

## SIGNS OF THE SEASON: I – CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

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Malachi 3:1-5

Luke 3:1-6

Something's coming! You only have to look around to see that something's coming! There are decorations on the streetlights in town, many houses on our streets are all lit up, the radio stations are filled with special music, the papers are filled with special sales circulars, choirs are rehearsing – all these things point to something coming!

That something is Christmas. In just four short weeks, we will celebrate again the event that changed all of life forever and ever – the birth of the Savior of the world, Jesus the Christ.

For thousands of years now, the people of God have celebrated this singular event in salvation history. And for thousands of years, there have been signs pointing the way.

Before the time of Christ, God's sign-bearers were the prophets. We heard about that in both of the scripture lessons this morning. The prophets told the people that one day, One would be coming who would change the world. Then, it was John the Baptist, who wandered about telling everyone about the imminent coming of the Messiah.

When the time actually came, it was angels who foretold what was to come. We heard earlier about the angel that spoke to Mary, and then, an angel spoke to Joseph. Angels sang out the good news to everyone when the baby was born in a manger in Bethlehem.

You know, when I was looking through all of the Advent and Christmas hymns in our hymnals this week, I was amazed by how many of them talk about the angels – Angels, From the Realms of Glory; Hark, the Herald Angels Sing; Angels We Have Heard on High; The First Noel. In all of them, we remember that the angels were the ones who told the story of Jesus' birth.

And now, more than two thousand years later, the world still needs to know about Jesus – maybe, more than ever. Surely, more than ever, there are forces that compete against Christ in the world. Surely, more than ever, we live in a distracted world, and Christ and Christmas can get lost in all of the other stuff.

We, who claim the name Christian, are now the sign-bearers of Christ for the world. We are the ones to remind the world of the reason behind the season. We are the ones who through our carols and our caring, tell the world again that it's all about Jesus. We are the ones.

The prophets did it through words of warning, John the Baptist in his preaching, the angels in their singing. How then, shall we be God's sign-bearers this season? How then, shall we be God's sign-bearers in this hustling, bustling, always busy, ever distracted world in which we live?

Well, in a lot of different ways. We can do it in the Christmas cards we send – cards that are about Jesus, and not just holiday cheer and peace on earth, and best wishes.

We can do it by coming to church. As I've told you more than once, people are watching us as Christians. They're watching to see if we live what we say we believe. So, even if our schedules are packed to the max, even if gifts need to be bought and wrapped, cards and letters addressed and sent, food prepared, parties held – even if, in the midst of all that, we still make time for God in our schedules – for worship, and prayer, and fellowship with other Christians.

We can be sign-bearers by caring for others. There are so many opportunities to do that, particularly this season – by giving to the Mitten Tree project, or the College Care Packages, or Angel Tree, or a million other ways. Our care reminds

people that God has not forgotten them – He is always with them – and has sent help and comfort through us.

I have to tell you something wonderful that happened recently due to our church's care-giving. You remember that a few months ago we took a special collection to buy gift cards for those public servants who had to work on Thanksgiving Day. We collected enough money to buy 125 \$5 gift cards to Dunkin' Donuts, and then we put them in with handwritten thank you notes from our church family. Five of us personally delivered those cards on Thanksgiving morning. It was wonderful.

The first card I gave out was to the hospital operator sitting behind the front desk, and her eyes filled with tears as she told me that no one had ever done that for them – no one had ever remembered those who were working on a holiday when everybody else is at home with their families. And then she asked if she could give me a hug!

Everyone else who was giving out those cards that day had a similar experience. It was wonderful. All of the recipients were so surprised, and so grateful.

But the story doesn't end there. Later that day, when I was over at Mom's for Thanksgiving dinner, my sister-in-law Adelma was there as well. Some of you know her – she's the photographer for the Cecil Whig. She told me that something amazing happened that afternoon. She had gone to the scene of an accident at Cayots Corner, and while she was there, she was talking to the EMTs, whose skills thankfully weren't needed. One of them said to Adelma, "You won't believe what happened to us today! A church gave us thank you notes and gift cards because we have to work today! How great is that?" With a smile on her face, Adelma said, "Could it possibly have been Elkton United Methodist Church?" And the EMT said, "Yes, how did you know?" Adelma told her she knew about it because I, her sister-in-law, am the pastor of the church, and she knew we were doing that.

You know what? Any group could have done that, but we did it in the name of Christ. Those people who received those groups may not have known a single person who goes to this church, but they know those cards came from a church –

and that says volumes about who we are and in whom we believe. We follow a Savior who cares in special ways, and our caring is a sign pointing right to Him!

Finally, let me remind you that there is perhaps no easier time to invite others to church, and more importantly, to Jesus, than this time of year – the Christmas season. Christmas stirs up good thoughts in the hearts of many people – memories of family time, memories of gifts and trees and perhaps, even memories of Christmas Eves spent in church lighting candles and singing carols. All they might need is someone to invite them. All they might need is you saying, “Hey, we have three different services on Christmas Eve, do you want to come with me?”

Are you willing to do that? You are a sign-bearer for Christ – for good or for ill. This season, this Advent season, be a good sign-bearer for Christ. In all your actions, in all your words, in all your ways, point the way to Christ, the hope of the world. Our world needs so desperately to hear the Good News that only He can bring – our world needs to hear our Christmas carols, in as many different ways that we can sing them and show them! Friends, go out and point the way to Jesus! May it be so.

Amen.