

THE SPARK
[written in oral form]

Luke: 46b-55; Romans 16:25-27
Advent 4, Year B

December 24, 2017
Gordon Allaby

I hope everyone has their shopping done.

I won't ask for a raise of hands of those who will be rushing out to be engulfed by the hordes of "last minute" panic buyers.

It's not like we weren't warned.

Stores and the media have been in Christmas mode since mid November, or earlier. Most of us join in the preparation, by at least the end of November.

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It IS Christmas time, and in the ecclesiastical domain, we call this season Advent. Simply put, Advent means the coming of Christ's birth.

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There are some church circles who discourage recognizing Christmas until the 25th. They would avoid carols and such, until then.

Traditionally, the Christmas season starts on the 25th and lasts 12 days until Epiphany, which is the **big day** for the orthodox church.

This year, we did both— recognize Advent and our culture's Christmas season.

And, why not? Why try to ignore what is all around us?

Why not accept it?

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Especially for children, this is a time full of wonder, dreams, fairy tales and sugar laden excitement.

Of course, we adults know better; we are more realistic.

We adults don't get excited about....much of anything..... pity.

To be sure, we've seen Rudolph and Frosty too many times.

Heard hokey Christmas songs in every store, and feel the pressure to spend too much.

Absolutely, the commercialization is way over the top

It is excessive.

And, for some of us, Christmas reminds us of loss and of lost hopes.

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Is Christmas out of control? Is it mostly shallow fluff?

Should we embrace "remember the reason for the season", or avoid gift giving and the parties all together?

Some think so.

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Many years ago the Puritans concluded that they were ruining Christmas because it had so many pagan rituals. They did more than annually complain about it. They took action and got rid of Christmas altogether.

In Puritan settlements, in the 17th century, laws were passed forbidding the celebration of Christmas.

The market places were ordered to stay open for business as though it was no special occasion, and all

violators were prosecuted. AND, it was against the law to make plum pudding on December 25th. Draconian!

The celebration was not referred to as Yuletide but as “fooltide”.

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Should Christians boycott all the excess and berate those who engage in myths and make believe?
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It's predicted that Canadians will spend an average of over \$600 on gifts this year. That's a lot of consumption.

Nevertheless, people are spending money on "Gifts". People from many persuasions are actively giving,.... and charitable donations surge during the holidays, too.

So is it so bad that the lighted houses, myths and hype... fabricate a contrived fairytale atmosphere? At the very least, people are engaging in an uplifting / outreaching sort of dance..... to make things / life better. In a festive way, the Christmas carnival is defying the darkness, at various levels.

There is something very special about Christmas, maybe part of that specialness is our investment into the celebration..... and ...our reception of the celebration. We call it the Christmas spirit.

There **is something special** / something magical about Christmas.

For example, and I'm sure you've heard this story before, but I think it's a delightful revelation of human spirit. So, I'll share it anyway.

In 1914, the world was leaping into the horror of the First World War, and there was a terrible battle on December 17<sup>th</sup> between the British and the Germans. After the First Battle of Flanders, the fighting degraded into trench warfare. Yet, on Christmas eve, the British could see, across the barren and corpse covered “no man’s” land, a lighted Christmas trees that a German had erected on top of their embankments.

The lighted tree was a daring venture by someone who had the Christmas spirit. Daring because it could draw enemy fire, but it didn't.

In fact, the sight of “Christmas” in the midst of war deeply touched the British troops, and they began singing carols. Soon, they could hear the Germans joining in, and before long, ..... one by one they left their trenches, both armies, and came together in the middle of no man’s land to sing carols and meet each other.

A fluke, a passing sentimental moment?

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Well, on Christmas day, the two opposing armies again left their trenches and came together in peace, and this time they brought gifts to one another. Some even played soccer.

This **spark** of compassion/ of Christmas spirit / of divine grace was life changing because it endured..... In the following days, when ordered to shoot at the enemy, the soldiers would aim high in the sky.

They refused to harm each other.

Finally, the generals on both sides had to remove those transformed soldiers from the front lines, because their spirit of **peace on earth** was not conducive to war, **and it was contagious**. Sadly, other troops were brought in and the killing resumed.

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Christmas is special..... It is a big deal.

Over one hundred years ago, in December 1903, on the barren sand dunes of the North Carolina coast, after many attempts, the Wright brothers were successful in getting their "flying machine" off the ground.

Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine who was back in Ohio: "We have actually flown 120 feet. We'll be home for **Christmas**."

Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, "How nice. The boys will be **home for Christmas**."

He totally missed the big news—humans had flown for the first time! ----He totally missed the big news..... OR DID HE???

Did his response actually **note** what was really important??

Daily Bread, December 23,

1991.

Christmas,..... the Christmas season/ the spirit of Christmas is very special, indeed.

Christmas is much more than the celebration of Jesus birth.

