

HERE WE GO AGAIN!

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
December 9, 1984

Perhaps you've noticed the word "complainer" in the bulletin. The word is not referring to me or to the sermon, but it is the title of the hymn tune we have just sung, which is an early American folk tune. However, I am not exempt from the title. I have, on occasions, been known to complain! How about you? Ironically, Christmas is a season that brings out the best and the petty in people. To some, Christmas is a beautiful, uplifting season. To others, it is a time to be harassed, hurried, and weary. These persons meet Advent--the time of preparation for Christmas--with a sigh, "Here we go again!"

How can we prepare and celebrate Christmas in a new way? How can we capture or recapture the light for the world? How can we let the light shine in our church, our homes, our lives, and our community? Let's make this Christmas special. Let's banish complaining, avoid humdrum, escape hassles, and celebrate the coming of Christ. How? Let's begin with remembering.

A popular game throughout America is Trivial Pursuits. Our family has enjoyed playing it, and this Thanksgiving we added a new twist. We designed a new category called "Norris Family Trivia." We each wrote questions of our family memories, such as, "In which store did Craig, at age two, get lost and was announced over the public address system?" or, "How many times has Jack banged up a car?" (Answer: Who's counting?) The Norris Family Trivia Game is an opportunity to remember, share, laugh, unify, solidify, and celebrate our family roots. Sometimes the complaint is heard, "Hey, that's not fair, as I wasn't there," or "That's not a fair question, as I wasn't born yet." The answer: "Yes, it's a fair question because it is part of our history. It is not necessary for you to have participated personally in order to claim the story as your history." None of us here were alive when the Declaration of Independence was penned and signed, but it belongs to all of us.

To remember is to celebrate, identify, and understand who we are. To forget is to find ourselves rootless. To ignore history is to be ignorant and vulnerable to repetition. History is the most important subject taught in school. The Bible is the most important text book of the church and its classes. Let's remember our stories, our history, or we will repeat the mistakes, act as persons without roots, and find the present superficial and shallow. History gives meaning to the present.

Let's remember all our history. When I was in school, American history was taught from the settlers' point of view, the conquerors. I remember learning of the massacre of New Ulm, a village in Minnesota that was attacked by Indians who massacred the residents. As Craig pointed out, when the whites won, it was called a battle; when the Indians won, it was called a massacre! As history students, we were taught to fear the Indians, blame them, view them as brutal savages with weird dances and an inferior religion, and to consider them ignorant, for they had no sense of property ownership. Do you recall the financial crisis New York experienced a few years ago and the Indian tribe who offered to help out by buying back Manhattan Island for \$24? What we were not told then about the New Ulm Massacre was that it was an act of desperation. The Indians had been promised food to replace the crops and game they lost by white settlements. But promises were words. To the credit of the white authorities, they sent repeated messages to Washington for the food, as the small white settlements of Minnesota had no food to spare. The Indians, disillusioned with the broken promises, frightened of the

prospect of the cruel Minnesota winter, desperate in their hunger, attacked New Ulm. Soldiers from Fort Snelling were dispatched, and the uprising was violently put down. Ironically--a tragedy of history--a few days after the massacre, a food shipment arrived at Fort Snelling.

Let's remember both sides of our history. We can't divorce ourselves from tragedy, ignorance and cruelty. Let's remember, celebrate our identity, confess our errors, repent of the mistakes, and resolve not to repeat.

Let's remember the dark side of the Christmas story as well as the light. We would prefer to celebrate Christmas as an escape from reality, with tinsel, decorations, pabulum, innocuous songs, shallow sermons, but to deny history and to deny reality is to miss the deep meaning of Christmas. We can't celebrate Christmas by forgetting the starving people of Africa. As we sing, as we feast, as we party, their swollen stomachs, watery eyes, and hopeless faces haunt us. We can't celebrate Christmas without remembering the 1200 persons--mostly children--dead from the poison gas in India, and the countless others suffering blindness, impotence, and epidemics. That's reality; that's the context of Christmas; that's the world into which Jesus was born. He was only a wee baby when King Herod sent his soldiers to kill every male child under the age of two in hope of killing the Messiah, but Jesus and his parents escaped to Egypt. He had to be born in a barn because there was no room in the inn. Remember all the story, not just the pleasant parts. Remember, repent, celebrate, and act; act that suffering may be alleviated, that this world might be redeemed.

