

**December 13, 2009**

**Philippians 4:4-9**

## **The First Christmas Card**

**What is the Christmas message?**

**Christians are not always clear about the content of God's first Christmas card.**

**What should Franklin Church put on its own Christmas greeting?**

The first Christmas card, as we know it, was designed in 1843 by the artist J.C. Horsley. It measured about the size of a postcard.

From this design, one thousand cards were lithographed and hand-colored three years later for Sir Henry Cole, first director of the South Kensington Museum, London.

The first Christmas card shows a Victorian family celebrating the gentle spirit of the season around a table.

They are making a toast to the health and happiness of their family, friends and nation.

Flanking the scene of Christmas cheer and celebration was the biblical concern for "Clothing the Naked" and "Feeding the Hungry."

A lettered greeting was printed underneath the picture.

The first Christmas card did not set too well with most church folk. It contained too much partying. And the reminder of benevolence was too graphic and hard-hitting.

To understand the first Christmas card is to understand what Charles Dickens said of the converted Scrooge at the close of A Christmas Carol, "that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge."

Christmas cheer is not a frothy, frilly emotion.

A glance at this week's gospel text reminds us that John the Baptist's message was hardly music to the ears.

The Baptist's denouncement of the crowd as a "brood of vipers" is not a customary Christmas greeting.

Yet its very harshness forces us to re-examine the nature of advent.

Advent is grounded in the "good news" of Christ's coming.

"Good news" that was characterized by five ingredients that set it apart from all other good news. What are these five identifying marks of a true Christmas "greeting"?

First, is it new?

In a little town, just down the hill a few miles from Jerusalem, the Word became flesh.

God exchanged vows with humanity, for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer. It was a radical, never-before imagined step God took - to come among us, becoming fully present in human life.

A true Christmas greeting, therefore, never sounds corny. Its central message is so startlingly fresh that while it may become a staple, it can never become stale.

Second, is it scandalous?

The true Christmas message should offend people's expectations. The proud and rich were not invited to Jesus' first birthday party - only those who wouldn't mind stooping to enter the stable where Christ was born.

Christmas is not a glitzy department store event or a honeyed "feel-good" sentiment of our own childhoods.

Its scandal lies that in the dirty straw of a dingy stable - with a squalling newborn, an exhausted mother and a nervous father - the glory of God shone all around.

Third, is it excessive?

Only God could have dreamed the Christmas story.

An awesome love of Joseph for Mary; an awesome love of Mary for God; an awesome love of shepherds for a child; an awesome love of God for each one of us.

Paul's message to the Philippians this week begins by acknowledging this remarkable love and demanding that we respond with equal excessiveness: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice!"

Fourth, does it promote love?

After John the Baptist denounces the milling crowd as "vipers" he proceeds to give them counsel. He encourages them to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8).

John gives them specific examples of actions they must take and attitudes they must cultivate in order to promote the new age introduced by the Messiah.

These acts and attitudes are love made tangible. Essentially Christmas is a love story.

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The great German Reformer Martin Luther liked to remind his listeners that when God speaks to humanity, God always speaks in baby talk.

God does this, Luther says, because God is love, and God bends to our infirmities.

Fifth, does it bring joy?

Have you ever wondered what the shepherds talked about as they journeyed back to their sheep after visiting Bethlehem?

Doesn't it seem more likely that the shepherds were so full of joy at what they had witnessed that they went home singing and praising God.

This same spirit of joy should dominate our returns from visiting the Christ child and should permeate all Christmas greetings.

St. Paul said to the Romans 5:11, "We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The last night Christ spent on earth he said: "I shall see you again, and your hearts will be full of joy, and that joy no one shall take from you."

Or, as Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, "Nor let any one cheat you of your joy in Christ".

Taking these five qualities to heart might produce some rather unexpected Christmas greeting cards.

Imagine that John the Baptist makes his way out of scripture and onto a Christmas card. Imagine, putting John the Baptist on a Christmas Card:

'Our thoughts for you at this special time of year are best expressed by the one who said "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?" 'Merry Christmas."

Envision a whole new line of Scripture Christmas cards featuring Mary, as always, a lovely gentle teenager, brunette, perhaps framed in a window looking out onto rolling hills with a bright star shining in the evening sky.

The inscription would be:

"Our holiday wishes for you were expressed by one who said: 'He has scattered the proud ... He has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things. And sent the rich away empty.' Merry Christmas."

The first Christmas card, while rather more understated than these two suggestions, actually got it right with its various scenes and panels.

Christmas is more than a party day, more than a family gathering. It is recognizing the arrival of God in our midst - for our sake and for our salvation.

Yet salvation is more than forgiveness. Salvation brings with it a tremendous sense of wellness and joy and a desire to live life wholly and abundantly alive.

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings  
tell;  
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.  
Amen.

