

December 13, 2009 Reading and Sermon

READING: *By Chris Dolson, pastor of the Shreveport Bible Church, Shreveport, Louisiana.*

Joy to the Mall!

An American parody of Luke 2.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from the U.S. Treasury, that all of America should go shopping. (And this decree was first made when leading economic indicators dipped to their lowest point.) .And all went out to shop, each to his own mall.

And a Christian also went up from his suburban home to the city with its many malls because he wanted to prove he was from the household of prosperity, and with him was his wife, who was great with economic worry.

And so it was, that, while they were there, they found many expensive presents, pudgy-faced dolls, trucks that turn into robots, and a various assortment of video games And the woman wrote checks for those they could afford and charged the rest on many; different kinds of plastic cards; she wrapped the presents in bright paper and laid them in the garage; for there was no room for them in her closet. And there were in the same county children keeping watch over their stockings by night. And, Santa Claus came upon them; and they were sore afraid (expecting to see the special effects thy had seen in the movies), And Santa said to them, "Fear not; for behold, I~bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people who can- Afford this holiday. For unto you will be given this day, in your suburban home, great feasts of turkey, dressing, and cake-and many presents. And this shall be a sign unto you: you shall find the presents, wrapped in bright paper, lying beneath an artificial tree adorned with tinsel, colored balls, and lights."

And suddenly there was with Santa Claus a multitude of relatives and friends, praising ant' another and saying, "Glory to you for getting me this gift; it's just what 1 wanted."

And it came to pass, as the friends and relatives were gone away into their own homes, the parents said to one another, "I sure am glad that's over. What a mess! I'm too tired to clean it up now. Let's go to bed and pick it up tomorrow." And when they had said this, they remembered the statement that had been told to them by the storekeepers: "Christmas comes only once a year." And they that heard it wondered at those things that were sold to them by the storekeepers, But the children treasured all their things in their hearts, hoarding their toys from each other. And the parents, after a drink, went to bed, glorifying and praising each other for all the bargains they had found in the stores.

SERMON

Getting What You Wish For

Dec 13, 2009

Many years ago my nephew John received from Santa Claus, a Public Broadcasting children's video tape called "Road Construction." Throughout the year he has watched this children's visual commentary on heavy equipment construction vehicles, over and over again with an undaunted fascination. The endless repetition of backhoes, bulldozers, steam shovels and dump trucks had never lost their intrigue for John and he modeled his Christmas list around all of the possibilities inherent in acquiring such an array of machinery for his personal use. Unfortunately his vast matchbox collection no longer sufficed as a viable alternative.

That same year, in the throes of our' family gathering for Thanksgiving, (as had happened repeatedly on Thanksgiving Day,) the sewer system thoughtlessly and inappropriately backed up. This time, massive doses of "Liquid Plumber" proved

as futile as shooting spitballs at Attila the Hun. Even our friendly midnight hero, the Roto-Rooter man was unable to' correct the problem, leaving us with a cellar floor covered with stinky tree roots, for his own Thanksgiving Dinner.

We called in the Public Works Department. They arrived on Monday morning toting every piece of heavy equipment one could possibly imagine. As they blocked off the street, I called John on the phone and I said, "Your Aunt Holly loves you so much, that I got all of the Road Construction vehicles to come to my house so you could watch them work." He and- his mom were there practically before I hung up' the phone. John inspected the impressive hole which consumed most of what used to be the driveway, 'he issued a few choice instructions to the crew and agreed to watch the proceedings from the hallway window. He watched the backhoe dig and the dump. truck get filled, the jackhammer as it cut neatly into the orange dotted .line on the asphalt and the bulldozer push the dirt into the street.

He took it all in ... for nearly 10 minutes, then came out to the kitchen fidgeting and whimpering and asked me to put on the Road Construction Video for him to watch on TV!

At one point I was asked to turn up the volume because the construction vehicles outside the window were making such a racket that he couldn't hear the sound of a televised steam shovel digging up an imaginary street!

Somehow ,the reality of what was going on right -under the window was not up to the expectations of his imagination. What he had hoped to see in real life was not there.

How often have we dreamed of something, had a picture in our minds as to what it would look like and how it would happen, and when it did finally materialize ... left us disappointed and empty?

A close friend of my Mother's my Aunt Edith, came to this country from Hungary during World War 11 leaving most of her family behind. For a number of years during some very hard times, she dreamed of owning an electric toaster. The day finally came when she was able to purchase one and once she actually got it home, took it out of the box, plugged it in and cooked her first piece of toast. Then she became very depressed. She got what she wanted, but the energy spent in the dreaming, in anticipating what it would be like to own one was gone. There it was in real life. The reality of having it was no where near as important as the fantasy and the dreaming of actually getting it.

I certainly can sympathize with both John and my Aunt. Watching a video about reality left him a lot of opportunities to imagine and to dream. He replayed that vision over and over again and placed himself anywhere he wanted to in any scene he chose. The reality did not quite match the effort that went into the dream. I'm guessing one could say the same for finally acquiring a toaster! They both ended up asking "what's next?"

