

Letting Go of the “Hallmark” Christmas

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

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Scripture: Jeremiah 33: 14-16

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I think that we need to let go of the *Hallmark* Christmas. Let me explain what I mean.

First of all, let me say that I don’t intend to offend those of you who love those Christmas movies that seem to get made at a breakneck pace; you know, the ones that appear back-to-back on the “W” station. Somewhere along the way, I think, Christmas has become packaged, given to us, and then we re-gift it to one another through Facebook. Christmas feels formulaic... monetized... harmonized. Like one of those love story movies, we expect complications in life resolved so we get a happy ending. We know, life isn’t that simple, though.

Truth is, for many or most people in our world, and us; Christmas is sometimes the messiest, most complicated time of the year.

Life isn’t formulaic. It is real, and gritty. It is strange that Christmas has become something of a franchise – a money maker for companies, based largely on comfortable cliché messages & images.

Yet as part of the preparation for Christmas, Christians are paying attention to births of revolutionaries. Of course we have Jesus, but the birth, also, of the guy we focus on in today’s reading – John the baptizer.

Imagine Hallmark actually trying to package the real meaning of Christmas – the transformation John today is calling for – repentance, turning your life around.

Imagine Christmas card writers trying to re-present John’s message. Maybe it would sound something like:

May you find revolution this Christmas:
Get out of your comfortable home,
And take that money you were going to use
To buy gifts for your ungrateful kids, and, hey!,
Why don’t you give the money to the Food Bank.

Ouch! How would the voice of the prophet go over this season? John is so revolutionary in his tone that our spy agency would probably begin monitoring him. Or police might consider him a danger to others or himself and he might end up spending some time in hospital. John, of course, inherits the rich Hebrew Scripture prophetic tradition. We can say that God has been singing revolution through seemingly ordinary, disempowered people.

I was reflecting with Catherine earlier in the week about our empty stable and manger. There were beautiful animals and characters made in love... But time has passed and, well, it is time to refresh the nativity. In the meantime, as we wait to see new shepherds, animals, a more modern Joseph, Mary and Jesus... Maybe this empty scene is a good thing. The characters of this Christmas story perhaps have become a

bit formulaic, too – Joseph and Mary so quiet and passive looking. The shepherds looking on so quietly. The animals, cute and cuddly.

Maybe we need to let go of the fuzzy Hallmark Christmas, to take a page from the book of John the Baptizer. Free of any characters in this stable scene, let's dare to ask ourselves: If we could insert modern people into this manger scene, who would be the modern-day Joseph... Mary... Who are today's metaphorical shepherds?

Let's play with this for a minute or two. Let's start with Mary. Still a child, physically, but in ancient times, little time to be a girl. They are married very young. And that message from angel Gabriel, that still-unmarried Mary will have a child. This reality of a child out of wedlock is perilous for Mary. Imagine the shunning, the judgment from family and neighbours.

For a year I worked with street youth in Kingston, half of them young women. A few of them were in their early teens, but without exception they had all been sexually abused. They were also very resourceful; most had worked the streets. Like Mary, they were forced to grow up much too soon. But you know, even in spite of the challenges they faced, every so often when staff invited them to play games, the playful child in those girls came out. Any of those street youth would make an authentic Mary.

How about those shepherds? Most of life spent not in the comfort of home, but outdoors. Often life for a shepherd is spent alone, the animals are the focus, a dangerous life out in the fields watching at night for predators.

How many men and women and children walk the streets around St. Andrew's at night, and cold nights. Alone in their thoughts. Some with mild or profound mental health issues. In Capreol, small a town as it is, Trinity United in Capreol would get a surprising number of people on a Sunday dropping into worship. Sometimes a person came in who had no church background. They don't know that you are supposed to be quiet. That you are not supposed to speak out during the prayer or message. One young man shared what visions he was seeing, and they were quite disturbing for our comfortable pew-sitters, and for this preacher too. But we listened to a voice crying to us from the wilderness.

I have no doubt that real shepherds would have had some interesting lines even as our pageants often relegate them to quiet onlookers. My guess: the shepherds' response to the legion of angels, if Hallmark was making a movie version of this, might not be able to have a family rating due to those shepherds' reactions.

I wish for the people who live just outside the doors here – that the poor, the addicted, the ostracized, the misunderstood and mentally ill – could experience the birth of God among them, something of new birth in them as they behold this most holy moment.

I pray for all of us, that we can let go of the *Hallmark* Christmas, allowing us space to be real, opportunity to see this manger in a more authentic way – acknowledging our griefs, our brokenness, and the unhealthy expectations that our culture teaches us to place on Christmas... An invitation:

Reach out to those people who need a little hope this Christmas.
Take a few minutes to care, to listen, to share what you have.
Let's embrace a real Christmas this year. Amen.