

# WHAT IF?

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT SEASON, AND DECEMBER 11, 2005

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Appointed texts:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain. Isaiah 65:17-25

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters,\* to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved,\* to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. John 1:6-8, 19-28

Christmas is coming, to be sure. I can prove it. Christmas must be coming, because Santa Claus is coming to town. In fact, as we know he already came to Saint John's last week on St. Nicholas Day.

Not only that, since we all believe in the Second Coming, he arrived again yesterday. Didn't you see him when you arrived for worship this morning, on the rooftop of the church entrance sign? That's because yesterday afternoon, after the wonderful funeral we had for our dear friend Carney, I went from the sublime to the ludicrous; when Wayne the Christmas tree seller in our lot helped me mount that inflatable "Pop-up Santa" who rises up out of his red brick chimney every sixty seconds to wave at passers-by and would be customers. Then he descends back down the chimney, only to rise again ...

Santa's popping up everywhere, it seems, to remind us Christmas is coming. I saw a color photograph of him in the newspaper this morning. It was taken at the Newport Aquarium, in Newport, Kentucky, where he's more affectionately known as "Scuba Santa." To lure and entertain the crowds, "Scuba Santa" dons a wet suit made of thick red neoprene and fuzzy white fringe, with a red diving cap topped by a white ball. He then jumps into a 385,000-gallon tank full of fish and literally "swims with the sharks." Apparently, he does this five times a day.

The grand tradition started three years ago, when the aquarium was searching for ways to increase attendance during the normally slow holiday season. "Why not stick Santa into the shark tank?" thought an aquarium spokeswoman.



With some thoughtful planning and logistics each day, the staff makes sure the sharks receive their regular meals and are well fed. Then, to avoid being eaten himself, Santa takes several precautions. He checks his arms and legs before each show to be sure he has no open, bleeding cuts. Once in the water he keeps his hands close to his body and makes no sudden moves. Experts advise if Santa were to wave quickly, a passing shark could mistake his flopping, white-gloved hand for a wounded fish. The unfortunate consequence, the spokesperson admits, would no doubt prove emotionally scarring for the dozens of children in the audience ...

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As you know, some of our fundamentalist brothers in our own Christian tradition have launched a campaign, complete with legal defense teams, in an effort to put Christ back into Christmas. They've even gone so far as to boycott major retailers like Target and WalMart, because they dared to drop the word 'Christmas' from their advertising, while attempting to promote a more generic holiday season of buying by a broader base of eager consumers.

Local politicians concerned with their own job security have reversed earlier remarks and issued press releases restating that that, uhmmm, you know, those trees with all the lights on them in the city park? They're not just "holiday" trees; in fact, they're still Christmas trees.

This last week, even the President got himself in hot water with some of his conservative Christian constituents over his Christmas card this year. Er, I mean holiday card. Though I didn't receive one myself, I understand the card's cover depicted a lovely picture of the White House, blanketed with snow. But inside the greeting merely read something like, "Warm wishes this holiday season." As in prior years, there was also quote from scripture. Jewish scripture. In this case, a verse from Psalm 28; about the source of strength for a person of faith in God. But it apparently it wasn't enough to silence some of his critics.

While it was explained by a White House spokesperson the First Family wanted to be sensitive to their friends and supporters from many faiths, at least Bush did not shrink back from referring to the National Christmas tree as what it is. At the traditional lighting ceremony this last week, he said:

"The lighting of the National Christmas Tree is one of the great traditions in our nation's capital. Each year, we gather here to celebrate the season of hope and joy – and to remember the story of one humble life that lifted the sights of humanity." Then he added, "Santa, thanks for coming. Glad you made it."

Once again, some listeners misconstrued what the President was saying. Press secretary, Scott McClellan later clarified W. was, in fact, alluding first to Jesus of Nazareth; and was then merely changing topics in his reference to the jolly old St. Nick.

But I'd say forget the critics! Let's hear it for what the President either said, didn't say, or meant to say! Let's hear it for raising up the story of *any* "humble life" – whether it be Jesus, St. Nicholas, or *anyone* for that matter – who might bring us a "season of hope and joy" in this shark-infested world, as reason enough for celebration!

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So, with that in mind, today I'm remembering and celebrating the humble life of a simple poet (and former U.S. senator) Eugene McCarthy, who died yesterday at the age of 89. He was a gentle soul who gave hope -- and with that hope, he gave a kind of hopeful joy -- to a generation of young Americans in the tumultuous 60's; when he essentially dismantled his own political career in coming out in opposition to the Vietnam War before it was expediently safe to do so.

