

Sermon December 27, 2015 Colossians 3:12-17

Since you have been chosen by God who has given you this new kind of life, and because of God's deep love and concern for you, you should practice tenderhearted mercy and kindness to others. Don't worry about making a good impression on them, but be ready to suffer quietly and patiently. Be gentle and ready to forgive; never hold grudges. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Most of all, let love guide your life, for then the whole church will stay together in perfect harmony. Let the peace of heart that comes from Christ be always present in your hearts and lives, for this is your responsibility and privilege as members of Christ's body. And always be thankful. Remember what Christ taught, and let His words enrich your lives and make you wise; teach them to each other and sing them out in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing to the Lord with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, and come with Him into the presence of God the Father to give God your thanks.

Baptist pastor Howard Thurman was an African American theologian and author and civil rights leader, born in 1899. He was a dean at both Howard and Boston Universities, and has been called one of the 50 most important figures in African American history. I discovered him when I first heard this quote of his: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Rev. Thurman wrote a poem called, "*When the Song of the Angels is Stilled*" and United Methodist singer-songwriter Jim Strathdee later set the poem to music in his song, "*I Am the Light of the World.*"

When the Song of Angels is Stilled

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and the princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart.

The Sunday after Christmas always feels anticlimactic to me. The wondrous village of Bethlehem - just through those doors - has been shut down. Christmas ornaments were filled with red and green M&M's and M&M's with the United Methodist cross and flame, and given to our guests on Christmas Eve. That night our dog donned the costume of a lamb for the children's service, at 11pm the Choir sang their hearts out, and at the close of both hours of worship we went outside under the almost-full-

moon, and lit candles, and sang *Silent Night*. The “Worship With Us at 5 & 11pm!” banners have been taken down. Christmas has come and gone.

Christmas is like the bliss of falling in love, or the first day of a new job, or the birth of a baby. It's like the euphoria Mary felt when the Angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that among all women she had been chosen to give birth to God's Son. That day Mary sang a prophetic song of love and liberation and she identified herself “the handmaid of the Lord.” But later when Mary and her fiancé Joseph had to walk for ten days so that Joseph could register in a census in his hometown, and Mary was nine months pregnant and leaving her mother and other female relatives who would have helped her birth her firstborn child, and she had to travel to a strange town not even knowing if there'd be a warm and safe place for her to give birth... I'm guessing there wasn't a lot of singing on the journey between Nazareth and Bethlehem but there was cussing and moaning.

I'm not cussing or moaning today but I feel kind of let-down after Christmas. Christmas has come, and with everything in us we have told this ancient and beautiful story in song and word and signs of hospitality and beauty to our extended family and our friends and to neighbors and strangers. I haven't been to the store yet but I'm sure all the Christmas leftovers on shelves are marked 50% off, and this week champagne and noise-makers for New Year's Eve will be featured. Christmas has come... and gone.

It's a running gag with my son, that every year what I'm getting him for Christmas is socks and underwear. On Christmas day all of us at the Sheffer house got new clothes. Ralph wore his new bathrobe around all day until we went out on Christmas night. And yesterday evening our kids and their friends tried on their new clothes just in case something didn't fit or didn't look good and needed to be exchanged. New clothes are fun and sometimes more than that... they're symbolic of change, like baptismal clothes, or wedding clothes, or funeral clothes.

The apostle Paul, who exchanged the clothes of an educated and prosperous Jew for the clothes of an itinerate preacher and jailbird, wrote to the early church about new clothes. His letter - which is today's scripture lesson - seems especially appropriate on the Sunday *after* Christmas. (Liturgically this is still the Christmas season but all physical, material evidence testifies that Christmas is over.) On Christmas Eve I said that the Christmas story - God's story - continues to be told in us. I grew up in the church and it's always been part of my life and I forget sometimes that not everyone has faith, not everyone knows or feels engaged by and included in God's story. But we who believe have been chosen (in the military it's called being “drafted”) just as Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zachariah and John and the shepherds were chosen (or “drafted”) to be part of God's story. Paul's letter to the early Church starts out with the news that we have been chosen by God. This is from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation: “So, **chosen by God for this new life** of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.”

Christmas - the gifts, the glamour, the glitz - is over. But as Howard Thurman wrote, now the work of Christmas begins. Now the work of love begins. And lest love

seem like a seasonal option Rev. Thurman spelled out for us what the work of love is, just as the apostle Paul did in his letter to the church at Colossae. In spite of evidence to the contrary (which says Christmas is over) the work of Christmas, lifelong work, has just begun.

The work of Christmas:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among people,

To make music in the heart.

The work of Christmas... telling God's story in word and deed - actually telling God's story with our lives - is the work of the church. No one is able to do this on their own or with good intentions or with the best of self-help. The work of Christmas can only be done in community, in prayer, and in the company of people whose lives inspire and encourage and enable our own growth as followers of Jesus Christ. Listen again to the rest of this morning's scripture lesson where Paul tells us of how to tell the Christmas story with our lives: "Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ - the Message - have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives - words, actions, whatever - be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way."

Christmas is not over; its work has just begun. May the real and lasting gifts we give each other - in this holy season and all year long - be prayer, forgiveness, high standards we hold ourselves and each other to of kindness, grace, and mercy, and above all... for each other, and for all the world, let us give what God has picked out for us to wear: that all-purpose garment, love. So one more time... Merry Christmas! Amen.