

“God Bless Us Everyone”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
December 24th, 2012
Christmas Eve *Candlelight*

John 1:1-14, Luke 1:26-38, Luke 1:39-45,
Luke 2:1-7, Matt. 2:1-8, Luke 2:8-20,
Matt. 1:9-12

[The angels said,] “Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God.”

Luke 2:14

Let us pray... O God,

Christmas-time is here and we praise you for our faith tradition
of family get-togethers, carol-singing, gift-giving, tree-trimming,
and good eating.

Thank you for being a God who would come into this world as one of us,
to share the joys and challenges of being human –

Thank you for being our God.

Thank you for setting an example of compassion, mercy, and generosity
for how we should treat one another.

Amen

What is ‘Christmas’ to you? How do you visualize ‘Christmas’?

What really makes it ‘Christmas’ for you?

Snow, right?

Even though we are all here in FL, don’t we still hold onto that image
of a snowy, New England town-square
with the Congregational church cheerfully lit
and the songs of a choir floating on a clear, crisp evening?

Being from the Northeast, that’s a natural for me –

and I expect that’s also true for those of you from regions colder than here.

Christmas lights –

even here in sunny FL, we can find streets lined with houses
lit up with all kinds of displays up to and including the Cottom Farm
which some of us saw last week on the hayride.

We had a tractor rather than a ‘one horse open sleigh’,

but we sang ‘Jingle Bells’ and other carols and

had cookies and hot cocoa when we got back to Fellowship Hall.

Christmas caroling – that brings to mind, pictures of people from the 1800s –

men in top hats and women in bonnets, all wrapped up against the cold and
caroling as they went from house to house on snowy streets.

Songs of ‘Good Christian Men’ ‘Hark(ing to hear) the Herald Angels Sing’

about ‘What Child Is This’, ‘Away in a Manger’.

Willard, p.2

Santa Claus –

Immigrants brought St. Nicholas, Father Christmas, and the Belsnickel with them from Europe to America to be synthesized as Santa Claus and stylized with a white beard, red outfit, and driving a reindeer sleigh.

Christmas trees were another European transplant, though originally fitted with lighted candles.

And that first glimpse of the tree all lit up on Christmas morning, loaded with presents underneath – gifts to be given as well as gifts received.

Then there is food – the table spread with various and sundry good things to eat – ham and turkey, mashed potatoes, green beans and almonds, cranberry sauce, baked goodies, and candy.

Feasting on good food takes us back to the Middle Ages of Europe with all manner of food and drink – perhaps not as appealing to modern palates, but savory enough for the people back then.

Live Nativities – they also have their origin back in the medieval era, thanks to Francis of Assisi in the 12th Century.

The customary donkey, cow, and sheep were most likely on hand for a Nativity then – though maybe a llama, too, these days.

The Nativity was – and is, an attempt to get ‘back to the basics’ of that first Christmas Eve when we imagine

Mary & Joseph huddled over baby Jesus in a feed-trough, all trying to keep warm in a stable, while shepherds and their sheep share the scene with three foreigners dressed like kings.

In the Bible however, there is no mention of a stable, but rather a manger – a place for animals to eat hay.

No mention of the sheep either, and the three wisemen don’t arrive until Mary and the baby are in a house there in Nazareth which could be days, weeks, months or more later.

For that matter it is questionable whether Christ was born in the Winter – when flocks would not be able to find pasture in unproductive fields, and that it was more likely in the early Autumn.

<http://christiananswers.net/christmas/mythsaboutchristmas.html>

Someone, sometime in the Roman Empire picked a date – in fact, to set the official universal calendar starting date according to the birth of Jesus Christ, despite the Mayan Calendar.

Willard, p.3

We have come a long way from that first Christmas –
but imagining what it was like 2,000 years ago is approximate at best.
Christmas seems to have changed and been transformed through centuries
and not always for the good.

It seems that in the past few decades, Christmas has become even more
materialistic and syncretistic – commercial and generic.

By the early 1800s,

English people were indifferent towards
the celebration and spirit of Christmas.

This was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution
brought on by new technologies for manufacturing and power.

Someone emerged during this era who – almost single-handedly,
revitalized the observance and celebration of Christmas in his time.

In his writings, author Charles Dickens

had been challenging unjust working conditions – especially for children,
and bringing attention to the unfair treatment of Britain's poor
when he started to write about Christmas traditions
that had been suppressed or had fallen into indifference,

His novella, "A Christmas Carol", in particular,
stimulated a renewed interest in the celebration of Christmas,
charitable giving, insight for needed social reform,
and gave British and American societies much of what
Christmas has come to mean.

Charles Dickens grew up in poverty, so he could write with authority about it –
and he did, becoming a very successful author in his own time.

Yet, it came about that he was short of cash to maintain his home
and support his family of 5 children.

So, out of this necessity, he wrote "A Christmas Carol" –
that became a labor of love for which he devoted himself to publish,
fronting publication costs to do so.

It was a success and had the effect of reigniting interest in Christmas traditions –
as well as the Christmas Spirit – or spirits in the transformation of
Ebenezer Scrooge.

You know the story...

Ebenezer Scrooge is a bitter, financial investor who treats
his one employee with contempt, his only relative with indifference,
and himself no better than everyone else,
dismissing the sentiments of Christmas as 'humbug'.

Willard, p.4

One Christmastide, he is visited by his dead partner, Jacob Marley's spirit who warns him of his fate if he doesn't change his hard-hearted ways. Three successive spirits visit Scrooge to show him scenes of his past, present, and possible future in the context of Christmas. Confronted with the errors of his ways, his hardened heart is opened up to love and care about people again, beginning with his clerk, Bob Cratchit and family – especially making sure the Cratchit's crippled child, Tiny Tim, got the help he needed.

I found one source that made this claim:

...it was the Christmas stories of Dickens, particularly his 1843 masterpiece A Christmas Carol, that rekindled the joy of Christmas in Britain and America. Today, after more than 160 years, A Christmas Carol continues to be relevant, sending a message that cuts through the materialistic trappings of the season and gets to the heart and soul of the holidays.

<http://www.allairevillage.org/events/description/ChristmasCarol.html>

In its day, Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol' had a powerful effect on British society and beyond.

Public readings of it inspired charitable giving at

After reading it, an American industrialist closed his factory on Christmas Day and gave all his workers a turkey for their dinners.

The Queen of Norway was inspired to make a donation for crippled children in Britain signed with the sentiment, "With Tiny Tim's love."

Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" and other writings have continued to influence the world and make a difference echoing that simple Gospel message of the Golden Rule and Jesus' words, 'When you did it for the least of these, you did it to me.'

Charles Dickens was just one person and his words helped make a difference to transform the society of his day – especially for the sake of children, who are always our hope for the future.

We are living in a time when our society desperately needs transformation – though it remains to be seen what direction that will take.

Yet, in this season of celebrating the birth of a child – Jesus Christ, who changed the world,

let us be bold to ask for the gift of becoming that 'beloved community' that is possible, 'on Earth as it is in Heaven.'

In the words of Tiny Tim, 'God bless us everyone!'

Amen