

WE DON'T NEED A LITTLE CHRISTMAS

Carlos E. Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 3:1-6

“Prepare the way of the Lord...”

Luke 3:4b

Somewhere between Housewares and Sporting Goods, you may hear it. It may enter your consciousness as you're examining the latest smartphone accessories over in Electronics. Or, you may find yourself unconsciously humming the tune, as you're searching Amazon.com for that perfect ugly Christmas sweater:

**“For we need a little Christmas,
Right this very minute,
Candles in the window,
Carols at the spinet.
Yes, we need a little Christmas,
Right this very minute,
Need a little Christmas now!”**

In the Broadway musical, *Mame*, that song comes at a low point for several of the characters — Auntie Mame herself included. So, “Haul out the holly,” she sings. “Put up the tree before my spirit falls again.”

I know a lot of people who are entertaining similar thoughts this Advent season. We've got a military standoff in Korea. In Washington, the partisan divide has never been so intense. California's on fire. And every day seems to bring

another sexual misconduct scandal, perpetrated by men in high places.

Little wonder that so many of us are wanting to join Auntie Mame in putting up the tree before our spirits fall again.

There's nothing wrong with needing a little Christmas. It's what so many are searching for, on their expeditions through the wilds of the shopping mall. Armed with checklists and coupons, supplied with sensible shoes and plenteous plastic charge cards, these latter-day explorers are wise in the ways of merchandising.

They're looking for the perfect gift: an expression of love (or, at the very least, high personal regard). It's a wonderful, caring thing to do, Christmas shopping. And it's fun, most of the time. That is, until you encounter one too many surly clerks... or discover that the perfect sweater you've chosen is excluded from the sale prices... or realize, to your dismay, that this shopping trip has gone on far too long, and you're footsore, and hungry, and weary.

Then, you may well find yourself humming,

**Yes, we need a little Christmas,
Right this very minute,
Need a little Christmas now!**

So, where are you going to find that "little Christmas"? Over where the kids are lining up to see Santa Claus? Or in the twinkling panoply of lights that hang

from the neighbors' gutters? Maybe you'll find it in the annual labor of picking out a tree: searching out that perfectly symmetrical evergreen — well, maybe not so perfect, but you're tired of the quest, and this one will do — and tying it on the roof of the car, and driving home, for all the world to see that here's a person who keeps Christmas, and maybe we ought to get our Christmas tree too.

All of us need a little Christmas from time to time... or think we do. Yet as wonderful and as warm and as beneficent as the American Christmas is, I don't think the Little Christmas what you or I really need.

All of us have heard, I trust, that the weeks leading up to Christmas are the time when the greatest number of suicides take place. It's a season when many feel depressed. These evenings meant to be filled with "candles in the window, carols at the spinet" are precisely the time when those who have lost loved ones may feel their loss most intensely. They may privately fear that they're losing their grip.

No, a Little Christmas is not what we need. What you and I — and all the world — *do* need is the great Christmas, the coming of our savior Jesus Christ into the world. It is his coming that is foretold by John the Baptist in the wilderness. Our Gospel-writer Luke tells the tale:

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

It's no accident that Luke begins his story of Jesus' ministry with this catalogue of the high and mighty of his day. Tiberius was stepson to the great Caesar Augustus. He'd been the compromise candidate for emperor, after there turned out to be no biological heir and after all the palace intrigues turned sour. He was neither well-loved nor well-respected.

Pilate clawed his way up the steep ladder of Roman middle-management to his position as procurator of Judea. He would rise no higher. From the moment Pilate began his rule, he displayed a remarkable gift for antagonizing his Jewish subjects. He was both despised and feared.

Herod was an unbalanced and dangerous personality, designated “King of the Jews” by the Roman authorities. Though he himself was a Jew, Herod spent as much money building pagan temples as he did maintaining the great Temple in Jerusalem. He spent little time in the capital, preferring the warm sun and gentle breezes of his seaside retreat in Galilee. Anyone he suspected of disloyalty — and there were many — he had murdered.

Less is known of the personal qualities of Herod's brother Philip and of Lysanias — the other two rulers Luke mentions. Suffice it to say that Herod's is not the only crowned head in that region. Luke also drops the names of Annas and Caiaphas, the priestly leaders of the Temple hierarchy — demonstrating, perhaps, that these men are more political than religious at the core.

Yet, when the word of God comes, it comes not to Tiberius, nor to Pilate, nor to Herod. It comes not to the priestly leaders of the temple, Caiaphas and Annas. The word of the Lord comes to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

“John who?” This man's a nobody. He's son of Zechariah, a local priest, that's all. And *where* does Word of God come to him? Not in city or town, not in marble palace or distinguished academy, but in the wilderness. In “flyover country!” The word of God passes clean over every eminent personage of the day, and alights instead upon the broad and hairy shoulders of this wild man, he of the fiery eyes and the gravelly voice and the unkempt hair.

Throughout the history of Israel, it is from out of the wilderness that true prophets come. The wilderness, in the scriptures, is not so much a barren desert — as we so often imagine it — as simply a wild place. It's a country where you have to be clever and resourceful — and also a little lucky — to survive. It's a place where you're cast, day after day, upon your own devices. If you make it,

you emerge calloused, sinewy and strong.

John's message is simple: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Live as the Lord would have you live. Be generous, honest, cause offense to no one."

If John had stopped there, he would have sounded like any other great prophet. But there's more John has to say — much more. From the verses that follow this morning's reading: **"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."**

There's nothing in that speech of John's that sounds like a Little Christmas, is there? No, what John's proclaiming with such great passion Great Christmas: the coming of God's son, Jesus Christ, into the world.

