

Forget My Sins, Lord

Psalm 25:1-10

November 29, 2009

It's an interesting Christmas Wish List the psalmist wants of God:

1. "Don't let anyone embarrass me;
2. Don't let my foes make fun of me;
3. Don't let down your faithful ones;
4. Embarrass the bad guys;
5. Help me know what to do;
6. Teach me how to do the right thing;
7. Show me the truth;
8. Teach me the truth;
9. Show me mercy;
10. Show me the love;
11. Don't worry about the bad stuff I did when I was a kid;
12. Remember how much you love me!"¹

An interesting wish list for sure. We'll come back to dealing with what we want for Christmas and some new considerations about gift-giving a little later. For now, I want to review some history. This is to help us all bring some civility to our conversations about the reason for the season and to set the stage for an appropriate practice of advent.

Long before Jesus came on the scene people celebrated during the winter solstice to recognize that the worst of winter was over. Early Europeans celebrated light and birth in the darkest days of winter.

The Norse in Scandinavia celebrated the Yule from December 21st all through the month of January. The men brought home these large logs and set them on fire in recognition that the sun was returning. A feast was held for as long as the log burnt. It was believed that each spark from the fire signified the birth of a pig or calf in the year ahead.

An additional reason these great feasts happened near the end of December was that most of the cattle was slaughtered then so that they wouldn't have to be fed over the winter. So, meat was plentiful. And the wine and beer had fermented and was ready to drink also.

The Romans honored the god of agriculture, Saturn, in the winter. Saturnalia, as it was called, began the week before the winter solstice and lasted a month. It was a hedonistic festival with plenty of food and drink. The Roman social order was turned upside down with slaves being the masters and peasants in command. Schools and businesses closed so that all could participate in the fun.

The children of Rome were also honored around the winter solstice. The birthday of the unconquerable sun god, Mithra, was celebrated on December 25. Some Romans regarded Mithra's birthday as the most sacred day of the year.

It wasn't until the fourth century that the birth of Jesus was recognized as something to hold a holiday about. Pope Julius I was the one who chose December 25 despite the fact that the Bible doesn't mention a date. Most

biblical historians believe this date was chosen so that the followers of Christ would have a reason to enter into the festivities of Saturnalia.

It was first called the Feast of the Nativity. The custom spread to Egypt in 432, England by the end of the sixth century and Scandinavia by the end of the eighth century. The Greek and Russian Orthodox churches celebrate it 13 days after the 25th of December.

Church leaders were basically hoping that Christmas would be embraced by more in society if it was aligned with the winter solstice festivals. Listen to this quote from History.com: “By the Middle Ages, Christianity had, for the most part, replaced pagan religion. On Christmas, believers attended church and then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere similar to today’s Mardi Gras. Each year, a beggar or student would be crowned the ‘lord of misrule’ and eager celebrants played the part of his subjects. The poor would go to the houses of the rich and demand their best food and drink. If owners failed to comply, their visitors would most likely terrorize them with mischief. Christmas became the time of year when the upper classes could repay their real or imagined ‘debt’ to society by entertaining less fortunate citizens.”²

So, what’s my point in rehearsing this history? Well, it is this: despite the catchiness of the *reason for the season* cliché, the answer we offer is really only true in our house. The secular reason for the season is about having parties – about doing things to celebrate the winter season – about doing things to help us forget the miserableness of winter and to help make the winter season tolerable. We are the ones who added something to the season and so we are the ones who are responsible for how we practice it and we don’t have a claim on how the rest of the community – the rest of society – the rest of the world celebrates it. The government is not responsible for putting crèches in the yards of its property – we are responsible for putting them in our own yards.

So, if stores put up banners wishing folks a Happy Holiday or someone greets you with a “Happy Holiday,” there’s really no need to assume that they are trying to be politically correct or offensive. In fact, I would suggest to you that it is we Christians who are the offensive ones when we get defensive about non-Christians not wishing us a Merry Christmas. When someone wishes you a Happy Holiday, respond likewise or feel free to say Merry Christmas back, but do so with respect and not out of smugness, or anger, or some feelings of superiority, because all it does in the long run is again make us appear ignorant of our own history.

Now, my point in offering this reminder at the start of advent is not to condone society’s way of celebrating the season. Rather, it is to set the stage for us to reclaim for ourselves the why and how we practice the seasons of Advent and Christmas. It is to suggest that perhaps we’ve *bought in* too much to the secular practices of the season to the neglect of some practices that might be more beneficial and fitting for who we are and who we want to experience and witness of in this season.