When you remember your family's history, when you remember your past Christmases, remember not only the light, but the dark spots as well. Remember, repent, celebrate, and act. Perhaps even now there is alienation within your family. Perhaps relationships are strained with some family members. Perhaps you haven't spoken to an old friend in years because feelings were hurt. Remember the dark spots, repent, and act. Take a step towards reconciliation. Remembering is a viable, dynamic exercise when it results in a desire and action to reconcile and unify. Then, celebration is truly a celebration.

Remember. On the first day back to school after Christmas vacation, a teacher asked the children to share their experiences of Christmas, to remember and share. The first child said, "We are Catholics and we went to midnight Mass, came home, went to bed, got up the next morning and we opened our presents." The second child said, "We are Methodists and we did about the same thing. We went to church for the Christmas Eve Candlelight service, came home, went to bed, got up the next morning and opened presents." The third child said, "Well, we didn't go to church. But on Christmas morning, we got up, opened our presents, and then we all went downtown to my dad's store. He showed us all the empty shelves, all the money we had made, and then we made a circle around the cash register, joined hands, and sang, "What a friend we have in Jesus."

As we remember the Christmas story, let us remember Jesus, what a friend we have, and that he is the light for the world. Sometimes we get so accustomed to the Christmas story, the Bible, and the gospel, that we forget the heart of it all: Jesus is the light for the world. Into the darkness of the world--a world where King Herods slaughter babies, a world where poison gas viciously kills and maims, a world where famine strikes indiscriminately, a world of hijacks, hostages and executions, a world of divorce, abuse, and estrangement--God lights a light for the world. And that light is Jesus. Jesus is what shines in the darkness.

Into the darkness, God didn't send just an idea for the world, but embodied the most noble of ideas and ideals in the person, Jesus. God didn't send just another institution or system to impose on people. Often the church has become just another repressive system, moralizing, squelching, intimidating. It is interesting how the often repressive Christian movement--the Roman Catholic Church--now in many parts of the world is a liberating force, now on the side of people, the oppressed, poor people. God is still in charge. Jesus is the light for the world, and can even bring light to repressive, moldy, dying institutions, even ours.

Jesus is the light for the world. Jesus was a person who lived on this earth and is now present with us. The Holy Spirit is a force, an energizing force named love, shining bravely throughout the dark spots of this world. Jesus Christ is uncontainable within an idea or an institution. Every time an idea or a church or a system has tried to claim Jesus or contain Jesus, it has become evil. The second commandment is clear, "You shall make no graven images." You shall not attempt to box God, or contain God, or claim exclusive knowledge and manipulation of God. Jesus is the light, and the darkness will not overcome that light, promised the Gospel of John.

Wherever Jesus went, and I believe the Holy Spirit is doing the same work today, Jesus did the following. First, Jesus met human need. He fed, he healed. As we respond with food for Africa, we are continuing Jesus' ministry. We are shining the light for the world. Secondly, Jesus freed people to live their lives. He forgave, he accepted, he encouraged. Third, Jesus taught his followers a new way of life, a life of discipleship, a life of ideals, a life fitting the New Age, the Kingdom of God. And fourth, Jesus challenged the systems, the oppressors of people. All of these four acts are love--expressions of love. All of these acts are lights in a world of darkness. All of these acts are what God is calling you and me, the church, to do. Shining the light of Jesus Christ in the dark spots of the world is our task, and the meaning of Christmas.

To make Christmas special this year, remember. Remember your past Christmases, the happy and the disappointing. Remember all our history, the Bible, both the light and the dark. Remember the focus of God's act: that Jesus is the Light for the World. Remember, repent, celebrate and act.

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