

"Keeping Christmas Year 'Round"

John 1:1-13; John 1:14-18

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 31, 2017—1st Sunday after Christmas—Rev. Ronald Botts

Not long ago we might have been thinking about how to keep Christmas in the most meaningful way. Actually, I think most of us go through this process in one way or another almost every year. How do we keep this most Holy Day for what it really is—the birth of Christ as the human embodiment of God. How do we make the Christmas season a renewal for all we believe in? How do we make this time of year where, because **we** are changed, we might help to change the world for the better? In short, how do we keep Christmas, Christmas?

Even the most secular of people often think we've made Christmas too commercial. The holiday is used, or misused, as a gigantic marketing event starting just after Halloween until all the post-Christmas sales are done sometime in January. It is non-stop retailing of one type or another.

If you have something to sell, this is certainly your golden opportunity. You want jewelry—we've got jewelry. You want clothes—we've got clothes. You want high tech gadgets—we have those, too. Spin your advertising just a little bit and you can market almost anything. Even something as unglamorous as a pill to reduce gas and that bloated feeling can be a commercial push that tells how to get through the holidays with the relief you need.

So in the midst of all the tinsel and blinking lights, all the inflatable reindeers and elves, all the cute but mushy words of songs like "I saw mommy kissing Santa Claus underneath the mistletoe last night," how do we keep the right meaning foremost in this holy time of year? Incidentally that last song by Jimmy Boyd rose to

the Number One song in the country in 1952, and was also particularly popular in Scandinavia. Go figure! The Catholic Archdiocese of Boston tried to ban it, but was unsuccessful. Something about promoting infidelity. They missed the whole premise of the song.

So how do we keep Christmas? Perhaps by doing just the opposite of what is implied. We don't preserve it by building a protective shield around it, by isolating it and treating it as a relic, but by going out and boldly **giving** it away.

Well, what do I mean by that? Let me approach it in this way. I've chosen one of my favorite songs today to be the one we'll sing as we conclude worship. We know it as *Go, Tell It on the Mountain*. It's a lively song most appropriate to sing the Sunday after December 25 because it's about giving Christmas away. In style, it would be what we'd call a spiritual. Take a listen to its refrain:

Go, tell it on the mountains,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountains,
That Jesus Christ is born!

While credited to John Wesley Work, a professor at Fisk University in Nashville a century ago, it probably came from the rich African American heritage of the South. I don't know who the original creators of this song had in mind to do the telling. Could those slaves and sharecroppers have been thinking about the shepherds? The Bible tells us that when the fieldworkers left the manger where they had seen the baby Jesus, "they made known what had been told them," and "all who heard it were amazed."

Or they might have been thinking about the aged woman, Anna, who was in the temple when Jesus was presented to the Lord. After she had seen Jesus, she began “to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” Like the shepherds, she wanted to tell the message “everywhere,” that “Jesus Christ is born.”

Or maybe the original folks who gave us this wonderful spiritual were thinking about John the Baptist. John, more dramatically than anyone, tried to tell the world—from the wilderness, from the Jordan River, from wherever he might be—that Jesus Christ was in the world right then. He made the announcement, and he did it well.

Another John provides us with our scripture text for today. The opening verses of his Gospel are as poetic, as majestic and as other-worldly as anything could be. They take us back before time, to the moments of creation. “In the beginning,” they say, there was the Word, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” That’s breathtaking in concept. It’s the sort of thing you wish you could set to music or attach to a picture because it’s really too immense to grasp in its entirety. Words alone soon fail us beyond a certain point.

Then, suddenly, when we’re so caught up in this eternal scene, the writer says, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.” When you read it for the first time you likely want to object, “What’s this doing here? What does this fellow John, about whom we’ve heard nothing until this moment, what’s he have to do with a light so powerful that the darkness cannot put it out? What’s this John have to do with a scene as grandiose as all

of this?” And we’re told simply that he has come to bear witness to the light.

After all, if Jesus is, indeed, the eternal Word, by whom the universe was made, and if he is the light of the world, then why does he need a witness? How, exactly, does one testify to a light? Isn’t light self-evident?

Well, that’s the earthly side of this remarkable gospel story. God’s part has been to send the Chosen One into the life of humanity. But then it was initially John’s responsibility to tell the world about the one who has come. In time, John’s task was to spread to others that they might also tell the story and spread this amazing news. And if it is a miracle that God came into the world in Jesus Christ, the Babe of Bethlehem, then it is almost as much of a miracle that God has entrusted this good news to human hands, to people like John and Paul, but also to people such as we.

John the Baptist led the way in introducing Jesus to the world, but he had no illusions about his assignment. Crowds were thronging to hear him and some began to ask John who he was. Was he a prophet or even the Messiah himself? John answered that he was nothing more than a voice in the wilderness, one who was preparing the way for the Christ. Perhaps he was the first to give Christmas away.

And people have been doing it ever since. That’s what the first apostles were about: they went everywhere sharing the Good News of what had taken place. They told of their first-hand experience of the who had been prophesied to come and to set people free from the constraints which bound them. The apostles also gave Christmas away.

Christmas-**givers** have come in remarkable variety down through the ages. Some have been among the greatest intellects our world has known -- persons like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltmann. They have been aestheticians like Hildegarde of Bingen and Thomas Merton, and activists like Mother Theresa and Dorothy Day.

But God has also used some of the simplest folks imaginable. Even folks like us. We, too, have a role to play but it may be hidden away from us unless we have the drive and imagination to discover what it is. We've got to put in some effort if we are to find our unique and intended part in sharing this message to the world.

If I could, I'd add some additional verses to our spiritual today. After singing, "Go, tell it on the mountain," I'd want a verse that would say, "Go, tell it with my words," because we have to verbalize the news of Christ if people are to learn of him. And again, "Go, tell it with my money," because while some of us can't go to the far corners of the earth with the message, we can help pay the way for those who do. And of course, "Go, tell it with my deeds of kindness," because sometimes the story is told best through a pot of soup, a note of concern, or a smile of patience.

If each of us does what is needed we would find our place to share this story—on mountains, hills, and everywhere—that Jesus Christ is born. Today is the right time to give Christmas away, because that is the way we keep Christmas the best.