

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Gospel Reading: Luke 21: 25-36

word count 2,269

The Advent season is a decorating season. Most churches designate a day with names like, “Hanging of the Greens” or some such title, where people with better sense during the rest of the year accept the encouragement of others to climb up on tall ladders holding giant wreaths, and attach them to swinging light fixtures. Last week, Lesley marshaled a small core of volunteers to get us ready for Advent, and didn’t they do a good job?

This is the time when we spend a great deal of energy decorating. A trip to any store will make you aware that the decorating season is upon us, and the old familiar carols are soon to be ruined by repetition at every retail outlet we encounter.

I personally do not decorate for Christmas, and because of this decision, I find joy in the season in other ways. It is not for any theological reason or to make any social statement that I don’t put out decorations, in fact I really enjoy seeing what others have done, especially Carl, who enjoys this burden, and who leaves me a few things to put on the tree to let me think I did something.

Thirty years ago this year, I was employed in seasonal work as a Christmas tree department decorator for a company called, “American Tree and Wreath,” located in the Christmas District of Manhattan, which is appropriately located at 25th St.

American Tree and Wreath produces artificial trees, lights, garland, decorations, and a phantasmagoria of bright, flashing Yuletide tchotkes designed to highlight the true meaning of Christmas in your home.

They were nice enough folk, and as normal as you could expect for people whose calling it is to work in a giant building where it is Christmas all year ‘round. They took training very seriously, showing us over the course of a week all the ins and outs of tree-assembly, attaching lights firmly, and the proper way to swag garland so that it fell in perfect connecting arcs across each tree. We learned to wear utility gloves to avoid cuts and gashes from the trees, and how to bend each tip upward so one would not notice the steel center poles. Each of us was educated in how to explain the theme of each tree to Mr. and Mrs. Christmas Shopper, who would no-doubt want to know.

“The 4.5 foot Presto Pine® is so called, because all you have to do is open the box at the arrow, and remove the tree by its base. Turn it upside down, and... Presto! The branches fall in lifelike proportion. There are no messy parts to assemble—the tree is table-top ready to decorate.

“It only takes two boxes of colored twinkle-brite lights, starting at the top with the first one, winding in a clock-wise fashion until you are two-thirds of the way down. Then, add the second string—it *will* come out even. Follow this with two strands of two-ply silver garland, and you are on your way!

“Now, who doesn’t like Looney Tunes? We have all your favorite characters in 5” lifelike plasticene. There’s Bugs, Daffy, Tweetie, Sylvester, the Roadrunner, Wile E. Coyote, Yosemite Sam and the Tazmanian Devil. Just choose any twelve of your favorite, loveable characters (you might consider buying a couple extra in the *unlikely* event of breakage) and hang one between each tinsel swag. Presto! Its beginning to look a *lot* like Christmas!”

This was the most popular themed tree we sold.

The competition across the street was called Mr. Santa. That year, bitter defectors made

their way over to American Tree and Wreath, explaining how rotten to work for Mr. Santa really is. Mr. Santa was cheap, suspicious, and forced his decorators to wear red Santa hats in every store they went to, from K-Mart to Bloomingdale's. These former employees underscored how fortunate we were to work for such a prestigious enterprise as American Tree and Wreath.

I was perceived to be one of your truly talented, up-and-coming Christmas tree decorators, and so I was made a team leader. This meant that I had a paid-for car and a free garage space on the Upper West Side that would have cost about the same as my rent. What the company did not know was that I was recently from a small town and was prone to getting lost while driving. What the team that was assigned to work with me did not know, was that I am only slightly obsessive about neatness and order, and would want perfection in our work.

Every day I drove my team to the stores to which we were assigned to put up a Christmas department. Occasionally I would make a wrong turn, and people shouted in the car that I should have taken this exit or that. I would not let the team leave the store until the 12-14 Christmas displays we were assigned to put up were in perfect order, with each tree evenly balanced with the proscribed theme. The quiet seething in the car on the way back was palpable.

One red-haired actor on my team, who was unnecessarily rude about my missed exits, told us that he had recently done time in jail because of an issue with his temper. A few days later the good people at American Tree and Wreath called to tell me that they had reassigned him, as he feared that his Christmas decorating road trips with me were too upsetting, and that I would soon have a replacement.

Store customers accused us of ruining Christmas by putting up displays in September and October. The trees chafed our skin almost as much as the constant piped-in Christmas music did our souls. My elves were revolting, and after about the 100th box of defective tree lights, it was clear that Christmas was becoming nothing for me but an enterprise aimed at an external notion of the meaning of the day, and that the customers had every reason to berate us.

Becoming a part of the commercialization of Christmas, and doing it through repeated actions in nameless stores whose bottom line was the financial success of the celebration of the birth of Jesus put me off such things for good.

There are two things to remember about these decorations. First, they are temporary. The tinsel, the trinkets, the lights come down and are stored away until next year. If how we see this season of Advent and what it leads up to comes from the decorations, then once they are dismantled, so too is our understanding of what this time in the calendar is all about, and it gets boxed up with the Presto-Pine® instead of doing what it is supposed to do—reinvigorating us with a sense of wonder; that the Holiness in the presence of hope, peace, joy and love are real and present to us if we would but believe. With this season, we are taught that we can begin again. Second, these decorations are exterior decorations—things seen, not unseen; things outside, not inside; things visible, superficial and artificial, not things of the Spirit.

