

## Sermon

*Northminster Presbyterian Church: Christmas Day, Year B (2011)*

*The lessons: Isaiah 9<sup>2-7</sup>; Titus 2<sup>11-14</sup>; Luke 2<sup>1-20</sup>*

A scant seventeen days after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke to the American people from Washington, D.C. He said: “This is a strange Christmas Eve. Almost the whole world is locked in deadly struggle. . . . Here, in the midst of war, raging and roaring over all the lands and seas, creeping nearer to our hearts and homes, here, amid all the tumult, we have tonight the peace of the spirit in each cottage home and in every generous heart. Therefore we may cast aside for this night at least the cares and dangers which beset us, and make for the children an evening of happiness in a world of storm. Here, then, for one night only, each home throughout the English-speaking world should be a brightly-lighted island of happiness and peace.”

Last night at the Christmas Eve service, we asked the question: Why celebrate Christmas? Why not just “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Festivus”? One conclusion to which we came is that Christmas has a real traction because we desperately need a Savior to enter into the darkness of our lives and light it up. Although we insist on putting on a good face and wishing everyone the best of this season, sometimes we feel more Scrooge than Tiny Tim—regardless of what our particular pain or disappointment might be. And so we need to hear, year in and year out, that there’s no relationship so broken that Christ can’t fix it, no pain so sharp that Christ can’t ease it, no violence so shocking that Christ can’t redeem it. We need that hope, and nothing provides it like the message of Christmas.

But there’s another reason to incessantly celebrate Christmas, and it’s a reason to which the venerable Prime Minister alludes. He delivered those words in the midst of both Christmas season and devastating war. The two conflicted with one another, and Churchill thought

Christmas had the power to stave off the detriments of war, even if for but a moment. In other words, the practice of celebrating Christmas has effects for our society, for our civilization.

Last night, as part of our holiday celebrations, my family and I watched *It's A Wonderful Life*. Raise your hand if you've seen the film. If you have, you cannot forget the angel Clarence, George Bailey, Mr. Potter, "Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings", and even Zuzu's flower petals. Of course, George Bailey is a struggling businessman who devotes himself to the people of bucolic Bedford Falls, the small town of his upbringing. Through George's efforts, people are able to better themselves and provide for their families, and a sense of community is deepened and strengthened, even in the face of Mr. Potter, who takes ruthless advantage of people for the margins of profit. Alas, the pressures of life set in, and George gives serious consideration to throwing himself off a bridge. Enter Clarence, an angel, who shows George what Bedford Falls would look like if he had never been around. Indeed, it wouldn't be Bedford Falls at all, but Pottersville, with red light districts replacing the sleepy downtown, a harsh coarseness of relationships where camaraderie and generosity used to exist, and tragedy where once there was redemption. The difference is harrowing. Thankfully, George changes his mind about that bridge and the pleasantness of Bedford Falls remains.

Larry Taunton, a Christian thinker and writer, sees a Christmas analogy in the story. Taunton is the author of *The Grace Effect*, which shows the difference between societies built upon the Judeo-Christian tradition and those built upon secularism. He sees George Bailey as analogous to Christianity: When it is present, the structure of society is stronger, people are less coarsened and more generous, selfishness is mitigated, duty and charity are encouraged. When it is absent, the opposite occurs: People look out more for themselves, which diminishes the very

foundations upon which civilization is built. With Christianity, you get Bedford Falls. Without it, you get Pottersville.

In short, all the things that make civilization possible are found and strengthened in the Christian faith; they find voice in the celebration of Christmas. Yet another Christmas movie captures this truth marvelously. 2006's *Joyeux Noel* tells the story of the Christmas Truce, when the celebration of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in 1914 paused the Great War. When Christmas worship held sway, men sang together, prayed together, drank together, played soccer together. When Christmas worship gave way to selfish power, men became butchers yet again. Regrettably, this tale is still contemporary. Whether we are talking about the New Atheists' assault on Christianity or just the slow ebb of Christianity's prominence in Western life, it's evident that religious practice is on the decline, and that's a shame. For the absence of such Christian practice brings the degradation of our life together. Or, to put it more bluntly, the decline of Christian practice is the decline of our civilization. When we say "Merry Christmas", it isn't a polite seasonal greeting. It's a laudation of our Savior's coming. It's a prognosis of healing and mercy. And it's also a battle cry. So keep Christmas. Keep it quietly and reverently, if that's your practice; keep it loudly and raucously, if you prefer; but by all means, keep it. Not only will you be honoring the Lord and bringing cheer to others and deepening your family's worship and enjoyment—you just might be saving civilization. Merry Christmas—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.