

December 31, 2017

Sermon

“The Work of Christmas”

Here we are at the end of yet another year. New Year's Eve is this evening, so let's review some of the traditions that will provide us with all the good fortunes we might need or want in the New Year. I wonder, is this the work of Christmas? Lets review, Ok, are you ready?

Well, first of all there needs to be noise .... Fireworks, or gunshots at midnight.

In the southern states it is common to eat black-eyed peas, or greens, because they looked like money so your year would bring wealth.

Spain and other Hispanic nations, would eat 12 grapes, one for each month, and they must be eaten by the end of the tolling of the 12midnight clock.

In Brazil it is a tradition to toss white flowers into the ocean to appease the Sea Goddess, who is known for blessing mothers and children and will bring prosperity.

In Romania, there are magical dances to be done, but you must be dressed up as a bear.

In Italy it is good luck to wear red underwear, in Argentina you will be lucky if your wear pink underwear to welcome in the New Year.

In Scotland they have what is called the Hogmanay festival, there is a fair amount of drinking, singing Auld Lang Syne, and swinging balls of fire to ward off evil spirits. These balls are then tossed into the ocean.

In Burma people welcome the New Year with the Thingyan water festival, a parade where everyone throws water on everyone, washing away bad luck and the sins of the previous year.

In Sweden it is a very lucky custom to smash broken or unused china onto a friend's front step this will bring your friend good fortune and the bigger the heap on New Years Day the more popular you are.

Open a pomegranate in Turkey for wealth and prosperity, but if you are in Armenia throw it on the ground for good luck. The more pieces and seeds that are spread on the ground the more successful your year will be.

In Norway it is tradition to dress up in your fancy clothes and visit friends and family where you will be treated to drinks and a traditional rice pudding with an almond in it. If you are lucky enough to get the almond, you will have luck in the New Year with lots of wealth and fortune.

Any of these traditions and superstitions sound familiar?

So, Here we are one week away from Christmas, the gifts that were placed under the tree, the unwrapping was happily anticipated, looked at with awe and hope and delighted expectation. These gifts have been opened, tried on, returned, broken, or placed in a drawer. And now we look to a new year.

We set out with resolutions, to lose weight, get out of debt, go to the gym, call or visit our friends and family more. One thing that I have done is to write out a list of things, or attributes I do not want to carry into the New Year. Then I burn that list at midnight. Yet somehow that is never enough of an effort to make the change truly happen.

An example of the work of Christmas might be, "Watch Night". Watch Night is the what the New Years Eve service is called in many African

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American congregations. Established in African-American communities on December 31, 1862, the original Watch Night was a gathering to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation becoming law. At the stroke of midnight on January 1, 1863, all slaves in the Confederate States were proclaimed free. Since that date many African American churches and communities have watch night services to celebrate that event. The Watch Night has now evolved pray for and to proclaim freedom, in Jesus name, for all captives, for the millions without freedom, for modern-day slaves, refugees from war torn countries, and undocumented workers that continue to struggle for justice.

Through the Advent season, we heard of the greatest gifts ever! Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, and yet one week later we quickly return to our traditions and superstitions to bring in the New Year.

Perhaps the real New Year begins on Christmas Day. This is the day of Immanuel, God is with us. The dawn of this new day this new world came with the light of the Star, the one that led the shepherds. It is hard to imagine: this one little gift, in a manger is a gift given to all of humanity, for time everlasting. The Christ child has arrived and brought all the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love we will ever need. In this one common event, the birth of a child, we are given the tools we need to help one another, to end strife, famine, and war.

The Christmas Holiday has come to an end. So now..... the work of Christmas begins: I borrow this title from a poem by Howard Thurman (1899-1981) he was an African American, author, theologian, philosopher, educator, a Civil Rights Leader and a pastor.

The poem is short and on target.

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the kings and the princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The Work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoners., To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among brothers and to make music in the heart.

So where do WE begin with this Work of Christmas.

Just like Christ, born into a family with siblings, we are the siblings of this family. We are all children of God, as Galatians told us. The word Christ means "to be anointed", each and every one of us has a spark of the spirit of God, our creator in us. We all share that same Spiritual DNA. We as humans get so distracted from our spiritual DNA, we grow concerned with our own little worlds, our politics, our retirement portfolios, what to wear, who we associate with, the careers we choose. What car we drive. All of it, distractions, sometimes, some years seem more wracked with troubles than other times. That causes us pain or worry. Perhaps many of you, as I know I am, frequently discouraged by the many needs of our world, the inequity of wealth and opportunities, the lack of social consciousness. But if we look beyond the discouragement and anger, and frustration, we will be able to see the light of Hope shining in. Living and sharing that Hope is some of the work of Christmas. We cannot sit back and be idle, worried, or isolate, and inactive. The discouragement, fear and anger we experience are symptoms of a change that is needed in our lives, in our world. Have your heard anyone say recently, "These are the End Times". Sometimes, I admit I think, that would be great, the big rescue is coming soon; we will be in heaven soon. But if we really think about it, we have all experienced the fact that "To everything there is a season", we experience good times and difficult times. In the words of Diana Butler Bass; "These ARE hard times, they are NOT the End Times". But that is how quickly we forget Immanuel, God is with us!

Not just at Christmas, but always and forever. If we use the gifts of Christmas, (and there are many more). But These four gifts in one birth are within us. Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. It really is THAT simple.

Traditions and superstitions are really quite amusing, weird, funny, and crazy. But mostly they are really quite distracting.

In some cultures the tradition for welcoming the New Year included sweeping the fireplace and the floors of our homes, opening windows to clear out the old year, washing the front steps, the threshold, and maybe painting the door. But if we tap into our gifts of Advent we will have all we need.

We have been given so much in such a small package, the new born Christ child. These are the gifts we have, another example of the gift of the young man who gave up his few loaves and few fishes. He fed thousands.

As we heard in the scripture lesson from today, God is Love, and we are heirs of God, so we are Love. We are encouraged to Love one another. As Christians, it is really That simple. In the words of one of my favorite musical theologians, Ringo Starr, my goal for the new year is quite simple, GIVE MORE LOVE.

So in closing, what we might think about is:

Sweeping out the old as we WELCOME in the new,

Sweep out the fear as we WELCOME in LOVE

Sweep out War as we WELCOME in PEACE

Sweep out Poverty as we WELCOME in sharing

Sweep out all that breaks God's heart as we WELCOME in COMPASSION, KINDNESS, JOY, and LOVE.