

Christmasize your Christmas

December 14, 2008

It's increasingly hard to sell small as anything good to our twenty-first century consumer-crazed culture. Those few items we do want to be physically small (Ipods, PCs, cell phones) are only good because they pack a big technology wallop. And of course, we all know that a kiss begins with Kay...we see the commercials with the small velvet covered boxes gracing our televisions during practically every t.v. show...and now even the Christmas ornament are getting into the act. But besides jewelry and electronics such as ipods, our society is big crazy.

This is true of department stores as well as bakeries and bookstores...and of churches. The mega churches are thought to do everything right and to be successful...and the smaller, more intimate churches are seen as struggling and just waiting for extension.

Bigger is better. The biggest is best.

The trend in everyday conversation is to use grandiose words. "Outstanding" is the new "good," "amazing!" is the new "OK," and "huge!" is the new "big."

I was in a restaurant recently and everything I asked was answered in superlatives.

Me: How's the salmon?

Server: Fantastic!

Me: Does it come with rice?

Server: Absolutely!

Would a good and a yes have been sufficient?

Undeniably!

At Starbucks, the smallest coffee you can order is a Tall.

"At Starbucks, Tall is small. Grande, which is both Italian and Spanish for large, is medium

Have you been listening to how people describe the news? It's not good or bad, it's wonderful or devastating. How's the weather? Either beautiful or horrible. The stock market never just goes up or down, it soars or tumbles, rockets or careens...or plummets or crashes...even when it just goes down a few points, they always speak of it in superlatives.

Despite cultural appearances to the contrary, the Christmas season is NOT about bling-bling. To be sure, that doesn't seem to be the case after a walk around shopping malls and Main Streets garlanded and glistening, gee-gawed and gaudy. But in the season of Advent we're not preparing for the arrival of a dazzling behemoth. We're preparing for the arrival of a small, seemingly insignificant baby, born to a young girl from an out of the way place in an insignificant village...even more...not born in a palace or a temple or even a capital...but a stable...more on that in a minute. No, in Christmas, we are not perpareing for the Bling-Bling...venti latte, supreme super duper advent of the messiah...but the quiet birth of the world's savior...the birth of love, gentle and humble and quiet and strong.

Advent looks forward not to blinding bling-bling but to twinkle, twinkle little star.

As with so many divinely-sent messages Advent, gets skewed and skewered by human nature, making our attention to the small, the fragile and the faltering even less at this time of year. Instead of celebrating the twinkle-in-the-eye of God, we're blinded by the glare of Nieman-Marcus glitz and glamour.

Instead of this being the season when "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them", this becomes the season when the wolf comes out in all of us.

Don't think so? Check out the parking lot of your closest upscale mall. Listen to the horns honking obscenities at each other. Witness the Nascar antics as drivers desperately race for the next available parking space. Try dodging the rat-race running for the nearest mall entrance.

The Advent season is the time of the year to Christmasize your life.

To Christmasize your life means to pay attention to the small voice, the small growth, the small crack, the small table, the small talk, the small town (like Bethlehem), the small change, the small children . . . To the quiet place, the young girl, the lasting love, the gentle spirit, the quiet strength and abiding faith...

To Christmasize your life means to recognize the importance of unimportance. To make God's priorities your own... **let it be done to me according to your word acceptance.**

To Christmasize your life means to start small, to pay attention to those things that are smaller than life, to sweat the small stuff.

To Christmasize your life means to honor the fact that big things don't become big, only small things become big.

To Christmasize your life means hearing God say to each one of us: "You dreamed to do great things. You did small things faithfully and well. Well done, good and faithful servant.

And To Christmasize your Christmas is to take a moment to consider the stable. That Jesus was not born in the capital city, or the center of the known world...not a place of power or knowledge or strength...except the gentle strength that comes from the love between Mary and Joseph...together on this long and arduous journey of life. They had come a long way from Joseph putting Mary away because she was found to be with child. Joe had had a dream with the same Angel who had visited Mary that fateful day...had he had believed God and he had believed in Mary. Together they had begun a journey of faith and love and this leg had ended in a place they would never have guessed....not in their own home, nor her mother's place, or cousin Elizabeth's...not even an inn...but in a stable! There was a census...they had to make the long, dangerous trip with her 9 months pregnant! On donkey back! Boy is Joseph brave!

In a stable, because there is no room for them in the inn. Said so mater of fact...he does no force his way. Such a babe in such a place. What do we see here? Divinity breaks into our earthbound lives, and what does this mean? It means at least this – instead of keeping his distance, God came very close. That's at the heart of the Christmas message. Instead of keeping his distance, God came very close. Matthew records the meaning of Jesus' coming in this fashion – 'his name shall be called Emanuel, which means God with us.' Did you hear the story of that woman who was asked to serve as the chairperson of a Christmas celebration that was to be held in the center of the town? She came to her pastor in distress because of the Christmas music which she had to choose for the program. Most of the carols, she said, are so distressingly theological. Well, they are. They can't be otherwise. So Charles Wesley, the prolific hymn writer who set Methodism to music, rose to his greatest height of expression when he set down those hymns of advent and nativity. Listen to him in one of those high moments of inspiration –

Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord.
Long desired behold him come, finding here his humble home.
Veiled in flesh the God head see, hail the incarnate deity.
Pleased as men with men to dwell, Jesus our Emanuel.

God has come to dwell with persons in the form of a person, and this is what the world had waited so long for – a human quality in God which would bring him near. Flesh of our flesh, body of our body. It seems such a simple thing, so common and so earthy. A little baby born in a cold cave stable, but then people realized, and we seek to grasp the truth more fully, the coming of Christ is the work of God, to satisfy the eternity he has set in our hearts. The yearning, the deep yearning that is present in us all. God has implanted it there, though sometimes unrecognized and unnamed. We want to know God. We want to share in this life, and we want him to share in ours. So he does. Instead of keeping his distance, God has come very close to us. He came in the way we would know him best, in love, as a little baby. Robert Browning demonstrated at least a hint of this love when he met and married Elizabeth Barrett. She was known as the invalid of Wimple Street. One morning after their marriage, she slipped up behind him and placed a manuscript in his pocket, and she said to him, please read it, and if you don't like it, tear it up. Robert Browning read the love poem she had written to him and we know them today as the Sonnets from the Portuguese. One of the deeply moving lines reads, 'The face of all the world is changed, I think, since first I heard the footsteps of your soul.' Christmas is the time when we hear the footsteps of God. Because of, instead of keeping his distance, he has come very close, and he came to us, taking upon himself our nature. Divinity has broken into our earthbound life. Such a babe in such a place. Instead of keeping his distance, God has come very close.

But there's a second big aspect of the incarnation. When God could have demonstrated mighty power, he came in weakness.

How difficult this is for us to appropriate. We are impressed by power, not by weakness. Everything about us is geared to gaining power. We are hardly out of our diapers before we begin to test our strength against each other. We think big is better, biggest is best.

To Christmatize our Christmas, we need to come again to the stable, and see the baby there...to hear the angels sing.