miss it, let's invite a visit from Ghost of Christmas Past, as we travel back in time, 80 years, to a jail cell in the Third Reich, where sits a pastor and theologian who has been imprisoned for trying to overthrow the Nazi regime. He is German born, a promising brilliant young man who went on to study and serve churches in Rome, London, and New York City, but who chose to return to Germany to lead an underground movement of faith and resistance. He will be in jail for two years. Shortly before the end of the war, he will be hanged. He will die just days before Soviet troops liberate the country. He is my age. His name is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And from that jail cell, he will write letters to his young fiancée, to his best friend, and to his parents. And in these letters, Advent and Christmas will take on new and urgent importance.

In a letter to his parents from the prison camp, Bonhoeffer writes, "We can... celebrate Christmas despite the ruins around us... I think of you as you now sit together with the children and with all the Advent decorations—as in earlier years you did with us. We must do all this, even more intensively because we do not know how much longer we have."

Christmas for Bonhoeffer becomes hope when there is no ostensible reason to hope. In a letter to his young fiancée, he writes (again, from a Nazi prison camp), "I think we're going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that every outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious... You won't be here... but... we shall sing *Friede auf Erden* [Peace on Earth] and pray together, but we shall sing, *Ehre sei Gott in de Höhe* [Glory Be to God in the Highest] even louder. That is what I pray for you and for all of us, that the Savior may throw open the gates of heaven for us at darkest night on Christmas Eve, so that we can be joyful in spite of everything."

He writes to her, saying, "We shall ponder the incomprehensibility of our lot and be assailed by the question of why... And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us... God is in the manger... Whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives."

Remember that Christmas would not be good news for Bonhoeffer's world if it did not portend profound changes. Christmas would not be good news if it did not besiege the walls of Auschwitz as well as minds of hate, if it did not root out the idolatry of Hitler, if it did not seek out the people crammed into trains and starving on the streets. And it would not be good news for us either. Christmas would not be good news if just lights and parties. It would not be good news if it left the war in Ukraine without account, if it did not commend to us the poor and the homeless, if it did not seek out the lonely, if it did not challenge in us every temptation and inclination to violence and selfishness—if it did not cry out as gun shots rang out in Colorado and Virginia. Bonhoeffer writes, "God comes in the midst of evil, in the midst of death... Advent creates... new people... Look up, you whose gaze is fixed on this earth, who are spellbound by the little events and changes on the face of the earth. Look up to these words, you who have turned away from heaven disappointed. Look up, you whose eyes are heavy with tears... Look up, you who, burdened with guilt, cannot lift your eyes. Look up, your redemption is drawing near... Wait and something quite new will break over you: God will come."

In his final Christmas letter to his fiancée before he died, he writes, "You, my parents, all of you, the friends and students of mine at the front, all are constantly present to me... Therefore you must not think me unhappy. What is happiness and unhappiness? It depends so little on the circumstances; it depends really only on that which happens inside a person."

That is the seriousness of Christmas—what happens inside you—and until we have experienced that, we have touched only the surface of Christmas; we have stood only afar from the manger. God says: come closer. Behold, God is born. Hope, and love!

All those things I love from childhood only matter because of the Child who inspired them, the Love that wrote them. They only matter because every Christmas Eve, we came to church stressed and late and the world in chaos, and for an hour, we sat singing carols by candlelight, face to face with the God-child, and when we came out after midnight, and the air was crisp and full of snow, the world was better; we were better.

Christmas can have Santa and eggnog and gifts under the tree—that's fine, that's lovely—but let it have more. Let it be the Christmas that brings us close to God, makes hope touchable, breaks open prison cells and defies a world of hate and sin (out there, and in here), and changes us. Changes everything.

Prepare yourselves. God is coming.

**Amen.**