

## **MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM MOZAMBIQUE!**

Micah 5:2-5a

I John 3:1-3

Sermon presented by The Rev. Dr. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church, Huntington, New York, on December 24, 2006 (Morning Service)

Changes in Christmas cards may tell a thing or two about changes in society. According to the Greeting Card Association, the overall number of holiday cards continues to decline. However, and this may relate to the “multi-tasking” that’s so much a part of life these days, there’s an increase in cards that combine holiday greetings with some other purpose – for example, notices about moving, births, save-the-date announcements, and so forth. Card professionals call this “double dipping,” and it’s increased by 30% in recent years. Some people looking for a job now include their resumes with their Christmas card, as recommended by some recruiting firms, although the President of one firm in Manhattan advises that the job seeker follow-up the card with an e-mail in early January. So things are changing in the greeting card world. The single biggest change, though, which has been taking place for years now, is the shift from religious to non-religious cards. Less than 10% of all Christmas cards now are religious. The most common image on a card these days is a snowman.

The George Eastman House and Museum in Rochester has a collection of Christmas cards, especially those using photographs, dating back to 1905. Scholars have studied the collection, to learn how Christmas cards reflect changing cultural norms. Joy Lewis, a curator at the museum, observes that one characteristic of Christmas messages that has remained fairly constant is that they frequently doctor, exaggerate or fudge the truth. She cites an example of a wealthy couple in the 1940s who loved to hunt together. They showed-off their prosperity by sending a card each year picturing them at their latest adventure, in safari outfits, with exotic animals. “Merry Christmas from Kilimanjaro” the card read one year, and there they were, in a safari jeep, a zebra in the background. “Merry Christmas from Nyasaland!” was another, the jaunty couple posing in front of a wild boar. It was their annual declaration of the splendid life of the idle rich. “Merry Christmas from Mozambique!” But wait, Dr. Lewis says. Look closely at this card and this picture. The leopard’s neck is crooked in an unusual way. It’s stuffed. And look very closely at the background. It’s a studio. This couple apparently never made it to Africa that year. Why? Who knows why. Maybe they suffered a financial reversal, or family tragedy. Maybe there was sickness or estrangement or emotional collapse, or any of the ailments that can undermine well-being. But whatever the reality of their situation, they couldn’t bring themselves to admit it or accept it, so they faked it. “Merry Christmas from Mozambique!” But not so, not really.

We may think, “no big deal.” When we get Christmas cards and messages we may allow for a certain measure of misstatement or overstatement, especially with those newsy letters. The Christmas letter says: “Eric has been living in Colorado for ten months now, and free spirit that he is, we don’t know where his sense of adventure will take him next”; but we know the truth: “Eric is still a ski bum, mostly jobless, and we don’t where he’ll land when the girl he’s with finally smartens up and kicks him out.” The letter says: “Although Melanie made the Dean’s List, she realized she’d picked the wrong major, and decided to experience the real world before

returning to college”; but we know the story: “Although Melanie’s name is indeed on several lists maintained in the Dean’s Office, actually she flunked out, moved back home, and insists she’s looking for work, but we haven’t seen much evidence of it yet.” The letter says: “Mom and Pop are still in good health, and enjoy many outings with their fun-loving friends”; the truth is: “Mom and Pop take the bus to Atlantic City every Wednesday, and are rapidly spending-down any inheritance we hoped to receive.” Merry Christmas from Mozambique! We may expect a little truth-stretching.

But Christmas declares and demonstrates a different truth. In Jesus Christ God showed his all-surpassing love for us as we are -- in our current condition, in our present predicament. Every detail of this remarkable story teaches how unremarkable it was, as a matter of history: that Jesus Christ came as an infant, by outer appearance no different from any other, rather than as monarch or superman; that he was born to Mary and Joseph, a mere ordinary couple without rank or standing; that the birth took place in obscure Bethlehem, one of the little places of Judah, Scripture reports, hardly worth noting on a map, and that their trip to Bethlehem was forced by a bureaucratic decree which Mary and Joseph lacked the influence to ignore; that there was no room at an inn, but rather as faceless nobodies in an unfamiliar town Mary and Joseph were dependent on the hospitality of strangers; in all these ways we may see that at the center of the Nativity story is the decision of God to enter the human situation in its ordinariness.

In Jesus Christ God calls us to repentance, and to a new way of life. It is not the will or the way of God to leave us as He finds us. “God imparts to human hearts/the blessings of his heaven.” The heart is transformed by the power of God. But God first comes to us as we are, in our current condition, in our present predicament. Are we able to accept ourselves as we are, be done with phoniness and falsehood, and live the truth in this world of illusion? Paul Tillich used to say the fact is that you are accepted; the great challenge and obstacle to faith is to accept the fact that you are accepted.

William C. Moyers, son of TV commentator and author Bill Moyers, was for years a closet alcoholic and crack cocaine addict. Now in recovery, Moyers works for the Hazelden Foundation in Minnesota. He addressed a recent conference at MIT on how brain chemistry affects addiction. Moyers encouraged researchers to continue their important work. “I have an illness with origins in the brain,” he said. But, he continued:

I also suffered with the other components of this illness, I was born with what I like to call a hole in my soul . . . A pain that came from the reality that I just wasn’t good enough. That I wasn’t deserving enough. That you weren’t paying attention to me all the time. That maybe you didn’t like me enough.

His is not an isolated nor a rare confession. To a greater or lesser extent such a “hole in the soul” afflicts a great many, perhaps even some here today. Will you come to the manger this Christmas, and find there the most perfect expression of God’s love? God does not seek value but creates it. God does not come to us because we are lovely but we become lovely as we reflect the glory of his coming. God does not measure the good we accomplish, but brings good out of the evil we do.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are,” it is written, in the Book of I John, Chapter 3. Children of God. Yes, that is who we are. All thanks be to God for this greatest of all Christmas promises!

I was having a picture taken, and the photographer was having a difficult time getting it quite right. Too much light, not enough; too much smile, not enough; glare from my glasses, take them off, no, put them back on; now there’s a shadow; and on it went. Finally, I joked: why don’t you just take a picture, then with digital techniques superimpose Brad Pitt’s face on my body, or attach Brad Pitt’s body to my face, whichever works better. And the photographer thought for a moment, and said: “I don’t think it’s going to fool anybody, either way.” I am what I am. Truth be known, I didn’t make it to Mozambique this year, either. But there’s no reason to lie and say I did. Here’s the Good News: God calls me His own child! God loves me as I am – in my present predicament, in my current condition. Yes, God loves me. All thanks be to God!