



188 South Swinton Avenue - Delray Beach, Florida  
Christmas Eve - December 24, 2009  
Isaiah 9:2-7; Ps. 96; Luke 2:1-20  
Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

*To you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord!*  
Luke 2: 11

On Sunday December 6<sup>th</sup>, I received a call on my cell phone. It was Tippi Breakwell. Tippi is a faithful member of St. Paul's, an upbeat and wonderful person. She was a member of the St. Paul's youth group when she was in her teens. She is the daughter of Mary-Yates and Fred Jones. Now she is the wife of Phil and the mother of Charlie and Kit. Tippi has taught church school for years.

"Hi, did you see today's *Sun Sentinel*?" she asked.

I could tell she was incensed.

Earlier in the day, I had been told me that there was an article in the *Sun Sentinel* about a mission trip 13 of us from St. Paul's had taken to New Orleans to rebuild a house for a family that had lost theirs in Hurricane Katrina. I assumed that Tippi was asking me about *that* story. Hearing her anger on the phone I was a little puzzled and began to worry about what might have been said in the article which I hadn't read.

"Was there a story about the church?" Tippi asked. "Nice, I'll have to look for it...No, I was talking about a story that was in a section of the paper they call *Sunbytes*. It's a supplement. There was an article about the origins of Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa."

"I haven't seen it," I said

"Well, they do pretty a good job explaining Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, but what they said about Christmas is terrible. They said it was all about Santa Claus!"

I told Tippi I would pick up the paper and read the article.

Soon after the call, I bought the paper. First, I found the story about St. Paul's and the New Orleans Mission trip. It was on the front page of the Community Section and was titled, "Congregation helps New Orleans rebuild."<sup>1</sup> The New Orleans mission was an amazing experience for all of us and the article, written by Sun Sentinel Special Correspondent Andrea G. Rollin, was well-written and accurate. We'll be sending more teams to New Orleans. There's still lots to do there.

I searched for the *Sunbytes* section Tippi had told me about, found it and thumbed through it. Ah, there it was, on page 22. "***Happy Christmahanazaa! - Many faiths, many traditions***" by Larry Schwingel.<sup>2</sup> It was one page with three columns of text, one each for Hanukkah, Christmas and Kwanzaa. Though brief, the entries for Hanukkah and Kwanzaa accurately described the origins of the observances. In his description of Hanukkah, Mr. Schwingel correctly wrote about the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem following its

desecration by the Syrians in 165 BC. He mentioned the miraculous story of the one day supply of lamp oil that remained lit for 8 days.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Schwingel traced the origins of Kwanzaa to 1966 and Dr. Maulan Karenga, author, social activist and professor of African Studies at California State, Long Beach.<sup>4</sup> According to Mr. Schwingel's piece, "At the central core [of Kwanzaa] is *Kwaida*, a Swahili term for "tradition." "Kwanzaa "celebrates family, community and the black culture," and "encourages people to learn more about their roots and focus on their values."<sup>5</sup> The section described other aspects of Kwanzaa that were informed and informing.

Then came Mr. Schwingel's entry about Christmas. Here's his opening sentence: "*Christmas has traditions that are spiritually and culturally distinctive, **yet the common bond is Santa Claus!***"[emphasis added].<sup>6</sup>

What? I thought to myself. Schwingel's article continued, offering some background information about the origins of St. Nicholas and the legends surrounding him, connecting him to Santa Claus, but never stating explicitly that Nicholas was a Christian saint.

In his conclusion, Mr. Schwingel stated, "*Christmas is about giving gifts, great food, candy canes, cakes and cards; it's a time for tree trimming and decorating. Moreover, it's a time for spiritual reflection and family time.*"<sup>7</sup>

Wow! Not one mention of Jesus or his birth. Now let me say, I love Santa Claus and all the fun and traditions around him, but this article trivialized Christmas and failed to offer people a meaningful insight into the true origins and meaning of Christmas in ways that could enrich and enlighten. Why had Mr. Schwingel been able to write something substantive and accurate in his summaries of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa and failed so miserably with Christmas?

I confess, I'm a thoroughgoing pluralist. I'm glad the article provided accurate and helpful information about Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. I believe that the diversity of America is one of our great blessings and strengths and I give thanks for it. But true pluralism should mean that we have the capacity to recognize, acknowledge, learn from and celebrate our religious and cultural differences in all of their rich diversity.

How disturbing current efforts to remove religion and religious symbols from the public square and to silence the conversation about it are. This *should be* a public conversation and we should not be reticent about having religious symbols of our many faiths on display and our stories told and retold. This also helps make religious communities accountable for the content of their speech and stories; requiring religious communities to live up to their ideals and to repudiate those aspects of their heritage that breed toxic behaviors such as violence and hatred. Pluralism demands that we respect one another and that we are not strident with the truths we hold, using them as weapons to tear down the faith and beliefs of others.

