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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

Merry Christmas!

How are we all feeling tonight? Stressed about everything that still needs to be done? Relieved to have family arrive safe and sound and all be together? Grieving the loss of someone you desperately wish was here? Ready for a few minutes to catch your breath, enjoy some candlelight, sing some carols, and try and remember what it's all about?

You're not alone. The dash from Thanksgiving to Christmas seems to get more manic every year – or maybe it just seems that way the older I get. And yet this year, again and again when I talked to people, they shared a sense of overwhelm and anxiety. 'Tis the season, we say tongue in cheek, but it's very real.

Which I why I offer to you, as a guide for re-centering yourself, the greatest Christmas movie ever made (no not Die Hard, and yes it is Christmas movie so don't @ me). I'm talking, of course, about *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Who here is familiar with this holiday masterpiece?

First aired in 1965, its humble animated drawings, the perfect soundtrack laid down by the Vince Guaraldi Trio, and its spot-on message about the meaning of Christmas, has stood the test of time.

Charles Schulz, the creator of the Charlie Brown and the Peanuts, should rightly be heralded as a theologian, because the whole of the story he wrote is biblically grounded and theologically one point. It also captures something unique about how Christmas is celebrated in America and why we so often feel frazzled at this time of year.

The movie follows a day in the life of perennial loser Charlie Brown as he bemoans his lack of Christmas spirit. He doesn't understand Christmas, he laments. He knows he should be happy, but he's not – he just feels disconnected. In fact, he says, he's depressed.

As the story continues on, we begin to see why he feels that way – and the message of anti-consumerism is just as profound today as it was in 1965.

He finds his dog Snoopy decorating his house in the hopes of winning the neighborhood lights and display contest so he can claim the prize of “money, money, money.”

When he goes to his friend Lucy for help at her advice stand, she first makes him pay a nickel, and then before offering counsel, does a praise dance for the sound of “cold hard cash” in her money tin.

The theme of money continues when Charlie's sister, Sally, asks for help writing her letter to Santa. She provides a long list of gifts she wants, and then suggests to Santa, “make it easy for yourself and just send cash – \$10s and \$20s will work.”

This consumerist critique reaches its zenith when Charlie Brown and his best friend Linus go in search of a tree for their Christmas play. Buy a “big shiny aluminum tree” he's told, and it will make everything perfect. But when he arrives at the tree lot, Charlie is immediately drawn to the one sad little pine tree sitting by itself among the other glittery offerings. Linus asks wonderingly, “Do they still make wooden Christmas trees?”

Meant to reflect the both the post-war retail boom, and the sense of unease at a culture in the middle of a huge shift, the roots of this commercial focus on Christmas actually go much deeper.

In a recent religion article¹ published in the *Washington Post*, The Very Rev. Andrew McGowan, a former seminary professor of mine who is now the Dean of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, and an early Church historian, wrote about the true war on Christmas that was lost long ago.

In it, he traces the ancient practice of observing the season of Advent, the roughly four weeks preceding Christmas, as a way to prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ. Christmas, then, was a 12 day feast beginning on Christmas Day and ending with the Epiphany, the day the church celebrates the arrival of the Magi.

When the Puritans settled in New England, however, they fought to suppress Christmas, and the observance of other liturgical seasons such as Advent were lost as well.

“Only in the 19th century, through the popularity of works like Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” and the poem “A Visit From St. Nicholas” attributed to Clement Clarke Moore, a seminary professor whose father was an Episcopal bishop, did Christmas experience a sort of new beginning” in America.

“Without the strongly established norms of time and tradition,” he wrote, “a quiet but real battle ensued. The victors were not the believers but the merchants. For what Americans actually observe today is not the traditional Christian feast of 12 days, but a “retail Christmas” that begins on Thanksgiving or Black Friday and ends on Christmas Eve.”

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/12/19/there-is-real-war-christmas-heres-how-advent-saves-us-mindless-consumption/?fbclid=IwAR3Y1szhLzT79G6UgecBNEQ3WkxI9MDhobLgH9Lf_7xgcIzhWXDmM3mNP7U

It is because of this shift that we feel the pressure to live up to expectations created by commercials and Hallmark movies and Pinterest. And it is what Charles Schulz's commentary in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* reflects, where he brilliantly shows the shallow promise of commercialism and how it doesn't really make us happy. But that wasn't actually his main point. Commercialism is only the symptom.

His main point was about the pervasiveness of fear, in the world around us and within us, that commercialism banks on, and the power of hope found in the birth of Christ.

Back to Charlie Brown sitting down for advice from Lucy at her little stand. The first thing she asks him, after he tells her he's depressed, is what he's afraid of. Unable to answer her, she goes through a list of different phobias – the ocean, cats, crossing bridges, and so on – until she gets to pantophobia: the fear of everything.

“That's it,” Charlie Brown exclaims! And while it's a bit of a punch line, him sarcastically and exuberantly putting an end to her laundry list of potential fears – it's more than just a throwaway comedic moment, and we know this because of what happens with Linus shortly after.

After Charlie Brown's inability to direct and wrangle his friends in the Christmas play, after his colossal mistake of buying the small pine tree, and after being ridiculed for that choice – being called stupid and hopeless and everyone laughing at him – he again laments that he just doesn't understand the meaning of Christmas. He surely hasn't found it in what the world is selling.

That's when Linus, and his trusty blue blanket, take center stage to share what Christmas is all about:

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid², for see—I am bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Now if you pay attention when watching the show, you will notice something small but essential. During his recitation from Luke’s Gospel, Linus does something he NEVER does in any of the other cartoons – he drops his security blanket. And when does he drop it? **Right as he says, “Do not be afraid.”**

The true meaning of Christmas, Schulz shows us, is about how the birth of Jesus separates us from our fears. It invites us to drop the false security this world tries to sell us, that we too often grasp onto so tightly, and which drives our unhappiness.

In the birth of Jesus, God gives us the gift of hope, and hope is the antidote to fear.

There is a lot to fear in the world today: the climate crisis, political instability, social stratification, and financial insecurity for more and more people.

So beware those who peddle fear, for they are not of God.

And pay attention to those who bear hope, and her sisters compassion and love, for they are heralds of the Gospel and bearers of God’s Word in our midst.

² A different translation is used in the *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and Linus actually says, “Fear not” when he drops his blanket, but I quoted the NRSV here since that’s the translation we read from.

And though their soft voices may seem to be drown out by the strident bellowing of fear, remember that the Christmas story, alongside the other great story of Christianity – the Easter story – promises us that fear will not have the final word. Hope will win. Compassion will shine forth. And love will lead the way.

Charles Schulz showed us this too.

Remember how Charlie Brown's Christmas story ends? After hearing Linus quote Luke's Gospel, he smiles for the first time. He finally understands the meaning of Christmas! And so he takes his sorry little tree and skips home in the starlight with the light of Christ glowing around him – and his awestruck friends following behind him.

Upon returning home and adding a single decoration to his tree, he watches it bend to the point of breaking, kind of like many of us feel by the end of the commercial Christmas season. But the story doesn't end there – it really is only beginning.

His friends, transformed by his Christmas spirit, come together and decorate the tree, and through the love and hope of all of them together, it becomes something beautiful.

Hope, compassion, and love overcame the darkness – and on them the light shined.

My prayer for all of us in this Christmas season, and in the year to come, is that when the weight and worries of the world descend upon us, we can be like Charlie Brown and seek the true meaning of Christmas in our lives; and also be like Linus and drop our worldly security blankets and trust in the promise of a God named Emmanuel, which means God is with us – that our lives will shine as beacons of hope overshadowing the fears of the world.

~ Amen ~