Years ago I took three 8 year olds on a week long trip to Bryant Pond Maine to experience what it was like to enter a different century, one which was devoid of computers, televisions, clocks, heat or running water and most all the luxuries of living they were all used to having and strived to acquire. They were very excited to go, but once we arrived and they realized there were no technological distractions around to occupy their excessive leisure time the mantra became, "What's next?" To eat or to stay warm in Bryant Pond, meant chopping wood to fuel the pot belly stove, and heat for the living room.

It meant fetching water from the spring and dipping into the rain barrel to wash the dishes as well as our bodies. Sleeping happened naturally without earphones and ipods to drown out the silence.

They were amazed that we were actually responsible for heat, light and water, that it did not just appear from a faucet or was activated from flipping a switch on

the wall. That adventure was not what they had envisioned; rather it became a self affirming and insightful lesson in personal survival.

Years ago I had a client who was intent upon committing suicide. He finally in desperation jumped out a window. However, in his misery he miscalculated-it was a first floor window and he landed in a prickly bush.

As we removed the thorns from his arms and legs he decided then that life itself was full of thorns and from the amount of laughter generated from his dramatic miscalculation he decided that if we could see his actions differently so could he. Then he began the process of taking control of what parts of his life he could indeed change. What helped enormously was the support of his community who truly loved him with all his quirks and faults. He learned to ask himself “ What’s next!”

All of these folks had some very specific ideas about what they wanted from this life, for John it was a fantasy which he could place himself in and out of at will. For my Aunt it was a material object, once obtained it lost its power. For the boys they envisioned more leisure time to loose themselves in their respective technologies, and for my client his sadness ruled his perceptions about life. It would seem that they had nothing in common except a dream, a vision of what life had to offer them.

When John finally went home, after his confusing day between what he had pretended in his mind to be true and what was real, he put on his coat and his miniature steel toed caterpillar boots, he went out to the hole in the driveway and smiled and hugged me. Sometime during that day there was a thread between the fictitious scene he put himself into on TV, and the reality right before his eyes. It just took time to connect the two.

My aunt Edith acquired many more delights in life, but she never forgot what it felt like to wish for something that had seemed so impossible to have. What she

discovered was that it was not the toaster that she truly wanted, it was to prove that she could reach a goal she set for herself.

It became the necessary rehearsal for achieving much higher more important goals in life and in health later on.

The eight" year olds went home with a very different outlook on how things happen. It was a sobering experience for them once they realized that living life productively takes real effort, and someone else may not always be willing or able to do it for them. They discovered as they asked "What's next".... Depended upon them!

As I thought about this church' and what we attempt to do here each week I realized that we are not unlike any of these folks. We come to church with a wide variety of experiences and ideas, each with a different vision of what is expected to fulfill our needs and our dreams of what this church should be.

Our Faith is the link between what we dearly hope for, what we imagine and replay in our minds, and how close we come to finding it by our own efforts. The real trick of survival is not to linger too long in either disappointment or expectation, and to ask ourselves how the tasks we choose to complete contributes to fulfilling the big picture we paint for this church community. We need the dreamers who are willing to take it one step further to look at the hard reality. We need the doers who will expend to effort to make the tangible needs happen. We need the switch flippers to take a moment and learn to fix the ones that don't work. And for those who come with a sagging spirit, it is the true mission of this community to take them by the hand and walk them right into the light of hope.

No matter how tough this season may be for some whose experience is dark and jaded by disappointment or sadness, or stuck in a re-run, we still have a chance to dream again, not just for what we lack, but to own the initiative to take the next step, by investing much more in what life can be for us here at First UU and how we choose to create it.

Sometimes we need to see those life affirming lessons for what they are, a testing of our capabilities and willingness to embrace that next step as individuals and as a congregation.

Moving forward takes faith. It asks us to take all of our dreams and desires and to work hard at being very clear on what it is we wish for and what happens next when we get it.

At times it is a compromise, more often it is a revelation we never expected. Sometimes it is life itself that tosses us a mean twist or a welcome surprise. Faith is something we all share, in many forms, in many traditions, faith in ourselves and in that little bit of magic that gives us the extra push, or insight when there seems to be no option other than being stuck in a replay over and over again. What a glorious time for us, to know that what we have in common is the means to nurture the unique ways we see our spiritual growth, our life together, as a church and as a community.

This is the perfect time of year to ponder what we truly wish for and how we hope to achieve it. Christmas can do that for us, in words and song even in the puffed up absurdities and accessories that dangle in our faces all over town. Christmas can give us permission to fully address what we really want and how to bring it home with us in creative and giving ways. In other words, it ain't the toaster or the steam shovel we want, it's the lessons of the journey, and the next step that really matters...where we go from here, together.

So as you enter this season and make your lists, I hope you will keep its spirit with you long-after the presents are opened and the tree is thrown out. Keep the dreams, imagine, enjoy reality, embrace the fantasy but not for too long, accept your gifts, and be willing to share them in any way you can, and make plans for the next vision that surely awaits our future.

May you get what you asked for this season. May you embrace an authentic life which honors those dreams, allows for goals and visions of hope, gives us the patience to see what it really is we want and then, moves us forward into the next adventure with wisdom and purpose.

**So Be It
Amen**

Rev Helen C (Holly) Baylies copyright 2009