**In the first year of the presidency of Donald Trump,
when John Roberts was chief justice of the Supreme Court,
and Chris Christie was in his final weeks as governor of New
Jersey;
when Angela Merkel spoke for the European Union,
and Xi Jinping was General Secretary of the Communist Party of
China,
the word of God came...
to you and to me,
in the midst of our Christmas preparations.**

Where are you going to hear the word of God this Christmas? Not over the

mall's public-address system, I can guarantee you that. Not amidst the cheerful din of the office holiday party. Not on the school bulletin board, either, thumbtacked up there along with the cutout figures of Rudolph and Frosty and Santa.

No matter who happens to be serving as President, the word of God won't reside in the Oval Office, either. For the Spirit of God shuns the halls of worldly power, even as it passes over places of comfort and complacency and merriment. The word of God seeks out, instead, those places where life is lived simply and honestly, close to the earth — and those times, especially, when living appears difficult, demanding, even painful.

Maybe, this year, you're numbered among those frazzled masses who feel they need a Little Christmas, and so you're frantically seeking for one, wherever you may find it. Holiday merriment you may well discover, for a time — but the Great Christmas of Jesus the Messiah is likely to elude you, until you're ready at last to lay aside all those holiday doings — the trivial pursuits — and simply *be*.

Lots of us, at Christmas, are desperately seeking happiness, but happiness is not ultimately the point. It's joy we're really after. There's a difference, you know, between happiness and joy. Happiness, you and I can very often achieve, by dint of our own effort (although that same happiness is also notoriously elusive, likely

to slip away at precisely that moment we think we've got it caged up).

Joy — at Christmas or any other time — is different. Joy steals up, unexpectedly, unbidden. It thrills and surprises. It transports the lucky recipient, for a few giddy moments, into a place of indescribable beauty. And — unlike happiness — joy leaves the recipient not hungering for more, but satisfied and grateful.

The playwright Moss Hart, in his autobiography, describes an experience he had of finding the Great Christmas — although he had a hard time recognizing it for what it truly is. It was early in the twentieth century, when he was a boy of ten years, and his family was living in New York City.

The Harts were not a wealthy clan, and because of their poverty, young Moss was surprised one night when his father said “Let’s go downtown.” The two of them, father and son, set out on a walk “down to 149th Street,” a part of town where, in that era, pushcarts full of toys were lined up for Christmas shoppers.

Moss knew his dad was going to buy him a Christmas present, but he also wondered how. Thinking back on that day years later, he figured his father might have had all of seventy-five cents in his pocket. As they walked by those carts, heaped high with the stuff of a young boy’s imagination, Moss saw all kinds of

toys he wanted. But each time, his father would ask the price, and after some whispering between him and the vendor, they'd quietly move on to the next cart. All the while, Moss could hear his father fingering the coins in his pocket.

So it went, from one pushcart to the next. Nothing the boy wanted could be purchased for the few coins his father had. Here's how Moss Hart describes his feelings, years later:

“As I looked up at him I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I had ever been in my life. I wanted to throw my arms around him and say, ‘It doesn’t matter... I understand... this is better than a chemistry set or a printing press... I love you!’ But instead we stood shivering beside each other for a moment — then turned away from the last two pushcarts and started silently back home. I don’t know why the words remained choked up within me. I didn’t even take his hand on the way home, nor did he take mine. We were not on that basis. Nor did I ever tell him how close I felt that night — that for a little while the concrete wall between father and son had crumbled away and I knew that we were two lonely people struggling to reach each other.”

As alluring as the Little Christmas is, there are times when it can be a stumbling block, preventing us from reaching the Great Christmas. “Rings and jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts,” writes Ralph Waldo Emerson. “The only true gift is a portion of thyself.”

Bible scholar and preacher Eugene Peterson tells of a time when he found joy (or rather, when joy found him). It was when he witnessed the birth of his

granddaughter (the first time he'd ever been permitted into a delivery room, an experience that had not been offered to him when his own children were born):

“I have climbed mountain peaks that gave me views of glaciated mountains in wave after wave of ranges, but none of those breathtaking vistas was comparable to seeing that baby enter the world; I have heard the most delicate and exquisite birdsong and some of the best musicians in the world, but no sounds rivaled the cry of that baby.

I was a latecomer to this experience that is common to most fathers today and common to the human race as a whole. Does anyone ever get used to this? I was captured by the wonder of life, the miracle of life, the mystery of life, the glory of life.

The day after the birth I was in the grocery store getting some vegetables and grains for the family. There were several mothers shopping up and down the aisles with young children in tow — many of them were snarling and snapping at the over-lively, curiosity-filled, energy-splattering kids. I wanted to grab the mothers, embrace them, ‘Do you realize what you have done? You have given birth to a child, a child — this miracle, this wonder, this glory? You’re a Madonna! Why aren't you in awe and on your knees with the magi, with the shepherds?’ Luckily I restrained myself; ‘Madonna’ probably would not have had the same meaning for them as it had for me.”

The Little Christmas is not peopled by visions such as these. Only the Great Christmas, the Christmas of the newborn king of heaven and earth, provides such expansive vistas.

My hope, for all of you, is that these remaining days of Advent — in unexpected and unscripted moments — will bring you bright bursts of happiness,

large and small. May you enjoy the candles and the carols and the Christmas trees. May you enjoy even the shopping and the cooking and the last-minute errands. Yet, when everything is said and done, may you also hear — as though you were standing on the banks of the Jordan yourself — the voice of John the Baptist, announcing that one is coming who is far mightier than he. Then, may you find your way not to the mall, but to the manger. Then, may you ask yourself the question, posed in our next hymn:

**“O Lord, how shall I meet you? How welcome you aright?
Your people long to greet you, my hope, my heart’s delight!
O kindle, Lord most holy, a lamp within my breast,
To do in spirit lowly all that will please you best.”**

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