

KEEPING CHRISTMAS

Dr. John Allan Lavender
Luke 2:8-14

I'm glad Christmas comes in December.

When the gaunt and naked trees look like spider webs against the dull, gray sky.

When the wind is cold and the nights are chilled.

When the ground is either stone hard from a heavy freeze or mud soft from a sudden thaw.

I'm glad Christmas comes in December.

When the streets are apt to be banana-peel slick from a thin film of ice.

When the hedges which hem that little plot of land we call our own stand skinny and forlorn, huddled together like a bunch of frightened storks who have suddenly lost their feathers and are trying to keep warm.

I'm glad Christmas comes in December.

When the wet of winter puts its telltale mark on the bottom of your trousers and leaves a ragged, white ring on your shoes where once there was a semblance of a shine.

When the restless wind sets up its lonely howl and even the sound of banging shutters and moaning trees sends a shiver up your spine.

I'm glad Christmas comes in December.

When the lupin and the daffodils, the gladioli and the calla lilies lay limp and cold, devoid of all their color and the world about seems dead or dying.

I'm glad it's then that Christmas comes.

When the atmosphere is grim and gray.

How wonderful to hear the happy strains of a Christmas carol when even the frosty December stars seem to join in singing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come."

I think God planned it this way. I think God gave us Christmas in December so we would know Christmas is not a season, but a spirit. A season which does not depend upon --

The rise and fall of the barometer.

The direction of the winds.

The set of the thermometer.

The degree of humidity in the air.

For the fact of the matter is that when the elements have done their worst and shown the ugly side of their nature, it is then that Christmas descends upon us.

Christmas puts a new cast on winter.

Sometimes it makes it seem less wicked. There is a fresh, new fragrance in the air. The very same snow which we had cursed a week ago because it clogged the streets and disrupted traffic, now seems to crown the earth with a halo of white and we bless God for it.

Even the wind seems to act like a school boy, kicking up flurries of snow in its path, with a wave of its magical wand Christmas gives a mystical touch to winter and makes it beautiful.

Yes, I'm glad Christmas comes in December. When life is hard.

If it had come in May when the flowers are blooming and the grass is green and the trees are bursting with new leaves,

or in October when the woods are a fairy land of reds, yellows and browns and Indian Summer brings its fresh supply of exuberance,

if Christmas had come at any other time of the year, how easy it would be to say,

“This just won’t last. This wonderful feeling. This wonderful spirit of good will toward men. It’s all a product of the season. The sky is blue. The sun is warm. The trees are green. The flowers are fragrant. That’s why we feel this way. That’s why it’s Christmas.”

But you see, Christmas doesn’t come in spring or fall.

It comes in winter, the hardest period, the hardest time of the year.

It takes the bitter and makes it sweet.

It takes the hard and makes it easy.

It takes the cold and, in a way we can't explain, makes it warm and wonderful.

Because it can do that to December, we know it can also do something good in March, July and September.

Because it is a spirit, and not a season, we seem to know that if we try, if we really try, we can go on Keeping Christmas the whole year through.

The other day, Susie Thayer dropped by the office with a wonderful quotation from Henry Van Dyke who once said:

“It’s a good thing to observe Christmas day, but there is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day, and that is keeping Christmas.”

In the little paragraph which Mrs. Thayer so thoughtfully brought by, Van Dyke goes on to say:

“Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and desires of little children?

To remember the weakness, the loneliness of people who are growing old:

To stop asking how much your friends love you and ask yourself whether you love them enough;

To bear in mind the things that other people have to bear in their hearts;

To try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you,

To trim your lamp so it will give more light and less smoke,

And to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you;

To make a grave for your ugly thoughts and a garden
for your kindly feelings.

With the gate open. Are you willing to do these things,
even for a day?

Then you can keep Christmas.

“Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest
thing in the world?

Stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than
death?

And that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem 1900
years ago is the image and brightness of eternal love?

Then you can keep Christmas.

And, if you keep it for a day, why not always?
But you can never keep it alone.”

Mr. Van Dyke says some powerful things in that brief paragraph, but none so poignant as that last line, “You can never keep it alone.”

The first Christmas was a sharing experience in which God gave His son.
Ever since, the only thing people have kept, is what they give away.
If we want to keep Christmas, we, too, must be willing to give ourselves away.

“Giving is living,” the angel said,
“Go feed to the poor sweet charity’s bread.”

“And must I keep giving and giving again?”
My selfish and questioning answer ran.

“Oh no,” said the angel, his eyes pierced me through.

“Just give ‘till the Master stops giving to you.”

This week I heard, quite by accident, how a fine friend of our church caught the spirit of giving which makes “Keeping Christmas” possible. His employees had collected a sum of money to purchase him a Christmas present. When he heard of it, he called them together and said,

“I don’t really need anything. I tell you what we’ll do. You go ahead with your collection. I’ll match what you give. We’ll put it together and buy some toys for little tots who otherwise won’t have a Christmas.”

The result of that conversation was over \$200 worth of wonderful, shiny, brand new toys. Great big panda bears, dozens of beautiful baby dolls for little girls and stacks of airplanes and car kits for little boys. Half of those toys went to an orphanage up on the north side. The other half came to our church, and through our church, to needy families at our American Baptist South Chicago Neighborhood House. This Christmas morning, there will be scores of happy children who, with radiant faces and joy-filled voices, will be able to laugh and sing, because one man caught the real spirit of Christmas.

