



“A Portrait in Contrasts”

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Hayward, California*

*Fourth Sunday in Advent
Christmas Eve
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Our Worship Team met a few days ago to make final preparations for today’s services. The first topic of conversation was about how to arrange this room. The renovation of our Sanctuary hasn’t just given us grief; it’s also given us options—endless options—about how to arrange Oliver Hall for worship.

One of us was prepared to tear down the Christmas pageant set this week, which I thought was a gracious offer given how hard he had worked with his artist friends to make it so lovely last week; but I insisted that we leave it up, and we did. And the set, as you may realize, has even been embellished a bit for today’s services.

Part of my motivation for leaving up the set was to remind those of us who were here last Sunday of the wonderful intergenerational pageant that took place in this very room.

I am still reveling in the memory of certain ones of you who never have a hair out of place, accepting the children’s invitation to join the shepherd’s section and do the shepherd’s headdresses, thereby crushing your Sunday hairdos.

Likewise, I loved peering out over the pulpit and seeing some of the most serious among us, seated in the magi section, wearing made-over Burger King crowns and great-big smiles.

Truthfully, it was hard for me to give up the halo that was loaned to me by my heavenly hostesses in the angel section. That halo brought back memories of Christmas pageants past when my twin sister and I appeared in the angel choir, reciting memory verses at the top of our lungs, while standing on the last row of the choir risers and trying not to fall off the back—when some kid in front of us made an ungraceful move during our performance.

Several of you even commented on my crooked halo, last Sunday, and how you thought it showed my true nature, and I agreed. My beloved Stephanie, by

contrast, often sees me through rose colored glasses, thought that my crooked halo was out of character, and had to stifle an impulse to interrupt the service in order to right my heavenly headdress.

Perhaps in a way that only theatre can do, being in our pageant last Sunday may have helped some of us—especially some of us adults—see ourselves as true characters in the divine-human drama of Christmas, even though we have long since exchanged our pageant costumes for parental and professional drag.

As we dare to see ourselves in this motley yet holy cast, I hope that we will pause to note—not only the hilarity that such pageantry evokes—but also the sharp contrasts that the nativity projects through the ages—sharp contrasts that are reflected in our own lives.

Consider the stark contrasts inherent in the Christmas story—contrasts between light and dark, rich and poor, the mighty and the powerless.

- ◆ The Light of the World is born in a land of deep darkness.
- ◆ The conception of Christ testifies to God's new economy that would turn the world upside down.
- ◆ A peasant woman gives birth to the King of Kings.

Rarely are these Christmas contrasts noted in our celebrations, even in our churches. Instead of noticing the contrasts, we tend to emphasize the positives. We focus on light, wealth, and might to the exclusion of darkness, poverty, and powerlessness.

On the positive side, we set up the Christmas tree, hang every decoration we own, and turn on the lights. We polish the family silver and put out our best china. We serve traditional dishes, some of which take hours to prepare. We put on our new holiday clothes. We spend hours at the salon, and hours longer primping before parties. We wash and wax our vehicles—maybe even vacuum the trunk. We scrub our houses from top to bottom, or hire someone else to do it.

We put our all into Christmas, and why not? Christmas inspires us to give our best to God and our loved ones, and this is a good thing.

Not only do we give our best, we also tend to only share our best news. Think of the Christmas letters that we give and receive. Our epistles do not enumerate the negatives. They accentuate the positives. They describe job promotions, home improvement projects, children's accomplishments, wedding celebrations, exotic travels, and high aspirations for the coming year.

Our Christmas letters rarely include news of a breadwinner's unemployment, an eviction notice from the landlord, marriages run amuck, chronic or terminal illness, or dreams deferred for one reason or another.

Some of you may wonder why I would speak of unpleasanties on the fourth Sunday in Advent, when we light the candle of Joy.

My answer is this: there is a danger in not noticing the sharp contrasts inherent in the Christmas story. There is a danger in not noticing the contrasts between dark and light, poor and rich, and power and might.

One danger in *not noticing* these contrasts is that we will be tempted to only see and celebrate the bright, shiny parts of Christmas, and therefore succumb to the belief that Madison Avenue got it right: that Christmas is only for the pretty people and that this holiday is only about acquiring more stuff.

Another danger in *not noticing* the sharp contrasts in the Christmas story is that we may be tempted to suppress or run from the sad, hard aspects of our lives that sometimes surface more poignantly in this season. The danger is that we may become like the innkeeper who had no room for the holy family. We may close off the vary parts of our souls that most need to hear the good news of Christmas and to receive the presence of Christ. If this happens, then we in turn, may miss the gospel message: that suffering is not our purpose, that poverty is not God's will, and that death is not the end.

A further danger in *not noticing* the sharp contrasts in the Christmas story is that we may be unable to experience the deep Joy of Christmas, or therefore miss the inspiration to become like the angels, shepherds and magi, who felt compelled to go and tell others what had been seen and heard.

So this is my Christmas wish for all of us this year: that we dare to peer into the set of this divine-human drama, and pay attention to the sharp contrasts of dark and light, rich and poor, and power and might.

Let us peer in and see *our whole lives* represented in Bethlehem, both the bright, shiny parts, and the sad, hard parts. Let us peer in and see, and remember that God sent the good news of Christmas for all people, and God meant for this good news to permeate every aspect of our lives and world.

Let us peer in, and believe these truths, and as we do, discover all over again the true meaning of Christmas. Merry Christmas, everyone. Amen.