

MY LIFE WITH SANTA

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Sunday, December 2, 2012

First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees;³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Christmas can be a tough time for Congregationalists. Historically at least. Our Puritan forebears who left the motherland to settle in Massachusetts were no fans of Christmas. First of all, Puritans associated Christmas with the Church of England and its old-world customs that they were trying to escape. Second, they did not think Christmas was biblical. It wasn't selected as the birth date until several centuries after Jesus' death in the third century. Third, Christmas for the Puritans usually included drinking, feasting, and playing games - all things the Puritans frowned upon. One particularly distasteful tradition, "wassailing", entailed people of a lower economic class visiting wealthier community members and begging, or demanding, food and drink in return for toasts to the health of these wealthy hosts. If the rich host refused to offer food and drink there was the threat of retribution. Finally, the British had been applying pressure on the Puritans to conform to English customs that solidified Puritan distaste for Christmas. So given all these realities, the Puritans banned Christmas in Massachusetts for about 22 years.

As we speak, there are about 1200 Santas making their way through our city streets. My have times have changed. In anticipation of this event, I have noted there is a little of that puritan blood running through my veins. Some of us on the staff have succumbed to a few snarky comments about how Santa is getting in the way of worship activities accompanied with our customary grumbling about parking and traffic. I did even call the organizer of the Santa Race to ask if we might negotiate a happy compromise next time around. I was polite but I think the organizer was extraordinarily more gracious about the whole thing than the little Puritan man in my soul that I was doing my best to stop from talking. At the risk of making my forebears turn over in their graves, I did tell the organizer if I was not preaching, I would like to be another one of those Santas running in that race this morning and a few of you here might like to join me. In some ways, I do have a high view of Santa. When I was a boy, we spent a year in the Netherlands. My parents speak fondly of Sinterclause or St. Nicholas whose marking characteristic was to provide bits of cheer, gifts and assistance to those who were poor. Sinterclause delivered his gifts just around this time in early Advent so that when we arrived at Christmas day the focus was placed a little less on gift giving and a little more on the Christ child. I also remember as a child going to family Christmas parties where Santa would arrive bearing silly gifts for young and old alike. I have not been to that party in many years but every Advent when my parents tell me they are going, I pine for the opportunity to be with my family and Santa. And if you want my truest confession of all, I thought it would be fun to buy one of those enormous light up inflatable Santas and put it up in front of my condo—but I don't think the condo association would much approve. So I suffer in silence and merely derive joy from the fantasy of imagining what my neighbors might say—or marveling at 1200 Santas descending on our city.

There is something appealing about Santa. I recognize he can be abused in service of self-indulgence, consumerism, and drunkenness at the office Christmas party. Some get blessed with a lot of Santa largess while others go away empty. The Puritans to a degree had it right. Life with Santa can get ugly. But so can Christianity. I am well aware of how Christianity, also has its dark side, and has been used in the same narcissistic and consumer oriented way to diminish people rather than build them up which can make more secular forms of Christmas revelry not seem as bad. So I think we need Santas in our lives along with other forms of playfulness. Santa offers us a welcome excuse to live into a fantasy that moves us beyond our humdrum overly dire, and restrictive ways of looking at reality. It's so much more life giving to imagine a jolly man riding on sleigh through the skies with reindeer showering grace, good cheer and toys over all the earth, than listening to Congress people squabble in Washington about how there is not enough money and what we can't do while threatening to hand out lumps of coal for Christmas. Maybe what we need in our lives is a little less cold realism and a little more fantasy and playfulness to fire our imaginations. Could we dare to imagine that there is in fact more than enough resources to go around if we pay little more attention to God's economy than the gyrations of the financial market?

Jesus I think, however, offers an even more life giving image than Santa. Jesus offers us the ultimate fantasy in the best sense of the word. The people of the early church, I think, looked for that Jesus. When we look at this customary Scriptural text for the first Sunday in Advent, we are presented with a rather fantastical picture of Jesus bringing in a new day when our redemption is near. This text was offered to people in the early church who were indeed weighted down with all sorts of problems and societal strife. Jesus had died, he had risen. And now for people of the early church, they lived with the promise that any time soon, he would return again on a clouds to alleviate suffering and redeem a troubled world. Yes Christ died, yes he is risen, and yes he will come again. Look at the fig tree when it sprouts new leaves and you will know summer is near and some thing new is about to be born.

Today some might think we are living in the end times. 1200 Santa's descending on our city can have a certain apocalyptic quality to it. But might the presence of all these Santas here help us imagine a world of playfulness, generosity, and joy where each person might not just have a gift for Christmas and a meager bit of charity but receive the gift of a just society where there is food to eat, good health, and a safe and affordable place to live? And if we live with the fantastical image of Jesus returning again, this might conjure up images of some unhappy evangelist out on Church Street with a megaphone handing out bible tracks announcing that that end is near. But Jesus promised coming could be about much more than our own personal salvation but about ushering in a world where all are redeemed and saved from suffering and not just some folks.

As we gather around this communion table, we are living into a full promise of God's dominion on earth. When we eat the bread and drink the cup together, we imagine a world not just as it is but as it could be. We are invited to move beyond our narrow-minded realism to embrace more fantastical images that offer hope rather than despair. The people of the early church needed some bold images of promise to sustain them. I think that we also need those images for our well-being and to find hope. So may the Santa's of our lives bring us some joy and may Christ reign that we can make of this old world a new world. Amen.