

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
11th December 2011
Advent 3

There was a man who said he was sent by God, and his name was John.
He came as a witness on behalf of those who needed a Messiah.
His theology was somewhat obscure, but he was not the light.
This is the testimony given by John when some people confronted him and said, "Christmas isn't Christian enough!"
He went about the countryside, proclaiming their news. He went to Wal-Mart, he went to Kohl's. He went to schools and he went to the City Council, proclaiming, "Christmas isn't Christian enough!"
As I have written, his theology was somewhat obscure, somewhat light, but he was not the light.

Perhaps you've read about this in the news – that certain groups of Christians want the Christ put back in Christmas. "It's not Winter Vacation," he proclaimed to the schools, "It is Christmas vacation!" "It's not a Holiday Sale," he proclaimed to K-Mart, "It's a Christmas Sale!" Several years ago, when then-Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia sent out a press release announcing plans for a "holiday tree" lighting, he was bombarded – and half an hour later his office sent out another press release saying, "It is in fact a Christmas tree."

Somebody's was busy in the Governor's office!

Well, that's all very well and good for those of us who are Christian. I mean, we certainly need to be reminded of the basic truth of Christmas, the Incarnation of God Almighty right here on earth, in the person of Jesus Christ, born of our sister Mary. And I, for one, gladly and cheerfully wish all and sundry "Merry Christmas" – because that is how I designate the holiday!

But is it the responsibility of Kohl's Department Store to spread the Good News of God in Christ? Is it the responsibility of the City of Mount Pleasant? or of Central Michigan University?

I don't think so, and I find this attempt to relegate our responsibility as People of God, as the Church, to secular institutions who serve all sorts of people, quite disturbing. I mean, if we're expecting them to proclaim the Good News, might that not mean that we -- you and I -- aren't doing it very well?

Perhaps this guy John would want to really cleanse the holiday. Perhaps he'd like to go on a spree -- let's get rid of those Pagan Christmas trees! Mistletoe? YIKES! Pagan! Advent candles?!? Oh, no, that's a Scandanavian, pre-Christian celebration of the return of the Sun!

And perhaps this guy John would like to explain his purity to your children.

Perhaps he'd like to explain why he needs the local department store to remind him that it's Christmas. Maybe he just wants to show our non-Christian brothers and sisters that we have a real holiday!

There was an article in the New York Times six years ago that I found quite disturbing. Perhaps you remember it. The title of the article is, When Christmas Falls on Sunday, Megachurches Take the Day Off, and it reports that some of the nations most prominent megachurches had decided not to hold worship services on the Sunday that coincides with Christmas Day. They say it's in keeping with their "family friendly" approach to churchgoing. They complained that back in 1994, the last time Christmas fell on a Sunday, church attendance that morning was "sparse."

Well, in a church of 20,000 members, what constitutes "sparse?" Did a meager four thousand people show up?

One church, New Birth Missionary Baptist in Georgia, with 25,000 members, is offering streaming video on Christmas Sunday morning. The head minister of that church envisions members having the option "to join their family around the computer and worship with us."

Bless our own Robert Williams, a spokesperson for the Episcopal Church USA, who said, "I can't even imagine not observing Christmas in an Episcopal Church."

And a classmate of mine, chiming in on our own e-mail discussion, asked, “Isn’t Sunday a sacred day? When were we encouraged to skip the Lord’s day?”

OK, OK, the liturgical truth is that if you celebrate a major feast the night before, which is called its “vigil,” you have legitimately fulfilled your obligation. I’m not sure that applies to Sundays, but if it’s good enough for Rome, it’s may be good enough for me.

However...

John Witvliet of Calvin College, asked, “What about the people in society without strong family connections? The elderly, single people a long distance from family, or people who are simply lonely [or spiritually hungry] and for whom church and worship would be a significant part of their day?”

Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary, got right to the point, I think: “The real question,” he said, “is not why churches are skipping Christmas, but why individual Christians are skipping church on the second holiest day of the Christian calendar next to Easter.”

Now... Please... I do not want you to leave today thinking that I’ve been trying to guilt you into attending St. John’s on Sunday, December 25th. Really. Honest. Personally, I cannot imagine trying to corral the kids on Christmas morning, “No, honey, no presents until we go to Church. Santa Claus doesn’t come until 10 o’clock.” I cannot imagine trying to attend Church with any sense of spiritual peace while also entertaining relatives from near and far who we dearly love and whose tradition is to gather for every holiday. I even understand those who stay up until midnight for a French reveillon celebration – and those who truly feel that Christmas is celebrated at our wonderful service Christmas Eve.

It is! You are all OK with me! Honest!

But the thought of not offering a service on Christmas morning, whether on Sunday or not, but especially since it is a Sunday, is just, somehow, weird to me. Wouldn’t that imply to the rest of society that in some strange way, for Christians worship is optional?

And that brings me to the last and best news of the morning.

When we celebrate the Eucharist here at St. John's, it is not just the people who are physically gathered who are celebrating. No.

When we make Eucharist, even just two or three of us, we are celebrating on behalf of all the saints – past, present, and yet to come – and that includes all of us.

I suspect I'd feel kind of odd if I didn't know that somewhere God was not being praised on Christmas morning. And I would be somehow blessed knowing that just down the street, or in the next town, a few people were gathered in prayer – for me and with me.

By the way, this does not mean you don't need to be here on other Sundays!

When Zach, or Martha, or Sally, or Peg, or Sandy, or Harry, or Karen and I pray on a Wednesday noon, we are praying for the whole church and on behalf of the whole church. When six or seven of us celebrate Mass on Christmas morning we will be celebrating for you and with you who are at home! You will be in our hearts, just as you are in the heart of the Jesus who loves us.

But think about this, please.

Is it really necessary for the J.C. Penney's or Target to mention "Christmas" in their sales flyers? Does that make you feel more Christian? Does it spread the Gospel message to feed the hungry and clothe the poor? Does it send a message of inclusivity or exclusivity? of welcome?

Second. How would you feel if every church closed its doors on Christmas morning?

Christmas is a season, it's not just a one-off holiday. It is a time to remember that God came to earth in human form to draw us back to him. God came to earth in the form of Jesus Christ so

that we might understand a bit more about God, and that we might once again -- and for good -
- know that God loves us extravagantly, wildly – he's crazy about us.

And so we, as a Church, proclaim that good news.

It's not up to Wal-Mart. It's up to us. Amen.