I was sympathetic with those who were upset at the absence of a Menorah at Old School Square this year and am glad that it was put up.<sup>8</sup> Why should anyone feel threatened by this, especially Christians? After all, our Lord would have observed Hanukkah and would likely have lit Hanukkah candles in his home had the festival been observed in his time.

Mass communications and global interdependence and the nature of today's global community require us to know stories beyond our own and to learn to accept and live with differences, even profound differences. Theologically, I am willing to assert that God loves differences and seems to desire a world where difference is not seen as a reason for enmity, but rather something we must live, honor and respect. This may well be the single most important revealed truth of our age.

Accepting this does not mean, however, that in the name of pluralism we sacrifice the rich and wonderful traditions, practices, stories and rituals that give us life with all of their particularities, or dumb them down until they are empty of any significant meaning and power and become just so much tinsel, fluff and glitter accompanied by vacuous “Happy Holidays.”

After I read the article in *Sunbytes*, I telephoned the *Sunbytes* office. I got a recording but ended up speaking with Larry Schwingel later in the week. We had a brief, polite conversation. I provided a summary of my objections, which centered on the premise that any attempt to explain Christmas which failed to include some reference to the birth of Jesus was both inaccurate and disrespectful.

Mr. Schwingel identified himself as a Christian, which makes the article’s “sin of omission” even more alarming to me. He told me that when he first wrote the piece, the title he gave it made no reference to “faith.” His intention he said, was to write exclusively about the practices and traditions behind the observances. The editors had supplied the tag-line, “Many faiths, many traditions,” he told me.<sup>9</sup> I pointed out to him that he had, nonetheless, accurately traced the origins of Hanukkah to the Temple in Jerusalem. He replied, “Yes, but that history seemed essential to the story”<sup>10</sup>

It was incomprehensible to me how anyone could view the birth of Jesus as of any less essential to an understanding of Christmas and I challenged him with this. He didn’t seem to get it.

We continued in circles for a few minutes and then brought the conversation to a conclusion, though not before I expressed my opinion that the Sun Sentinel or Sunbytes should issue some sort of editorial apology or retraction. As far as I know, that went nowhere.

The commercialization of Christmas has become so forceful it often overshadows and cheapens its spiritual and religious significance. A life giving story, one which communicates a dynamic truth about the light and love of God becoming immediately present to us, has all too often been relegated to the background or, even, completely forgotten or ignored, as it was by the Sun Sentinel, Sunbytes and Larry Schwingel....Except...except, that there are those of us -- you, me, all of us -- who are here tonight who refuse to forget.

Marisa Weekes, a young person whose family attends St. Paul’s. Marisa is a student at Pope John Paul II High School. She recently wrote an article for *The Eagle’s Eye*, the school’s newspaper. Her article was titled, “Keep Christ in Christmas.”<sup>11</sup>

“Modern Christmases have become about the joy found in presents, decorations, and Santa Claus,” Marisa wrote, sounding a similar theme to Mr. Schwingel in *Sunbytes*.<sup>12</sup> “But what has happened to joy found in Jesus Christ?” she asked. “It is often forgotten that the reason for the holiday is to celebrate the birth of our Savior,” she wrote.<sup>13</sup>

Marisa also wrote, “As students at a Catholic school, we should always remind people that the reason for the joyous Christmas season is Christ. When you are exchanging gifts with your family on Christmas morning remember that no Ipod, video game, or piece of jewelry can compare to the gift of Jesus Christ sent to us directly by God. While you are decorating your house, drinking eggnog and searching for the perfect gifts for your loved ones, remember the reason for the season is the birth of Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup> I’m proud of Marissa, good for her!

We remember....We, gathered here tonight, remember...Our remembering is no small thing. In fact, it is important, vitally important. It is life-giving.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, and an incredible thinker, story-teller and bearer of Jewish religious and cultural memory writes about the Baal Shem-Tov, a renowned 18<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi and Jewish Mystic who is considered the founder of

the Hasidic tradition. It's in the Preface to his book, *Wise Men and Their Tales: Portraits of Biblical Talmudic and Hasidic Masters*.<sup>15</sup>