Now, if you know me at all, it may not come as much of a shock or surprise if I told you I was once part of McCarthy's "children's crusade" in 1967, during my freshman year at DePauw University. I spent part of that winter and spring traipsing the farm fields of Indiana, leaflet the corn belt and trying to engage Midwest farmers who had little appreciation or interest in a peace candidate.

As we all know, McCarthy didn't win his party's nomination. Humphrey did, only to be soundly defeated by Nixon; and after the Chicago anti-war street protests at the Democratic National Convention all but doomed Hubert's chances. We also all know how the war ended with a brokered peace of sorts, and American forces finally fleeing that debacle.

Nixon's presidential victory would eventually come to an end in the form of his own self-destruction, called Watergate. But before him, of course, Johnson had bowed out when he had declined to even seek re-election in the first place. Popular sentiment for the war was already turning; and LBJ no longer wanted to be commander-in-chief, and continue a conflict whose accompanying sorrow all but destroyed him in the end.

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The poet was not the only one who spoke a truth that the world could not bear, nor was it prepared to hear. There was another famous life who wasn't Jesus from Nazareth; but who'd come from other humble beginnings, this time from Liverpool; and later retreated to as much simplicity as his notoriety would allow him. This last week people remembered and celebrated the life of songwriter/singer John Lennon, on the 25th anniversary of his murder. At the Straw Field's Forever memorial park across the street from his widow's apartment in New York City, those who gathered sang some of his songs into the night, including "Imagine."

Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try  
No hell below us, above us only sky ...

Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do,  
Nothing to kill or die for, No religion too ...

Imagine all the people living life in peace...

You may say I'm a dreamer ...

Just imagine, what if? Whether Nicholas, Gene, John or Jesus, what if – in the President's speechwriter's words this holiday season -- we actually welcomed with hope and joy the saint, the poet, the dreamer, or even the savior?

What would that mean? What would that really require of us? What would it look like? What would he look like? And how would we not only re-act, but accordingly act ourselves? All of us, including: those among us who are fighting to "save" Christmas, those who could care less, and those of us who long to imagine another kind of Christmas? What if Christ really came this "holiday" season? *What if?*

First, what would it look like? Would look anything like what the ancient prophet Isaiah describes in our first scripture lesson this morning? Would it hearken the dawning of a "new heavens and new earth" where "the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind?" Just imagine what kind of song the dreamer might sing.

What if people lived out their lifetime, so the young would not prematurely perish in violence? Where anyone who only lived to only be one hundred would be considered a youth! What if they built houses and lived long enough to inhabit them, or planted trees to one day sit in their shade?

For all the familiar rhetoric these days about honorable intentions, sincere efforts and firm resolves, what if – in this new heaven and earth old Isaiah envisions -- we "no longer labored in vain," as we seem to do nowadays with such vanity? What if the wolf and lamb *were* to dwell peaceably together? What if there were to be such a place, such a "holy mountain" Isaiah calls it? *What if?*

Then how would people *act*? What if, in the words used to describe an early community of Christian believers in our second scripture lesson this morning, we had "mutual respect for all who labored" among us in this global economy? What if we "were at peace among ourselves?" What if we only admonished the "idlers" of our leisure class who hold the power and the purse strings? And instead, we "encouraged the faint-hearted," "helped the weak," were "patient, and -- perhaps most especially -- did not repay evil for evil," but always sought to "do good to one another and to all?"

Then – in the words of this passage – would we have reason to "rejoice always, pray w/ out ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, and greet everyone as brothers and sisters with a holy kiss?"

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Maybe that's what folks were wondering when the wild-haired preacher in camel's hair stumbled out of the wilderness, and expectant and weary-worn people asked John the Baptist, "Who *are* you?" They asked him: if he wasn't the messiah, if he wasn't Elijah, or just another prophet, who was he? Was he just another poet, prophet, or dreamer?

His answer? Yes, *but more so*, he was the one who'd come to town to bear witness to a light that was coming into this world. It was a light that would illumine the words and deeds of every poet, prophet and dreamer of God with the radiance of what we would come to simply call *Christmas*.

Everyone knows Christmas is coming, 'cause Santa Claus is coming to town. But *what if* it were Christ who actually truly came this Christmas?

Amen. *jb+*

It's about time! St. Nicholas and Saint John concur, it's the What-If time for Christ to come to town this Christmas!

