

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"The Gospel in the Carols: We respond"

Scripture: Psalm 98, Titus 2:11-14

Theme Carol: In the bleak mid-winter #145

Opening Hymn: Angels from the realms of glory #146 (1,2,3,5)

Closing Hymn: Once in royal David's city #166 (1,2,3)

Children's Hymn: All hail King Jesus #268

Choruses: Infant holy, Infant lowly #143, O little town of Bethlehem #164

Children's Songs: Silent Night and Away in a manger

Choir: "A Christmas Echo" by Patrick M Lieberger

Rev. Steve Filyk

December 22, 2019

4th Sunday of Advent

Which person are you more like, this time of year?

Person A. (right)

Or person B. (left)

Person A (right) is in a state of increasing agitation and unrest.

Last nite he got into a huge shouting match
with a lady in the mall parking lot.

She had 'stolen', stolen the space he was clearly heading towards.
And so he got out of his car, started arguing, then yelling.
It was only when a crowd began to gather
That he pulled himself together and walked away.

That's person A. (right)

Person A is demonstrating little peace or joy this Christmas.
He has had his fill of Christmas plays and winter concerts.
The volunteerism of his kids is driving him crazy.

When they told him about an unscheduled performance
at a senior's home,

He snarled at them.

He told them that they'd need to find their own way there.

Every once in a while, he ponders the trajectory of his life.

He even considered reading the devotional

His wife brought him home from church.

But most evenings he plants himself in front of the TV,

Finds a basketball or hockey game,

and forgets about everything else.

That's Person A. (right)

So how about person B? (left)

Person B is also feeling the same pressure of the season.

His family is stressed from all the extra obligations and activities

So Person B gets up earlier in the morning

To read his Bible, to pray, to get ready for these challenges.

At work he makes his 'rounds'

calling on his regular clients.

While it is sometime a little awkward

He invites them to donate the local women's shelter.

He's runs his own little campaign

for the shelter each December.

He meets one client for lunch.

But as the server is handing him the bill,
She knocks a full glass of water straight into his lap.

He laughs it off.

He sees that she's young, awkward and nervous.
He gives her a big tip
Even though it now looks like he's peed in his pants.

Which person are you more like

This time of year.

Person A? (right)

Or person B? (left)

The reality is that we have the potential to be both people.

That 'stolen' parking space can end with a gentle wave--

"You go ahead."--

or a raised fist or middle finger.

It all depends on the state of our heart and mind.

Of course, we might expect

that those who have welcomed the Christmas message
(that's most of us);

We might expect that those who have welcomed Christ
Would somehow embody the best of this season.

The Apostle Paul raises this question

in the verses that precede today's reading.

In the preceding passage

Paul calls various member of the church
(old men, young men, old women, young women)
to embody exemplary character.

Paul's an evangelist and he realises

that we are walking, talking billboards for Jesus.

The way that we live will either make the Gospel attractive
Or distasteful and displeasing.ⁱ

Today's lesson also calls for such exemplary behavior.

But here it frames this behavior differently.

Paul has moved on from a focus on evangelism

To simply considering the proper response to the Gospel message.

At the beginning of today's lesson (verse 11)

Paul reminds us of what God has done in Jesus:

“For the grace of God has appeared
that offers salvation to all people.”

At the end of today's lesson he tells us that this God

who has come among us in Jesus,
Will return and visit us again.

This expresses much of the hope

That we have as Christians.

God sent Jesus to save us from our sins and rescue us from evil.
We are given the assurance that our future is in God's hands,
And that one day, all things will be made new.

God has taken care of both our past and our future.

But what about the present?
What about the present?

We are told that God's work in the past
And God's promise for the future
Directs our living in the present,
Directs our behaviour this Christmas.

We are called to, and I quote:
"live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age"ⁱⁱ

Self-controlled:
(sōphrosynē; also translated "moderation" or "temperance")

Upright:
(dikaiosynē; more often rendered as "just")

Godly: (eusebeia; pious)...ⁱⁱⁱ

We are called to "live self-controlled,
upright and godly lives in this present age"^{iv}

Self-controlled means avoiding excess.

That's quite the challenge at a time of year when we are tightly wound
And there's free liquor on the table.

That's quite the challenge at a time of year
When we are deluged by advertising for the latest, greatest products
All at cut-throat prices.

Uprightness means extending our concern
Beyond our own clan,
to those who are less fortunate and hard done by.

Godliness or piety means guarding God's place in our daily activities.

Uprightness and godliness are also big challenges
given the season's pressures
around time and scheduling and finances.

And yet this behaviour is seen by Paul
to be the right and proper response
to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For it is the 'grace of God' we are told,
that "teaches us to say "No" to
ungodliness and worldly passions,
and to live self-controlled,
upright and godly lives in this present age"^v

The same grace of God that redeems us from sin and evil
Is what allows us to become the people
God intended from the beginning:

“a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”^{vi}

But how does this happen?

How does this transformation occur?

If you listen to the many Christmas stories

You might be convinced that this transformation is spontaneous.

What are we told about the Grinch

When he realises that all his nefarious activities

Can't ruin Christmas in Who-ville?

“And what happened, then?

Well, in Whoville they say –

that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day.”^{vii}

And what are we told about Ebenezer Scrooge

When he confronted with Christmas past, present, and future?

He is suddenly giddy with gratitude.

He starts acting magnanimous and kind.

He orders a prize turkey for his lowly employee.

He makes an enormous donation for the care of the poor.

Wonder transformation can happen at Christmas.

But I think these stories

have a danger of convincing us that Christian character

Is something that happens to us

Without our own attention and involvement.

The reality is that Christian character
Is a joint-project with God
That require our willingness and determination.

This character develops from daily obedience.
Making small everyday decisions to say 'yes' and to say 'no.'

This "Learning when and how, to what, and to whom
to give our yes or our no is a lifelong project.

It is learning to live not merely in dull balance or tedious moderation
but in passionate, disciplined choice and action..."^{viii}

So is Paul asking us to do more work this season?
I think he is asking us to different work:
Taking our passion and energy and redirecting them
To activities that bring about redemption.^{ix}

PAUSE

At Christmas we hear Good News:
We have been rescued from sin and evil.
Paul tells us that what Jesus has begun
will be completed at the end of time.

So how do we live in the meantime?

We respond by giving our heart,
And our soul,
And our strength,
And our mind.^x

And by God's grace we are transformed.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ See Titus 2:10

ⁱⁱ Titus 2:12 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ David Rensberger "Titus 2:11-14, Exegetical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.*

^{iv} Titus 2:12 NIV

^v Ibid

^{vi} Titus 2:14 NIV

^{vii} Dr. Seuss "How the Grinch Stole Christmas!"

^{viii} David J. Wood quoting M Shawn Copeland "Titus 2:11-14, Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.*

^{ix} See David J. Schlafer "Titus 2:11-14, Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.*

^x See Luke 10:27