

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

ROOMY HEARTS

Sermon for Advent 3C—Zeph 3:14-20, Philippians 4:4-7

LPC, 12/16/12

Is there a war on Christmas?

For the sake of argument, let's say there is. Who is waging that war? Before you answer, consider this: you are more likely to hear Christmas carols from secular, commercial concerns than from church this time of year. You can get Christmas carols from any retail store or from the secular media, but you can't get them here in God's house. Not yet, anyway.

Of course, to those commercial concerns, Andrea Bocelli's rendition of *O Holy Night* is fungible with Eartha Kitt's *Santa Baby*, but never mind. They're the ones providing Christmas music. We're not.

The church, in perhaps the most counter-cultural stands of many counter-cultural stands, insists on saving Christmas till Christmas Eve at least. Then we party for twelve days. But the season the world calls Christmas Season the church calls Advent. And we reserve Advent for something very, very special.

Episcopal preacher Diana Butler Bass wrote a wonderful article on Advent that appeared online this past week, and which I have linked to Lawrencefield's Facebook page. She says,

It is not Christmas. It is Advent. During these weeks, churches are not merry. There is a muted sense of hope and expectation. Christians recollect God's ancient promise to Israel for a kingdom where lion and lamb will lie down together. The ministers preach from stark biblical texts about the poor and oppressed being lifted up while the rich and powerful are cast down, about society being leveled and oppression ceasing. Christians remember the Hebrew prophets and long for a Jewish Messiah to be born. The Sunday readings extol social and economic justice, and sermons are preached about the cruelty of ancient Rome and political repression. Hymns anticipate world peace and universal harmony.

Does that sound like *Rocking Around the Christmas Tree*?

Of course there is one line that might be applied to Advent from a song that strictly speaking should be reserved for Christmas. The song is *Joy to the World* and the line is "Let every heart prepare him room."

That, my friends, is the quintessence of Advent: Preparing room in the heart in which Christ may be born ... Feathering the mangers of our hearts, so that the infant Christ may be laid there safely.

We need to be better than that Bethlehem innkeeper who told Jesus' parents that there was no room for them. We need to reserve a room for Jesus. Not just any room, but the best and biggest room. Then we need to change the sheets, shake out the

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blankets, and replenish the soap, shampoo and toilet paper. It would be really nice if we could put out fresh flowers or a fruit basket, turn down the covers and put a chocolate on the pillow.

Unfortunately, too many of us are not even open for business. We're out waiting in line for the Black Friday sales, and complaining because the salesclerk said, "Season's Greetings," instead of "Merry Christmas."

How can we prepare Jesus room in midst of this madness? How do feather the mangers of our hearts for him? How do we reserve him room at the inn? How do we open for business? By this I'm not referring to anything about commercial transactions, but instead *God's* business of transforming creation.

Using the Bethlehem innkeeper as a negative example, I suggest the disciplines of welcome and hospitality.

Now there are several in this congregation who have what I'd call the gift of hospitality. Unexpected company? Pull up a chair! Party for 150? No problem.

Hospitality is a spiritual gifts for some of us, but hospitality is a spiritual discipline for all of us. Hospitality as a spiritual discipline is not necessarily opening our houses to all and sundry. Hospitality as a spiritual discipline is intentionally widening our capacity to appreciate other people as children of God. If you're inclined to ignore a certain type of person, instead consciously consider him or her as a valued human being. If you become irritated at someone, remember that he or she is also a flawed human, but lovable in God's eyes.

I am told that the Benedictines practice a radical hospitality such that each visitor to the monastery is treated with supreme respect and affection. Their reason is that part of their Rule is to greet each stranger as if he or she were Christ himself. By making room for others, they make room for Christ.

As long as there is room for Christ within us, people saying "Season's Greetings" pose no threat to Christmas. (Leave it to human nature to find a way to take offense at someone wishing you well!) Christians have no right to complain about "Season's Greetings" unless they have greeted every stranger as they would Christ himself.

Keeping Christ in Christmas has nothing to do with whether or not you say, "Merry Christmas." Keeping Christ in Christmas has everything to do with having a roomy heart, prepared for Jesus, indeed, prepared for all whom God loves. That's everyone.

As St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians: "Let your gentleness be known to everyone... And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." If there *is* a "War on Christmas," we really have nothing to fear.