The exterior decorations we rely upon now to get us in the “Christmas spirit” often do remarkably little to alter the barren landscape of our souls. For me, the Advent workshop is more about the Spirit in the room that says that we are moving towards Holy time together, than it is about the things we create. That’s what makes it such a wonderful afternoon before hearing our choir sing music of the season that we might not hear in department stores. The “getting ready” for the season through all of these beautiful things *points* to the meaning of this time of year, and is not the meaning in itself.

In the end, spray-snow and cartoonish hosiery hung with care reveal little about our hearts. Indeed, they themselves can contribute to a culture filled with people without insides—all exterior,

all appearance, all image. By contrast, the wonder of the actual exterior story of Advent leading to Christmas points in a substantive way to an interior reality. Luke's Gospel reminds us that there will be signs "in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth ..." —all of creation will reflect the stirrings of its Creator's intentions.

Jesus points to a single fig tree which is capable of rightly expressing interior changes. Deep in its roots and heart, the rising sap of spring brings forth sprouts and leaves, decorating the tree with the lush greenery of new life. Jeremiah also uses this language of exterior regeneration to symbolize interior changes when he describes the new branch which will "spring up" from David's line.

The Advent season invites us to consider sprucing up our inner selves and souls along with our homes and offices and churches - interior decorations that will go with all our exterior decorations.

The ornamentations of the season are those that lift up what we are called on to remember every year.

First, there's Mary, whose story is one of love and faith. To her has been assigned a narrative full of angelic annunciation, and a pregnancy that defies the social order of the day. She must travel to a distant and uncomfortable place, making do with a setting that represents a come-down in her expectations.

Second, there's Joseph, whose story is one of justice and compassion. If we were to remove these qualities from the Advent story, it would go something like this:

"When Joseph found that Mary was pregnant, he went to the judges as the Deuteronomic code dictated and denounced her for her betrayal of their marriage compact. Mary, being a woman and without a voice in the court, could say nothing in her defense. So the judges, as prescribed by the Law of Moses, dragged her to the door of her father's house, and there some of Nazareth's leading citizens stoned her until dead."

A "just" person is not the same as a "law-abiding" citizen. "Justice" is not the same thing as "law and order."

One of the greatest mistakes going is the notion that just because something is legal it is moral, or that just because something is questionably moral, it should be illegal. Joseph broke the religious law in not turning in Mary. What he did was illegal; but what he did was just. Justice is not the same thing as legality, as our own ballot initiative processes have taught us on several occasions.

Third, there are the Shepherds, whose story is one of wonder and joy. Luke wants to make a point, which is that it is to simple shepherds that a great mystery is first revealed. They are the ones who spend the most time looking up to the stars in wonder, and they are the ones whose joy is in protecting the weakest among them.

The story of shepherds abiding by their flocks at night while a heavenly host descends upon them violates our logic and stops us cold, because we have lost our sense of the blend of poetry and truth. That is why Christmas is a time to go beyond intellectual curiosity into spiritual curiosity—to say with John Donne, "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me wonder." The reflection of our own faces in the external ornaments of this season should mirror back the inner ornamentation of the season, which is an attitude and atmosphere of wonder, openness, and awe. Shed your super-sophistication, your skepticism, your coolness, and return to a childlike stance and sense of wonder and mystery. The joy of the Advent season goes to the foundation of faith.

Christianity has forgotten the concept of joy perhaps more consistently than any other aspect of Jesus' life and ministry. Our own church's Puritan ancestors were once described as a people

whose biggest fear was that someone, somewhere, might be having a good time. I hope we have progressed beyond that, but I wonder that the maturing cycle of religious communities involves such an absence of joy in their understanding of faith.

Author Elizabeth A. Johnson says, "Jesus was perceived as someone who made merry, and his meals were considered a bit uproarious, very joyful, a taste of the joy of the kingdom in its fullness. Edward Schillebeeckx, who deals at length with these suppers, makes an interesting point: 'At these meals, being sad in Jesus' presence is an existential impossibility. You just could not keep your own sadness in that kind of company.'"¹

Fourth and lastly, is the story of the Magi. The writers of Matthew bring them into the account of the Epiphany to tell about their particular story, which is one of service. Educated and with means, known as both kings and scholar-scientists, they came without a desire to impress, but simply to give the great gifts they had, to worship, and to do so by offering their service to humankind.

Love and Faith, Justice, Wonder and Joy, Service...all these are the interior ornamentation of the season which fill us for the journey towards Bethlehem once again this year, overtaking our doubts and fears about what has filled this year before now.

The exterior decorations of the season are beautiful—the trees and wreaths, even Santa Claus waiting to come after the story has been achieved. But they only point to a greater truth, and after they are boxed up and put away, it is the story itself that lightens our hearts that ends up being the only important one to stay in our hearts. Amen.

Sermon Resources

General. Interior Decorations, Homiletics Magazine

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, Consider Jesus (1990), 55-56.

Scripture for Sunday, Advent 1C

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called "The LORD is our righteousness."

Luke 21: 25-36

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."