A few years ago a couple of churches took a beginning stab at recreating the season. They named their work “The Advent Conspiracy.” Their vision was to “restore the scandal of Christmas by substituting compassion for consumption.” The movement encourages embracing four themes during Advent: Worship More, Give More, Spend Less, and Love All.³

It’s important that we remember advent is a season of expectation and preparation rather than gratification. It’s not that parties and pageants don’t have a place in this season for us, but that we need to guard against them being our primary focus. This is a season of preparing to encounter God’s coming to live among us in our day

and not just a remembering a time when he came to live on earth in the past. Advent is a season of preparation for a real experience and not a remembering some event in the past alone. Thus, it's a time for prayerful preparation – a time for experiencing the mystery and awe. We need in this season to slow down – to give ourselves some time to meditate – so that we can arrive at Christmas Eve – at Christmas more rested and ready.

And so, I encourage us to consider *worshipping more* this advent season. You know, take advantage of the R & R days and Prayer Walks that Jeff is developing for us – attend the Thursday evening Taize vesper services, our morning worship services each Sunday morning, the Longest Night service on December 21st when we pause to remember that not everything about this season is full of joy and peace and happiness.

My intent for lifting up these opportunities is not to simply get us to add more to our schedule – to make our lives busier – to increase participation in church sponsored worship events. Rather, it is to get us thinking about ways we can modify what we do in this time of the year. For example, I'm thinking of adjusting my model of physical exercise to incorporate something more meditative – praying while riding a bike – reading something to relax my mind, feed my spirit, rather than a time to watch the news.

One of the other things we can do is to change our addiction to consuming and consumerism so inherent in the secular practice of the season. Some folks are doing it by purchasing “alternative” gifts. Heifer Project International is a popular recipient of such alternative giving. Animals can be purchased for families in more than 40 countries. Chicks cost \$20, three rabbits: \$60, a pig: \$120, a cow: \$500. Persons who choose to give through this project give cards to the recipient's of their gift informing them what they have purchased in the person's name for a struggling family.

Christian environmentalist, Bill McKibben, spearheads the “Hundred Dollar Holiday” among United Methodists in New York. Families promise not to spend more than a total of \$100 which forces simpler, more personal and often handmade gifts – you know, a baked pie, an offer to babysit an evening, an invitation to one's home for a meal, a coupon for a trip to the zoo or backrub or clearing the dishes when it's the siblings turn. There's a joke about what might have happened if Three Wise Women were among the first to visit the infant Jesus instead of Three Wise Men. The punch line of the joke is that they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole and brought practical gifts! When you think about it, cleaning the stable would have been a lot more helpful and practical than frankincense and myrrh.⁴

Michael Slaughter, pastor at Ginghamburg United Methodist Church near Dayton, has led his congregation in recent years to remember that “it's not your birthday, it's Jesus' birthday.” Ginghamburg is doing some fantastic work among the refugees in Darfur. I mean they have raised millions in the last couple of years to bring clean water and education to the people of Darfur. One of the ways they began to do it was they challenged themselves to take whatever amount they spent on Christmas presents for friends and families and to give a like amount to this church-wide mission effort.⁵

I am not prepared yet to make a specific suggestion either for a project or for what each of our households might consider doing to give more and spend less. I can tell you the intent of challenging us to rethink our giving patterns is not to cover the cost of the parking lot. This needs to be something that is for the purpose of adjusting what we do in our own households and through the church that the disadvantaged might benefit. I'm going to run an idea by the finance committee this week and there will be something in the Christmas letter. Here are some things I've been thinking about:

- 1) How about reducing how much I spend on my loved ones by say 10 or 20 % this first year?
- 2) How about giving to a local food pantry – NNEMAP, CRC, New Life or the Free Store – either through the church or directly to one of them?
- 3) How about choosing to do something with the family instead of giving as many gifts – a day of hiking in Hocking Hills or one of the area parks?

My mom gave me an article while we were at her house for Thanksgiving which told about a set of grandparents who announced at the end of their annual family Christmas gathering that they didn't really need any more gifts and would consider it a greater gift the next year if each of their children and grandchildren did something for someone in need. What they then did was spend their time at their annual Christmas gathering sharing with one another what they had done in the name of their grandparents and Jesus. We're contemplating what that's going to look like for our family in the coming years but we know it's time for a change.

The connection between the emphasis I am encouraging us to make part of our experience of Advent this year and today's text, the 25th Psalm, is that 6th verse where the psalmist asks the Lord to "remember not the sins of his youth, but to remember him." "Remember not, O Lord, how I have practiced Christmas in the past but empower me to live closer to your hope for your people." "Lord, don't remember my sins of Christmases past, but remember me for the real me who wants to live it closer to your will for this world and for your call on my life." "Lord, please forget my sins of the past when I was but a teen in this thing called life." We start advent by asking God to forgive us our past adventing and christmasing.

Let us pray.

1. Homiletics, November – December, 2009, p. 45.
2. <http://www.history.com/content/christmas/the-real-story-of-christmas/saturnalia>.
3. "The Advent Conspiracy," Homiletics, November – December, 2008, pp. 30-31.
4. "Hazardous Holidays," www.HomileticsOnline.com, December 3, 2000, on Psalm 25:1-10.
5. Bob Kaylor, "It's Not Your Birthday," Homiletics, November – December, 2008, p. 8.