

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Luke 2:8-20

December 24, 2010, 11:00 p.m. – Browns Point UMC

Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

Every year, there's a Christmas song for me – one that I play again and again, to which I sing loudly – one that never gets old. Last year it was Chris Rice's "Welcome to Our World." This year's song is a bit less holy, but a lot more festive and fun: it's the 12 Days of Christmas from the Indiana University a cappella group, *Straight No Chaser*. If you haven't heard it on the radio or been one of the millions to watch the video on YouTube, it's three-and-a-half minutes of perfect harmonies that include all twelve days of Christmas (sometimes more than one at a time), Deck the Halls, Santa Claus is Coming to Town, Here We Come a Wassailing, Carol of the Bells, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the Dreidel Song, and a version of Twelve Days set to the tune of the 80's pop song, "Africa." Doo do do do do do dooooo...

Now if you didn't know, the Twelve Days of Christmas are actually a Christian idea – they're the twelve days from Christmas Day to Epiphany, which is January 6, and is the day we celebrate the magi – the wise men – visiting the baby Jesus. In liturgical language, these days are the season of Christmastide. But any connection of the actual song, which is at least 300 years old, with Christian or liturgical tradition, is relatively recent and somewhat contrived. As much as a recent Sunday School teacher would like you to believe it's a catechism song – the partridge in the pear tree representing Jesus, the two turtle doves representing the old and new testaments, the three French hens representing the three cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and love, etc., etc... It's not a song about Jesus: it's a song about giving increasingly large and lavish gifts, many of them birds.

And that makes it pretty appropriate that the *Straight No Chaser* version alone has been one of the best-selling Christmas songs in America for the last four years running. Because that's what Christmas is about for us, right? The giving and receiving of increasingly large and lavish gifts. When we are young, the focus is generally on receiving – I remember, as a child, not only making long lists of the things I wanted to receive for Christmas, but also calling my friends on Christmas day to list off all the gifts I had received and hear what they had received to compare my loot with theirs. [To that end, my sister and I always received exactly the same number of gifts – my parents were smart that way.] When we get older, though, generally (hopefully) our focus moves more toward the giving: we like to think we are excellent gift-givers and sincerely generous people. In truth, giving gifts makes us feel powerful and allows us to demonstrate our own generosity and thoughtfulness, perceived or real.

I know I have felt especially proud of myself this year, in particular. My small family, in an effort to keep Christmas from becoming an orgy of consumption for our small daughter – who, frankly, couldn't care less at this age – has adopted a new tradition of giving and receiving three gifts each: something to read, something to wear, and something to play with. One of the three gifts should be used. I thought and thought for weeks about the gifts I would purchase for Steven, and eventually ended up not only with exactly what I wanted to give, but three gifts that follow *a common theme*. I'm just beside myself waiting for him to open them in the morning, because I think I'm so clever and will be so extraordinarily appreciated because of my excellent gift-giving. [I'll let you all know how that goes.]

But the point is that it's easy for us to feel proud of ourselves when we're giving – and even to feel holy because of our generosity.

The problem is that Christmas – the Bible version, not the Twelve Days version – is not about a gift exchange. In fact, it's not about *us* giving at all. Read the story again: none of the people

mentioned actually *do* anything. They're all passive participants: God sends an angel to tell them what's happening, and they go along with it. Humans didn't think of, enact, or even really understand what happened that first Christmas night. What God did in coming to earth as Emmanuel – God with us – wrapped up in the flesh of an infant – was so beyond anything we could understand, anything we could imagine, anything we could achieve by effort or striving, that God had to resort to strange, supernatural means to get it done. It was all God: God giving Godself to us, to the world, God showing God's love in the most dramatic and tangible way possible, God showering the world with an unending fountain of grace – and us *receiving*.

And that is the beginning of discipleship: we learn to see our very lives as gifts. We realize that we can do nothing to become more holy on our own – we rely fully on the work of God in our lives. We accept that in fact we cannot alone set things to right or take charge. We can't save the world, no matter how hard we try, how pure our intentions, how generous or thoughtful we are. We can only receive the grace God offers, ponder it in our hearts as Mary did, and then glorify and praise God for all we have heard and seen, following the shepherds into the world.

Some of the best gifts in life are things we didn't know we wanted. This was the case for the world when God came to earth in the form of a helpless child and transformed the world forever. The same is possible for us tonight: no matter what it is we are hoping is under the tree, no matter how excited we are for our loved ones to open the gifts we so thoughtfully and generously purchased or made, the truth is, as disciples, we go into this night empty-handed, and all we can do is receive the gift of grace God offers.

That beautiful old hymn describes how there was no room in the Inn in Bethlehem for Jesus, and then the refrain says again and again, "O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee." It's not something we can do ourselves – by thought or generosity or effort – but God's love and grace are available to all of us, without limit. All we have to do is make room in our hearts to receive him.

Amen.