*"For trying to precipitate the redemption, the Baal Shem Tov was punished,"* Wiesel writes.<sup>16</sup> *"Exiled to a far away land, he was deprived of his powers and his knowledge. He turned to Reb Tzvi-Hersh Soifer, his faithful servant and disciple who never left him. Help me; said the Baal Shem Tov, do you remember anything – a prayer, even a word, from before? No, Tzvi-Hersh did not. He too had forgotten everything. Everything? Really? No, said Tzvi-Hersh, I still remember the alphabet. Then what are you waiting for, exclaimed the [Baal Shem Tov], start reciting! Aleph-Bet-Gimel-Daled, Tzvi-Hersh began."* *"And with great fervor,"* Wiesel relates, *"they both recited all twenty-two letters, repeating them again and again and again until memory was restored to them."*<sup>17</sup>

*"This tale,"* Wiesel observes, *"is among the most beautiful in Hasidic literature because it emphasizes the virtues of both faith and learning."*<sup>18</sup> He continues, *"To approach a biblical passage is to respond to its call, its interpretation, while exploring the depths of its multiple meanings, some of which are immediately understandable, and some enveloped in dazzling mysteries."*<sup>19</sup>

That is what we are doing here tonight...We are "approaching a biblical passage," the story of the birth of Christ...We are responding "to its call, its interpretation." We are exploring "the depths of its multiple meanings," the poor lifted up, a King born in a stable, Word becoming flesh, light shining in darkness, and the darkness not overcoming it...Some of these meanings are "immediately understandable;" some are "enveloped in dazzling mysteries." The important thing is that we approach them....That we respond to their call....That we remember....

In Jewish and Christian tradition, the word memory does not merely mean to recall an event of the past, merely for recollection's sake. It means to remember it in such a way, that it exists as a present reality today, giving life anew, offering God's salvation here and now, which it can, and indeed does.

Memory, remembering are so vitally important to us as spiritual beings.... When we forget the stories, when we lose the faith, when we forgo the traditions, we forget who we are and what we are to be about, we lose our identities and we devalue ourselves as human beings. We also lose our lively, and life-giving, connection with God.

I can't help feeling that in so many of our current practices around Christmas, with all their tinsel and glitz, we are like the Baal Shem Tov of old, exiles in a land far and distant and long removed from that city of David, from Bethlehem, where a child was born, a child long expected, a child who came into the world in poverty, but who also came as light and love shining into the dark places of our world, bringing divine love, forgiving love, reconciling love which had power to save, and that continues to have power to save us, each and everyone of us if only we remember....

But too often, we have forgotten. Have we forgotten everything?  
A.....B.....C.....D.....E.....F.....G.....G....God???? H.....I.....J.....Jesus?...

Ah....there it is....

*"In that region, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were terrified. And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see – I am bringing you news of great joy which shall be to all people; to you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah the Lord...."* (Luke 2:8 – 11).

That's our memory, our precious memory, the story of Christmas. That's the Gospel, Good News of Christmas....It always has been. It always will be....It has power to save...Thank you for remembering, and being a part of our community of memory on this most holy night. May God bless you and yours with the light and love of the Christ child, born once again into our world, in our lives, into our hearts and souls, because we dare to remember!

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<sup>1</sup> Rollin, Andrea G. "Church helps New Orleans Rebuild" – *Sun Sentinel – Community Section*, Dec. 6, 2009, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Schwingel, Larry "Happy Christmahanazaa! – Many faiths, many traditions" - *Sunbytes – Holiday Gift Guide* published by the *Sun Sentinel*., Dec. 6, 2009, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Christmahanazaa! – Many faiths, many traditions

<sup>4</sup> Christmahanazaa! – Many faiths, many traditions

<sup>5</sup> Christmahanazaa! – Many faiths, many traditions

<sup>6</sup> Christmahanazaa! – Many faiths, many traditions

<sup>7</sup> Christmahanazaa! – Many faiths, many traditions

<sup>8</sup> See O'Connor, Lona – "Menorah's absence in Delray Beach is legally safer for city, Manager says" – Palm Beach Post, Dec. 8, 2009 at <http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/menorah-s-absence-in-delray-beach-is-legally-107736.html>

<sup>9</sup> December 8, 2009 phone conversation with Larry Schwingel

<sup>10</sup> December 8, 2009 phone conversation with Larry Schwingel

<sup>11</sup> See Weekes, Marisa "Keep Christ in Christmas" – *The Eagle's Eye* Volume XXIX Issue II - Student newspaper of Pope John Paul II High School published November – December 2009, Boca Raton, Florida

<sup>12</sup> "Keep Christ in Christmas"

<sup>13</sup> "Keep Christ in Christmas"

<sup>14</sup> "Keep Christ in Christmas"

<sup>15</sup> Wiesel, Elie *Wise Men ad Their Tales: Portraits of Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Master* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003)

<sup>16</sup> Wiesel, p. ix

<sup>17</sup> Wiesel, p. ix

<sup>18</sup> Wiesel, p. ix

<sup>19</sup> Wiesel, pp. ix - x