

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

January 4, 2008

John 1: 10-18; 15: 1-11

Ever-green and Ever-growing

W.H. Auden's poem "For the Time Being" expresses a post-Christmas sentiment I imagine we can all relate to. Here are a few lines:

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, putting decorations back into their cardboard boxes --- some have got broken --- and carrying them up to the attic. The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt, and the children got ready for school. There are enough left-overs to do, warmed up, for the rest of the week ---- Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot, stayed up late, attempted --- quite unsuccessfully --- To love all of our relatives, and in general grossly overestimated our powers. Once again as in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility, once again we have sent Him away, begging though to remain His disobedient servant, the promising child who cannot keep His word for long. The Christmas feast is already a fading memory, and already the mind begins to be vaguely aware of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are...."

So here we are. Christmas is over....the evergreen tree in my living room is dropping its needles, and so will have to be undecorated this week and taken out to the curb, and all its ornaments packed away for another year. And even though every year we all agree that the spirit of Christmas is something that should last all year, we know it doesn't. We'd like it to, we believe it could be true and even ought to be true, but we know it isn't. At least not in the real day-to-day living of our lives. In theory, we say Christmas is a year-round reality, but in practice Christmas is at most a week or so of special activities and feeling, and then life returns to normal. Parents of younger children --- would you really want Christmas to last all year? Do you think you could stand all the Christmas excitement in your house for that long? How many of you would want out-of-town relatives living with you all year? Even you die-hard shoppers, wouldn't you eventually get tired of going to the mall or the shops or just buying stuff to buy it?

But, Pastor Karen, I can you hear you thinking in your heads, it's not the actual details of Christmas, but the spirit of Christmas that we want to last. You know, the joy, the sense of celebration, the genuine love we feel for others, the generosity, the warmth, the enjoyment – all that, Pastor, that's what we want to last. That sense of specialness that Christmas generates in our lives, and the feeling of closeness and happiness that wash over us -- that's what we want to be year-round. Not just on Christmas or holidays or special occasions, but year-round.

So is that possible? Can we be ever-green Christians? Fresh and vital and saturated with joy Christians year-round? Lavishing sweet aroma on those around us? Can this be a way of life for us – and not just a fleeting experience at Christmas or Easter or some other special time?

I added another reading from the Gospel of John for us this morning because I wanted us to hear the connection between the first and 15<sup>th</sup> chapters. In chapter one, in that beautiful prologue we hear read every Christmas, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is made evident: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.” In the human Jesus God lived and dwelled among us. And then in chapter 15 Jesus tells his disciples that as a branch abides in vine, so are they to abide in him. God in Jesus abides with us, and those who abide in Jesus abide with God. That's the image John describes. And in this image there is some helpful instruction for us who want to be year-round, ever-green Christians. Jesus says, “Abide in me and I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing....My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love....I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

The key word, of course, is “to abide” – to remain in, to continue, to dwell in Christ. To be fruitful, ever-green Christians, we have to remain in Christ day by day. Not just on Sunday mornings. No matter how good the meal, eating just once a week will never keep us healthy. Neither will a Sunday to Sunday only experience of faith. Daily we need to partake of the truth and power of God. Otherwise we will wither. We'll dry up and become brittle, just like an ever-green branch severed from the tree. If, however, we abide in Christ, he promises that we'll be fruitful. We'll make a difference. By shining light. And giving care. And showing love. And practicing kindness. By giving generously. By speaking the truth and making peace and being faithful. By trusting God. We'll be fruitful in our own lives and as a church. We'll be fruitful.

So, what is it that you need to abide more fully in Christ? What do you need to be an ever-green and ever-growing Christian? As a new year gets underway for us as a church, I offer these suggestions for your consideration and action:

Turn back to God in prayer. Repent of your sins. Accept God's forgiveness.

Read a portion of your Bible every day.

Come to Sunday School.

Take part in a weekly Bible study class – here at our church or in your neighborhood or through some other church or group

Expand your mind and challenge your faith through study and learning and discussion. Read the Good Book and read and talk about other good books, too. Listen to books on tape if you don't like to read. Or read some good journals and devotional materials if you don't want to tackle the heavier stuff. The point is to grow -- to not stagnate – to not dry up.

I like what Frank McCourt, the author of *Angela's Ashes*, says his Irish headmaster told his class when Frank was a young, poor schoolboy in Ireland:

He says, "You have to study and learn so that you can make up your own mind about history and everything else but you can't make up an empty mind. Stock your mind. Stock your mind. It is your house of treasure and no one in the world can interfere with it. If you won the Irish Sweepstakes and bought a house that needed furniture would you fill it with bits and pieces of rubbish? Your mind is your house and if you fill it with rubbish it will rot in your head. You might be poor, your shoes might be broken, but your mind is a palace."

We know there's lots of rubbish to fill our minds with, don't we? But there's good stuff, too. What do you know about what you believe? Are you stocking your mind? Are you maturing in your knowledge and understanding of God and of your relationship with Him?

Another suggestion:

- Participate more fully in the life of the church. We're at a turning point in how we are going to do our ministry together here at Church of the Redeemer. We have three new coordinators of ministry – Nurture, Outreach, and Witness, who will be working closely with current chairpersons of all of our various committees to plan a purpose-centered program of ministry at our church. Before too much in the new year goes by, we will have a ministry celebration where everyone will be invited to sign-up for a specific task or area of ministry. This will be exciting for us, I think, but it will take a willing spirit of cooperation for this new structure of leadership to be effective. It can't just be the same people doing everything. It can't be chairpersons and coordinators feeling frustrated because no one comes to the meeting or no one helps out with the work. The best way I know to feel part of the church is to take part in the church. Big parts, smaller parts, middle-sized parts. All are important. It's the taking part that matters most. Church is a participation sport, so to speak, not a spectator sport. We aren't just to sit in the stands and watch the paid players play -- instead, we're all on the team, and we all get to play.

And last, but certainly not least, consider your giving to the church. Does your financial commitment reflect fairly your faithfulness? Are you giving out of your abundance or out of your scarcity? Are you giving cheerfully and freely? A new year of pledging and giving begins today -- it will be great if we finish out 2009 in better shape than we finished 2008. Is there room for improvement in your own record of stewardship?

How we answer or respond to these questions and suggestions has implications for our abiding in Christ and for the fruitfulness of our Christian faith. They are offered to prompt each of us to think about where we are now and how we might grow to be more balanced, evergreen disciples. To bear fruit, Jesus promises, is to have great joy. And so in that sense Christmas does indeed last year round. It may be time to take down the Christmas tree, but we can be ever-green and ever-growing Christians all year long. And I like that -- don't you?