



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Making Our Own Christmas Cards

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Malachi 3:1-7

John 14:25-31

We come to this second Sunday in Advent as we continue, in the words of John the Baptist, to “prepare the way of the Lord.”

As we heard in the lighting of the Advent Candles, we remember the words of the ancient prophets of Israel to “look for the coming of the one who will bring justice and righteousness to the earth.”

And that one is Jesus, as that beautiful Advent hymn, “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus” says it well, “Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a king, born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.”

Daniel Clendenin says, “In its simplest terms, the kingdom of God that the birth of Jesus announced and embodied is...mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed ... embrace rather than exclusion...”

The ancient Hebrews had a marvelous word for this kind of life: Shalom. The reign of Christ the King is Peace.

But let’s be honest, this is a tough month to talk about a season of peace, for even as we move forward in Advent and prepare for the birth of the Prince of Peace, our world is filled with disease and despair, discouragement and deceit.

But peace on earth is what the angels promised poor shepherds on the night he was born.

Jesus tells us that peacemakers are blessed, and one of the very last things he said was "Peace I give you, but not as the world gives peace."

The peace Jesus gives describes a life that is whole and complete and points to the prospect of healing, and that is the fullness of Shalom.

We hear this in the words spoken by the prophet Malachi. He is the last prophet in the Old Testament. All we know about Malachi is that his Hebrew name means "my messenger."

The message that came to him was the word that the world was ending. I don't mean that the world was about to be destroyed.

I only mean that the world as it was, barren of hope and empty of God's presence was ending and a new world was beginning.

And it was four hundred years after Malachi that John the Baptist brought that message of the new world, answering Malachi's question of how to return to God with his message to prepare the way of the Lord, "the one who will bring justice and righteousness to the earth," Jesus the Prince of Peace.

The reign of Christ is marked, not by who has the most guns, not through policies of power, but in places and people who serve the suffering, who bring light to the dark places of life, who, yes, prepare the way for the Prince of Peace.

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Maybe you're sitting there thinking this is some Christmas-cookie way of living that is not grounded in the way the world works.

But that's just it; this is Jesus' peace, not the world's peace.

So how do we send the message of what it means to you and me that Christ is born and reigns as the Prince of Peace in our world? Maybe in this time of disconnections, a place to start is with an old-fashioned way of messaging: Christmas Cards!

I've looked around at the cards being offered, and I found that there are three basic values or themes which seem to show up most in Christmas cards.

One is a secular or commercial theme, a picture of Santa Claus and a bag full of toys over his back.

It's easy to say that the true meaning of Christmas is exploited by commercial interests.

Yet this is where the gospel was born, where the roads of secular and spiritual, commercial, residential, theological all meet at one great intersection.

We Christians live in that world, and we have something to say. But this card doesn't say it.

In addition to the blatantly commercial or secular cards on the market there are a great many that I would categorize as sentimental.

In this category of card, I would include those that show pictures of the home and hearth with a warm, cozy fire, and stockings hung over the fireplace mantel.

It seems fitting that we should uphold family life at Christmas. After all, what is Christmas but the story of the holy family traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem under the oppressive politics of Rome and from Bethlehem to Egypt and back to Bethlehem as refugees escaping the violence of Herod the King?

But this is not the card that would tell that story.

And thinking about Mary and Joseph leads us to the third category of cards that I've found.

It is one you might imagine a minister would choose, the traditional picture of the nativity scene.

As I considered this card, I realized that most are a stylized, conventional interpretation that is far removed from the very primitive scene of the darkness and earthiness and mystery of the night when Jesus was born.

It has been cleaned up and decorated with Martha Stewart-like simplicity and neatness that misses the deep meaning of Christmas: A child, but no ordinary child, one who has come to rule over a special kind of kingdom, a certain humility and weakness, the opposite of human power.

I've spoken of the secular, the sentimental, and the traditional as three categories of Christmas cards.

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But there should be a fourth category of Christmas cards, a Christmas card that somehow expresses the faith of Christian living in 2020 and is true to the story of Jesus' birth.

I looked and couldn't find one. And that's when it occurred to me...what so many are doing in 2020 is creating their own cards.

So, what would making our own Christmas card look like?

This is what I've thought of. First of all, it would be shaped like a cell phone. In this age of instant communication, what other way to give a message about the good news?

And then, we live in a pandemic world, so I thought about a picture of an ambulance; and because of people all around the world being infected, I would make it a flying ambulance, like angels in the night sky, to remind us that we desperately need some peace and healing all around the world, not just for us.

I would have that ambulance flying through a sky painted in thunderous, stormy, blood-red colors of the religious and political leaders in Israel frightened by the news of this king to be born.

They attempted to suppress the truth, living by the lies of their power, and eventually used that power to assault the innocent and vulnerable in their world.

That's the atmosphere in which Christmas was born.

I would put that ambulance flying over a church; not a quaint clapboard church of old New England, but a church of all doors, open for everyone.

And that's why I would have that church where everyone could get to it, not in some neighborhood set apart by the economics of who can buy a house there or gated by fear or race or privilege.

This church would be like that stable, in the muck and the mire of life at that great intersection where anyone and everyone could get to it.

And I would want a cross, not necessarily on the church but out front, for everyone to see; near the intersection where God meets us in this baby...that crossroad of life where all sorts of people come together.

And I would want to put people in the picture: young people like Mary, anxious about the changes in her life, faithful and courageous in the choices that she's having to make...and people like Joseph, good people, people of integrity, prayerful people.

And older people like Anna and Simeon who had waited for the coming of the Lord...and the shepherds, poor, low-class, hard-working...and the magi, people of a different culture, different religion...

All of them part of the picture of faithful living in the name of the Prince of Peace.

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That would be my Christmas card, with a message inside that said: *“In the Christ child, we hold peace; In the Christ child, peace heals us.”*

I pray that is our message, *“In the Christ child, we hold peace; In the Christ child, peace heals us.”*

I pray that is our life: To be a messenger of God preparing the way of the Lord as a faithful descendant of the prophet Malachi, in the words of Jesus: Peace be with you.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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