

The Prince of Peace Meets Shalom Santa Tonight

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Redlands First United Methodist Church
December 24, 2009--9 pm

I have a question for you, “What do you call Santa’s Helpers?”—Subordinate Clauses. Ever since our public places have taken down mangers and “Merry Christmas” banners, I have paid special attention--and, frankly, have been impressed with the creative *abstract holiday designs* for the banners or decorations that hang from street lights downtown or on poles in shopping center parking lots. We see tree-like triangles, candle-like rectangles, and all sorts of squiggles. In downtown Redlands--as well as in Loma Linda--our street decorations are three star-like shapes with squiggles below them.

I have another question for you--this one is more serious: What is the relationship between the Christ child, the one whom the prophet Isaiah told people to expect and Santa Clause, who kindly distributes gifts via his special energy-saving vehicle tonight?

We might argue that there is very little connection between Santa and Christ and between mangers and our new abstract squiggles. If we think there is hardly any connection, we might bemoan the fact that we do not have crèches all over the place to remind us of the reason for the season.

However, I confess that observing all the abstract symbols in public places actually causes me to think more than I used to, when “Merry Christmas” banners waved along our towns’ sidewalks.

Christ was born into a world that desperately wanted God to turn things over and to shake things up. Into that world his birth, life and ministry was a *strange thing* that *actually did change their lives for good and offered so much promise.*

When people expect a leader to look like what they think a leader looks like, they have to *ponder a while* when they are told that a baby born to a poor couple would be called upon, when he grew up, to transform the world. *Just the strange ups and downs in this story are enough to make some transformations.* The so-called lowly are really not low. The so-called high and mighty are really not so high. An emperor might wear no clothes, while a baby wore swaddling clothes.

The crèche *was* a shocking image...baby in manger rather than king on throne.

Yet, over the centuries, plenty of us have become *accustomed* to the manger. Its shock value has worn off. We still *revere and celebrate* the holy family and child—but really, are we *shaken up by them*?

The newer abstract symbols on banners which are *meant to avoid* naming Christmas actually demand more of us, and they get my imagination working. These tree-like, candle-like, angel-like images and squiggles don’t *reveal* so much as they *invite* us passers-by to *ponder*. Think of that. Pondering is exactly what the manger and baby images are intended to evoke.

The so-called not-exclusively-Christian abstract images point somewhere. They are symbols, and they point to “The Holy,” especially if that’s where we are looking. These symbols might nudge Christians to look up to those who get the smallest paycheck or to look eye-to-eye with Jews, whose symbolic star has six points instead of five.

What about Santa, whose upper lip is surely going to be white tonight as he ‘gets milk’ in so many homes?

Although the image of Santa came from Saint Nicholas, a very Christian Saint from the 4th Century in Turkey who secretly gave gifts to those in need, we sometimes think of Santa as leading the parade of the “secular” side of this Holy Day. I think differently. **Maybe Santa is for children what mangers and “Merry Christmas” banners are for adults.** That is, maybe Santa makes Christmas OBVIOUS. Santa is very “real,” tangible, touchable. We can sit on Santa’s lap, just as we can put a doll into a manger. These are concrete things.

By contrast, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Prince of Peace is hard to visualize. Does the Prince of Peace have a beard or braids? Drive a Hybrid or ride on a Dragonfly? Is the Wonderful Counselor a psychologist? Surely not.

We’ll track Santa’s journey tonight—on radio, TV, and probably even on the internet. We *imagine* his route, and children who celebrate Christmas around the earth have high expectations. *I wonder whether we adults wonder about the path of the Prince of Peace tonight. Do we stay up with excitement, expecting peace--or at least leaps of compassion--to descend?*

The Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, Mighty God is a force, a presence, a field of Love, an invisible power that, just like Light, shines brighter **if we permit it to**. In a sense, it’s too wonderful to draw on a street light banner.

I have an idea: instead of being frustrated with too much Santa, *we could use what we’ve got*. We invite Santa into our homes, even down our chimneys. Why not imagine the Prince of Peace coming along with him? I think that would satisfy both the Prince who was born a baby and the Kindly Saint who secretly gave to the poor.

The whole point of Christmas, of Christ’s birth, is that a very real human being was born into a very real world that needed him. Our real world *can be* transformed tonight, *as we, and lots of others*, invite in the Prince of Peace into our relationships, at home, at our offices, and even into international decision-making. If *Santa* helps us to imagine, to expect, to feel connected with those around the world, to love—I’d say, Santa deserves to be called *Shalom Santa*, for he has prompted us to hold onto the “hope and dreams of all the years”-- Peace on Earth, Good Will for All.