

“A Righteous Branch”

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Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

I hope you had a good Thanksgiving! Because now I have the unsettling job of welcoming you to the season of Advent, and trying to rescue the birth of Jesus Christ from the spirit of consumerism, which began in earnest last week.

Earlier in November I read an article about Christmas and popular culture called, “Nobody Is Actually Upset About the Starbucks Cup. Stop Saying Otherwise.”* In past seasons the take-out coffee cup at Starbucks was decorated with stars, ornaments, snowmen and the like. But this year the design is only a plain red and green, without any symbols of the holiday. So someone wrote a satirical piece complaining that the cup wasn’t sufficiently honoring the holiday spirit, and that next year it should have Bible verses. It was not a serious piece. But someone else shared it, claiming that Christians were upset about the Starbucks cups. Then other people got upset about Christians being upset, when really there was no evidence that anyone was upset to start with. It seems that people are just looking for an excuse to be upset. The sad part is that for many people, this is what Christmas has come down to: those who battle with retailers over how to observe religious holidays, versus those who are angry at those who battle.

This country has a complicated history when it comes to the relationship between holy days and commerce. When the first Christian settlers came to America, they banned the celebration of Christmas altogether, because they believed it was an idolatrous pagan holiday, which in many ways it was. For example, a Christmas tree has nothing to do with the story of Jesus’ birth in the Bible. It came from a pagan tradition at the winter solstice. So in the 1600’s it was against the law to celebrate Christmas in New England. Even after laws against Christmas were repealed in 1681, Presbyterians were among those who kept discouraging any celebrations. For them it was still an unbiblical abomination. Decorating with evergreens was forbidden in many churches and merry-makers were arrested for disturbing the peace. Some Puritans even called Santa Claus the Anti-Christ.

But by the early 1800’s Christmas had seeped into our culture and was widely celebrated by all kinds of people in the United States. In 1870 it became a national holiday. And around that time the celebration also took on a more religious tone. Department stores started to pipe in carols and even hosted hymn sings. Store window displays outdid the churches in religious symbols to attract and encourage shopping. Meanwhile, churches started decorating their sanctuaries, staging pageants and holding special worship services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

In 1875 a Baptist magazine called for a separation between religion and Christmas. They wanted to keep Christmas, but as a more universal holiday, and leave religion to the churches. No worries. By the 1940’s the non-religious side of Christmas was thoroughly integrated into American culture and commercial life. Store displays started to feature winter

scenes, songs focused on Frosty, Rudolf and Santa, and popular “Christmas” movies such as “Miracle on 34th Street,” contained warm sentiments with no religious content.

So where are we now? Are we to rely on Macy’s and Starbucks to set the tone for the holidays? Let them do what they want. It’s up to the churches to lift up the real story of Christmas, and separate our celebrations from the consumerism and greed that robs this season of its religious content.

One way we do that is to observe the season of Advent. Advent is a four week period of spiritual preparation before Christmas. It’s a time to become aware of places in our lives and the world where God seems far off, places where we long for God’s presence, for God’s righteousness and justice. It’s never hard to find these kinds of places, from the millions of people who still fall through the cracks of our health care system, to the hordes of refugees waiting to be admitted to a place of safety; from the debris and grieving families of the Planned Parenthood shooting in Colorado Springs, to the destruction, grief and fear in Mali, Iraq, Lebanon, Nigeria, Paris, and other places in the world, recovering from terrorist attacks just this month. There are many places that need God’s presence, justice and righteousness.

This morning Suzanne read from the book of Jeremiah, our first lesson for the first Sunday in Advent. Our Wednesday Bible study group just finished reading excerpts from Jeremiah, and most people were glad to be finished. In fact, they were practically begging me to stop. Jeremiah can be hard to read. He was a colorful character, but he brought continual messages of gloom and doom to his people. And who wants to hear about gloom and doom over and over again?

Jeremiah was living in a difficult time where God seemed far off. By the time we reach chapter 33, Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonians. The city was surrounded so that no one could come or go. Inside the city, Jeremiah was arrested and locked up by his own people, because he wouldn’t stop predicting disaster. The truth was, they were on the brink of disaster. The people were starving, struggling with deadly diseases, surrounded by soldiers and swords, and the land would soon become a desolate wasteland (33:10, 12). Jeremiah told the people it was because they had turned away from God, worshipped idols, and refused to accept correction (32:33-35). He called them to face reality, and they responded by locking him up.

Still, in today’s passage Jeremiah brought a message of hope. This hope was not based in some possible political solution. The enemy was not about to go away, and the land would not be spared. Jerusalem would indeed be captured, burned to the ground, and the people sent into exile. But there was something to hope for in the long run. Their ultimate hope was based in the righteousness of God, and the righteous branch God promised to raise up to bring about justice in the land.

Now scholars argue over whether this righteous branch refers to a single Messiah-like figure. Christians have traditionally believed it points forward to Jesus. But if you read further in the passage, it sounds more like a series of righteous rulers, or even a faithful community as a whole – God’s people becoming a righteous branch that grows and blossoms to bring justice and safety to the land.

There are actually religious groups today that call themselves “the Righteous Branch.” One was started in 1978 when a group broke away from the Mormon Church, just in time to avoid having to allow black men to serve as priests, which they considered would be a horrible thing. I certainly wouldn’t call that righteous. It sounds more like self-righteous and bigoted to me. To be truly righteous, according to the Bible, is to do the right thing, to fulfill your responsibility to God and to your neighbors, especially those who are oppressed or on the edges of society. Righteousness is not about excluding people you consider to be unworthy. It’s about acting with justice, caring for the welfare of others. When a community is truly righteous, all the people prosper and feel safe.

Karen read a blessing from 1 Thessalonians this morning. Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians at a time when the church was facing opposition and hardship. And Paul’s words to them can offer us guidance as we begin the season of Advent. Paul thanked God for the people he was writing to, who were in a time of hardship. So we are to thank God, and cultivate thankfulness for the people God brings to our attention or puts in our lives, and pray for them. Paul wrote that he prayed night and day to be able to see them face to face. When people are suffering, an email or a phone call is OK. But there is no substitute for being there in person. You may not be able to fix anything. But just being there face to face makes a difference. Our presence and understanding helps us all recognize the presence of Christ. That’s one reason it’s important to come together in Advent and Christmas. And being together can also help us to know what we can do to be faithful.

In the season of Advent, we are called to turn out attention to places where God feels absent, and act with righteousness. Jesus said, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.... For as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:35-36, 40). The true spirit of Christmas is not to be found in a shopping mall, or in a great deal on line. It’s found by honoring Jesus, especially in places where people suffer and long for justice, and places where we can act with righteousness.

As Paul wrote, so may we increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

*by Melissa Ziegler Hemingway at thefederalist.com/2015/11/10.