But the real miracle is this. By a peculiar twist of divine economics, the man who gave his Christmas present to others is the most richly blessed of all. He has discovered that “Giving is living.” So he will go on “Keeping Christmas” in his heart long after December 25th is past and gone.

That same spirit of giving is what makes our Outdoor Christmas Pageant something to remember. All week long the telephone has been ringing. People have stopped by the office. One lady even wrote a note. All of them thanking us for the Christmas present.

No one really knows how many people gave how much of their time and energy to make this

Christmas gift to our community possible. Hours and hours were spent in building sets,
making costumes,
arranging electrical fixtures,
cutting tapes,
rehearsing parts,

and this past week folks gave two, three, four, some even six nights so Morgan Park and the surrounding communities could know that Jesus is the reason for the season! That the coming of Christ is the true core of Christmas.

They were just as busy as everybody else at this time of the year. But somehow or other, they managed to fit it in. As a result, throughout the days and months of 1957, those people are going to go on “Keeping Christmas.”

Because they sacrificed once, it will be easier to sacrifice again.

Because they tasted the sweet nectar of giving, they will not be content until they drink deeply of that cup again.

Because they have given self, out of love for Christ and others, they will have learned to pray with Grace Bush,

“Lord, let me keep a Christmas heart,
That hears and sees another’s need,
And strives each day to follow Thee,
In word and deed!

“Lord, let me keep a Christmas heart,
To light with joy the children’s eyes,
And know the Christ child. Though He come
in humble guise.

“So may I keep Thy birthday, Lord!

In all I say, in all I do!
A Christmas heart of faith and love
The whole year through!"

If I could have one wish for our church I could not wish for more than we learn the secret of "Keeping Christmas" the whole year through.

It was not a preacher, but a plumber, who once made this significant remark:

"What is blocking God's plan for a better world is not the gross sin of what we call the underworld, with its bootleggers and narcotic rings, but rather something wrong in the spirit of religious people. The gravest menace to society is not a gunman, not the gangsters in the movies, but the unspiritual church."

To that criticism, we should couple a statement made by Reinhold Niebuhr when he said,

"All too often the church is an institution designed to make selfish people think they are unselfish."

Does that sound too harsh? Too hard? Well, the sad fact of the matter is we do not really keep the spirit of Christmas alive the other 364 days of the year.

Our Christmas cards are a good illustration of that. We are very careful to make sure we send a card to everyone who sends one to us, but how often during the months of January to November do we take the time to send a little word of cheer or warmth or encouragement or comfort to someone in need?

How often do we pay the slightest attention to an announcement printed in the Advance, or made from the pulpit, suggesting we send a get well card to someone in the hospital? Or a note of Christian condolence to someone who has lost a loved one?

We send gifts and greetings at Christmas time because a little bit of the meaning of Christ's birth rubs off on us. I wonder what would happen if the spirit of Christmas really invaded us this year. Why, it would mean a revolution. A permanent change. The spirit of giving would go on day by day, and not just at this special season. Throughout the entire year --

We would find hurt feelings could be healed through the forgiveness of Christian love. The kind of love we show at Christmas time.

We would find strained relationships could be improved through the touch of kindly words. The kind of words we speak at Christmas time.

We would find whole areas of our personal, community, national and international life could be changed for the better through the exercise of a Christian conscience and the use of Christian deeds. The kind of conscience and deeds we show at Christmas time.

In this nuclear age in which we live, I don't think our world can long survive if we continue to be content to keep Christmas in December only. The good of Christmas must be kept all year. The same humility, kindness, meekness and love which surrounds this season must become evident in our hearts and lives from January to November, too. As Peter Marshall puts it,

"In a world that is not only changing, but even seems to be dissolving, there remains one way to peace. It is the only way.

Untried, untested and largely unexplored. It is the way of Him who was born a babe in Bethlehem."

That's my Christmas wish for you. That you will give yourself a gift which no amount of money can buy.

A gift so powerful nothing in all this world can keep you from possessing it, except your own unwillingness.

A gift which will fill your days with the glory and brightness which lights this holy season.

A gift of faith and hope and selflessness which will enable you to keep on "Keeping Christmas" the

whole year through.

When Marjorie Davis Rowel was in our church a few Sunday evenings ago, she read a beautiful poem entitled The Christmas Spirit. It meant so much to me I asked her for a copy and she graciously sent me one. I'd like to conclude my Christmas message by passing it on to you.

Wouldn't life be worth the living and this old world seem like new,
If we'd keep the spirit of Christmas every day the whole year
through?

There's be fewer then of heartaches, fewer still of blinding tears,
There'd be less of misunderstanding, down the road to after-years.
Why should Christmas smiles be brighter than they are at other times?
Why should we be more forgiving to the tune of Christmas chimes?
Why put all our deeds of kindness on a tinsel Christmas tree?
Do we give for love of giving, or just for the world to see?

You have smiles that cost you nothing, pass them out along the
street.

You have words to praise, encourage, have they all grown obsolete?
Life is brighter, work is lighter, friends seem at our beck and call,
When we make believe it's Christmas, all the summer, spring and fall:
So remember, while December brings the only Christmas day,
Every day let there be Christmas in the things we do and say.
Wouldn't life be worth the living, wouldn't dreams be coming true,
If we'd keep the Christmas spirit all the year through?

Marjorie Davis Rowel