

The Comedy of Christmas¹

My dad worked for General Motors his entire career. And that was totally cool for a kid in elementary in Southern California. I was a regular visitor at the Van Nuys Fisher body plant where they manufactured Chevys. When I was 13, that plant assembled more cars than any other auto factory in the world. And, they introduced the totally cool Camaro that year. In those days, GM was king. Largest corporation in the world. And that was in an industry that employed 1 in 7 workers in America.

You know where I'm going with all of this. That was forty years ago. For most of the years since, General Motors has been on a long, gradual decline. Now in 2008, with a spike in gas prices, and a sharp recession, General Motors finds its very life in the balance, determined by whether or not Washington will provide some sort of support.

You also may know how this has happened. A combination of over-high salaries and wages, over-sized vehicles, and an over-sized company couldn't be changed to the degree necessary to avert the present disaster. Now, at length we are contemplating something that I never even imagined—bankruptcy.

This isn't a sermon about my childhood. It's about learning to change course and averting disaster. That's much of what the Old Testament is about. Israel was a nation created by

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on December 14, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga.

God. Israel was to be a nation beyond compare. It was guided by laws which came from God. Israel settled down in a territory provided by God. But with time, Israel got stuck in ways that were not what God had in mind. For example, Israel was hard on its poor. It became fascinated with exotic foreign religions. At length, the unthinkable happened. The armies of Babylon overran God's Chosen nation. All because, as with GM, Israel got stuck on a wrong course and would not change.

Obviously, I'm not preaching the sermon I originally planned. The reason for the change is because our whole culture is at a moment of reckoning right now. The General Motors crisis is part of a larger crisis. The larger crisis is—to take the risk of over-simplifying—that we've borrowed our way into years of prosperity and now we've got to pay up. You simply can't go on indefinitely consuming more than is produced. We're looking at the partial collapse of an economy that is honeycombed with debt.

I read an article in the last couple of days that describes a sudden modesty about the way many Americans are spending and living.

Competitive consumption has been replaced by contagious anxiety. Buying hit the wall with the housing collapse, the stock market plunge, the credit card crunch, and the unemployment figures. Thrift is the new normal. Sixty percent off is the new black. Cutting back is in. Retail therapy is out.

American behavior is finally catching up with what we already know. What we've always known is that credit-card driven, debt-ridden, pay later, more is better wasn't sustainable. Not economically. Not ecologically.

Now, what's all this have to do with Christmas? One of the great messages of Christmas is that Jesus comes to those who have come to their senses and have changed course. If I were to boil down Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist's message to one word, the word would be "repent." It means "after thought." It means "think again." It means "change of heart."

After I decided that I wanted to preach about repentance, I wondered what I was going to title this sermon. Here's what I came up with, "The Comedy of Christmas." You're thinking, "haven't heard anything very funny yet. "By "comedy" I'm not thinking about clowning around and telling jokes. I'm thinking of comedy in the sense of literature. A comedy is a story where the characters change their attitudes. Those stories always end on a light note. A tragedy is when the characters don't change a thing. No attitude adjustment, no snapping out of it. A tragedy is a story that grinds on to its inevitable, logical conclusion. Usually it also leaves the audience with a few dead bodies on the stage.

John the Baptist teaches us that Jesus is coming. The kingdom is coming. Snap out of it. If we can, we know the comedy of Christmas.

Have you seen the new McDonalds ad? McDonald's is starting to serve fancy coffee—a market that is dominated by Starbucks and others. So their ad reads, "Four dollars for coffee is just dumb." Look out Starbucks. Four dollars for coffee is just dumb.

Isn't John the Baptist, and Jesus after him saying, Christmas comes, Christ comes, the Kingdom comes when we can wake up and get rid of what is just dumb in our lives.

If you're thinking that somehow this seems to be a tangent or some miniscule idea and not really very Christmassy, consider Charles Dickens's Scrooge or Dr. Seuss' Grinch. The Grinch in the children's book appears to have little else to do than to think up ways to spoil the Christmas festivities down in Whoville. Bottom line. The Grinch is just dumb. But in the midst of his meanness, he has a change of heart.

Same thing with Scrooge. Scrooge is a tragic figure—hard-bitten and practical to a fault. But when Scrooge recognizes that his life is just dumb, he comes perfectly to embody the spirit of Christmas.

Same thing with you and me. What in your life and my life is unsustainable, tragic, from which we need a wakeup call?

Anything that could be called an addiction in your life needs to go. Weekend after weekend of hard drinking is just dumb.

So is a feud with a family member. Not speaking with a loved one for years is an unsustainable lifestyle. Snap out of it. Repent. Change your mind.

A woman in my last church battled and eventually lost to melanoma for about 4 years. Her eldest son was a big personality and over the years would write his mother informing her how she was a bad mother and how she had wronged him. I know it sounds unbelievable to get hate mail from your children. So she saved the letters, rubber banded in a box. She imagined showing them to someone to prove what she had to put up with. But with her strength failing she decided to pitch out the letters. You know what happened to the empty box? That's where the Christ child is laid.

Sin is the ultimate unsustainable existence. If there's something in you that pushes away God habitually, there's something way out of whack about your life. That cannot go on for eternity. Repent. That's how each of us will receive Christ.

It is to those who can hear the wake up call, who can pull back from insanity, who know the comedy of the change of heart who are welcoming Christ into their lives. Phillips Brooks had

it right—"Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear
Christ enters in."