

## Message for Lessons and Carols

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A friend of mine is the pastor of a very liberal UCC congregation. Their three readings on a Sunday morning consist of a reading from the First Testament – that’s their name for it – a reading from the Second Testament, and a reading from the Continuing Testament, which would be a reading from a contemporary author – a longer version of the sort of quote I might put on the front of our order of service.

My friend describes his congregation as very liberal – calling an openly gay pastor, supporting reproductive rights for women, working hard for justice as well as giving to charity – but when it comes to Christmas, my friend suddenly finds himself pastoring a group of fundamentalists.

Tradition, rather than innovation, is the order of the day, especially if that day is Christmas Eve. The members of this very liberal UCC church want the three C’s of Christmas Eve tradition – the carols, the candles, and the crèche – and they want them served straight up. No messing or mucking about with the equipment of Christmas Eve. The Advent wreath goes here, the baby Jesus goes there, and the garland goes everywhere. In this very liberal UCC church, Christmas is a time for tradition with a capital T.

Well, that doesn’t sound all that different from most UCC churches I know, including this one. We have our traditions, and one of them – and in my mind and heart, one of the loveliest of them – is this service of lessons and carols.

It’s a tradition widespread in the Christian church, made both famous and popular by the choir and organ and architecture of King’s College in Cambridge University. I suspect that some of us will tune in to hear that service on Christmas Eve or Day, and in so doing, we will be repeating what we’ve done here this morning and will do again next Sunday morning under Donna Nedrow’s leadership: we will be immersing ourselves in the Christian tradition at its most beautiful and at its least offensive.

And if there is any validity in the wish to have Christmas all year long – and I think there is – then surely this way of living out this moment in the Christian tradition must be a part of what is wished for.

The excess of consumerism we can do without, and our marketing mavens have made a shopping excess out of every holiday already. And if a holiday didn’t already exist on which to purchase something, business would invent one, which is where Cleveland’s own Sweetest Day, which first appeared on October 8, 1921, came from.

No, we don’t need more candy or flowers or cards or electronic gadgets, despite the dire predictions of those dismal scientists we call economists. Nor do we need more Christmas tunes pouring from every speaker in every store in every mall in every burb and suburb in America. And in Legacy Village, I was amazed to discover ten years ago, such tunes pour forth even from the sidewalks.

I have nothing against popular Christmas music, of course. I dust the furniture and vacuum the rugs at home singing “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus,” but by the time this Sunday closest to Christmas rolls around each year, I’m pretty thoroughly saturated with images of Santa, his reindeer, and his elves.

But what I never tire of is hearing the Christian story – not just the Christmas story, but the entire Christian story – told in lessons from the Bible and carols from the rich storehouse of Christian sacred music. That’s Christian tradition – our tradition – at its best, and I remain both edified and mildly mystified that people still queue up outside places like King’s College in secular England to hear it.

When that story is told in words and music, the lens widens from the cultural focus on silver bells and mistletoe, and the larger narrative arc, from creation to that new creation we call redemption, comes into view. And not as spectacle – we call those pageants – but rather as address. Hey, you, the angels says, unto YOU a child is born, unto YOU – all of you, through times and space – a child is given. And with the gift of that child came the gift of a person who is the gift of personhood itself.

That’s what Immanuel comes down to, even if it means God is with us in Hebrew. The gift of God’s presence in our lives isn’t a spectacle, despite our annual efforts to bind God tightly in swaddling clothes and lodge him firmly in a manger where we can keep a close eye on him.

No, the real gift of God’s becoming one of us is to give us the gift of ourselves, our true selves, our true personhood, which is another way of saying the gift of life. Is it not, after all, personhood that distinguishes being human from merely existing? Is it not that mysterious mixing of demonic and divine in a free moral agent that makes us a little lower than the angels? And is it not, finally, our awareness of our tragic inability to live our true selves all year round that makes the angel’s announcement on Christmas Day such good news?

Hey, you! Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord. He will save you, if you will let him, from your sins – from your not being the you that God made you to be. His name is Immanuel. God with us. God as us. God as all of us can be.

Is that not, at its heart, the Christmas message? If it is – and I believe that it is – then I can understand perfectly well why no one wants it to be messed with and why, at Christmas, very liberal people like us might become fundamentalists in order to proclaim it and defend it. If that message isn’t worth proclaiming and defending, then what, in God’s name, is?