

“Bah Humbug, Ho Hum, or Forward Ho?”

Second Sunday of Advent

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Yesterday I received an email from a clergy friend who, at the end of a busy week, wrote, “I’m off to a Christmas party. Sermon sucks for tomorrow, I think—maybe the spirit will have other ideas!”

Only a pastor can fully understand the significance of this comment: “Going to a Christmas party . . . on a Saturday night.” Pastors turn to pumpkins if they are not home by 10:00 on a Saturday night, and if they come back and their sermon isn’t done, they turn into something worse: a boring preacher the next morning.

I wrote back: “I know about sucky sermons! What is it about the second Sunday in Advent? I have a great sermon title but I’m still struggling for a message!”

As I read through the lessons for today I was intrigued by 2 Peter 3:14b “and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”

My title for today’s message is “Bah Humbug, Ho Hum, or Forward Ho?” My title describes three responses to Christmas.

Rhode Island’s Governor Lincoln Chaffee’s insistence on calling the state Christmas Tree a Holiday Tree is about as Bah Humbug as it gets these days. His stance is the latest in a long series of affronts to the Christian faith in misguided attempts to cast it out of the public square. It can be persuasively argued that no other group in America is being devalued today as much as is the Christian faith. Taken together, it is as if our culture is rising up to say “Bah, humbug” to the claims of Christmas.

And the Christian community’s acquiescence regarding the secular culture’s rejection of anything religious and its return to a pagan winter solstice festival is about as Ho Hum (what can be done?) as you can get. Few people realize that we are witnessing history reverse itself.

In the early centuries of the Christian movement, the church was a small, severely persecuted sect. The Roman Empire sought to extinguish it. But a funny thing happened on the way to extinction. In the 4th century Emperor Constantine became

a Christian and a few years later decreed that Christianity was to be the new state religion of the entire empire. Over night the church was transformed from a small persecuted sect to a vast state institution to which all Roman citizens were required to belong. It was overwhelmed by this mass migration to Christian faith.

One of the challenges the church had to face was defining for this population of former pagans what it meant to be a Christian. What do Christians believe? How do they behave? What kind of folk are they to be?

Constantine helped with this process by calling several church councils to hammer out responses to these issues. The result was the historic Christian affirmations of faith: the Nicene Creed, and the Apostles Creed. We still turn to these formative creeds today for an understanding of Christian faith.

The church also had the wisdom to search for a way to enculturate the masses to the Christian faith, and they found in the pagan winter solstice festival a vehicle that proved worthy of the task. This was a universal pagan celebration of the winter solstice in December. The church co-opted this festival and transformed it into a celebration of the birth of Christ, the savior of the world. Christ Mass, or Christmas, thereby became deeply engrained in western Christian culture, and it remained so until the middle of the 20th century when the Christian consensus in western countries began to unravel.

Today, at an accelerating pace, western culture is reverting to a pagan celebration of the winter solstice, a festival of lights, a happy holidays, virtually rejecting this season as Christmas.

So we have “Bah, humbug” as the secular culture’s response and we have “Ho Hum (what can be done about it?)” as the church’s response to the secular trend.

But the season of Advent points to a third response as it reminds us of God’s redemption and restoration of Israel from exile in time past, and that a future time is coming when there will be “new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home” (which clearly implies that righteousness is not at home in the present world order).

During Advent we wait and prepare for God to fulfill his promise. Though we may be impatient, 2 Peter tells us, “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think

of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting *any* to perish, but *all* to come to repentance.”

Now if you ever doubted it, this verse reveals God’s own desire for universal salvation. It’s not a give-away. Repentance is required, but God’s deepest desire is to redeem the entire creation and everyone in it.

So, 2 Peter asks, “what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and goodness? . . . in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”

Ours is not a passive, toe-tapping, watch-checking, calendar-calculating waiting. We are to be busy striving to live holy, blemish-free lives, being the leaven in the loaf, the salt of the earth, the light of the world so that “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” is transformed from a prayer to a living reality.

God’s patience creates a space for grace in which all may come to repentance. The Church has been given a message and a mission, so our response to Christmas must be “Forward Ho! Move out! Let’s get on to God’s destination for human/earthbound history, which is a time and space where righteousness will finally be at home.”

This was the impulse behind the modern missionary movement that, at the end of the 19th century, set out to win the world for Christ by the end of the 20th century. Its goal was to assure that the gospel was preached on every continent and to every people so that all humankind would have an opportunity to respond to God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

This is what inspired the Bible societies to send translators to remote tribes to learn their languages and translate the Bible into their native tongues, and a whole host of other missionary endeavors in all nations.

So, what happened to the great missionary enterprise of the 20th century? Macy’s and Gimbal’s helped derail the Christian movement by replacing Christ with Santa, and now American culture seems bent on replacing Santa with Holiday.

Gov. Chaffee’s defense of his re-writing of western history? He “pushed back on

those upset with his tree description, saying that ‘all those engaged in this discussion — whatever their opinion on the matter — [should] use their energy and enthusiasm to make a positive difference in the lives of their fellow Rhode Islanders.’”

Well, where does he think the impulse to make a positive difference in the lives of others came from? It didn’t come from paganism, nor ancient religion, nor the Roman Empire, nor the modern secular state, nor the oppressive systems of this world. These have crushed the human spirit and oppressed the weak and helpless.

The impulse to care for one’s fellow human beings came from Jesus Christ and from centuries of his followers committed to living holy, blemish free lives that so transformed the world that present generations take for granted the hard-fought battles won to improve human life and move the earth toward being a place of compassion where righteousness is at home and human dignity is understood as a God-given right to be honored by all and protected from oppressive regimes.

But if we take our history for granted, or worse yet, deny our history and write Christ out of it, we are doomed to repeat those hard-won battles, which cannot be won again without Christ.

Someone once said “culture is the cumulative result of individual decisions.” You get enough people deciding a certain way, and it impacts and changes culture.

If this is true, and the Great Awakening and the Wesleyan revival proved that it is, then we have a lot of decisions to make and a lot of lives to influence.

In his day, John Wesley was credited by a contemporary 18th century historian for saving England from the kind of bloody revolution that convulsed France. Conditions were much the same in both countries. France erupted into devastating rebellion that overthrew the corrupt monarchy by the shedding of much human blood. The Wesleyan revival fundamentally changed England through transforming the human heart from within on a scale that also transformed English society.

One of the stories that comes out of that time is of the great impact Wesley’s preaching had on coal miners. Wesley would go to the coalmines and preach to the miners as they changed shifts. Miners lived harsh, coarse lives. In order to cope they drank. They would often stop at saloons on their way home on payday and consume

all their wages in alcohol. They were terrible husbands and worse fathers.

When they converted to Christian faith under Wesley's preaching, they cleaned up their lives and became loving husbands, caring fathers and compassionate citizens. They cleaned up their language so dramatically that the mules working in the mines got confused. They didn't understand the expletive deleted commands the miners were giving them. They no longer knew what to do. Cultural change reached down even to the level of jackasses.

The Wesleyan revival transformed hundreds of thousands of lives, in England and then jumped the Atlantic Ocean to deeply impact America in its most formative years during and after the American Revolution. Both British and American society was profoundly changed by it.

So, like I said, "Forward Ho!" We have work to do. We have decisions to make. We have lives to influence. We have a culture to transform, again.

Let's pray:

Lord, grasp us with your Word today, and do not let us go until we have responded with the action you desire from us. Amen.