It is also an invitation to suspend disbelief. It is time: to admire a fat man in a red suit, and let your children sit on his lap, to be dazzled, to decorate and be creative. It is an opportunity for all to be challenged to give and receive,..... **and** to ignite the **Spark!**

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Goethe, the enlightenment philosopher, suggested that some people had the **Spark** of life—that zest for living/ that vitality/ that creative vibrancy, and that others did not. According to Goethe, those without the "Spark" were dull, selfish and not really living.

I think Goethe was mostly right; however, he never explained the source of the spark.

Moreover, I want to believe that it is a possibility for everyone to receive that spark.

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The Spark:

I think the Spark that can ignite life in us is from the TOUCH OF GOD. And, it may not be labelled with Christian terms.

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However, we glean our perspective from the Gospel accounts.

About two thousand years ago, Luke introduced Jesus through an immaculate young girl, selected by God, to be Jesus' mother.

The angel Gabriel explained to Mary what miraculous things were to happen,... to her and her older relative, Elizabeth.

Mary soon visited Elizabeth, and both Elizabeth and her yet born son responded with excited affirmation that Mary possessed something divine.

Luke then credits Mary for writing the love song known as the Magnificat. Magnificat is Latin for magnify,... as in joyous praise.

It is an eloquent and ardent declaration about God's wonderful grace and compassionate justice. God cares for the poor.

And, not only that.....There is NO Way a giddy 12 or 13 year old, under educated girl could whip off this song just after being visited by an angel and told that she is carrying the Messiah in her womb.

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I think this is the beginning of Christmas excessiveness and hype. It's way over the top,.....yet delightfully beautiful and fanciful.

To be sure, Luke was revealing how very excited Mary was.

Mary had been touched by God. She had That spark,.....and I dare say that this is the first example of Christmas Spirit.

Mind you, others before Mary demonstrated great joy after being touch by God, but we obviously can't call that spark "Christmas Spirit."

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As I said, I think the "Spark" comes from God. It is a divine touch.

And, since God is love, God's touch must surely be the touch of Love--divine love. It is a touch / a spark that can ignite a new birth / a soul renaissance.

We church people, name it as Jesus,..... but God is pretty big,... and capable of reaching out beyond our narrative.

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I think the timing and frills of Christmas, that has blurred with secular culture,... sparks us, and prompts all of us to receive "The Spark"... the light from God.

THE Light illuminates the darkness,..... and so does Christmas.

Christmas is observed this time of year for a reason..... Because we NEED the celebration to mitigate the winter solstice and the onset of winter.

Many Northern pagan cultures had winter festivals for the same reason.

We need the festivities, just as we need the touch of God in our lives.

And, if sugar plum fairies, elves, flying reindeers and Christmas decorations bring light into our lives,... then wonderful..... for maybe we are hearing the Good News..... in a secular, modern language.

Perhaps, the over the top Christmas celebration is a contemporary Magnificat.

God may not get cited, but I'm guessing that God smiles when people deliver food hampers, feel joy, ...give each other gifts and cease making war.

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Let's nurture and encourage the positive parts of the holiday season. Maybe it'll catch on.

We need to get excited and get the Christmas Spirit.  
We need the light, God's light.

There IS too much darkness in the world.  
There is too much "bah humbug"  
There is too much sorrow and sadness, and there is too much **Dullness!**

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I'll end with a story about a boy named "Sparky."

Sparky was born in 1922, in Minnesota. His uncle identified an energy/ a passion in the boy, and gave him the nickname "Sparky" after a comic strip horse named "Spark Plug."

He may have had a noticeable passion for life, but he wasn't good in school. School was difficult for him.
Sparky failed every subject in grade 8.
In high school, he flunked physics, Latin, Algebra and English.
He wasn't good at sports either, even though he loved hockey.

He did make his high school's golf team, but lost the important last match of the season.
Plus, he was socially awkward.
Though likeable, he was considered a failure by his peers, and often called a "loser."

Sadly, he lived up to that label,.... or should I say, "down".
Still, he kept trying..... He had a passion / a spark for life.

He feared mediocrity was his destiny, yet he wasn't dissuaded.

He loved to draw, and so he focussed on that,...and was proud of his drawings.
In grade 12, he submitted some of his cartoon drawings for the Year Book,.....but they were rejected.

Regardless, he kept drawing, and decided to become an artist.

After high school, he sent his best samples of artwork to Walt Disney. Disney was a leader in making cartoon shows.

You guessed it, he was rejected again.
Even so, he didn't give up.
Instead, he decided to do his own life story in cartoons.
Sparky had a deep faith in God,.....and he had that spark for living.

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Sparky's main character was a little boy who symbolized the perpetual loser and chronic underachiever. He surely knew that story well.

His character became world famous as the lovable loser, "Charlie Brown."

Charlie Brown reminded people of the painful and embarrassing moments from THEIR own past,.... of their pain and their shared humanity.

Of course, the creator of the Peanuts cartoon strip, of Christmas specials and more....was Charles Schultz.

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I don't think Schultz was a great illustrator, but he was a great story teller.

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It's wonderful to delight in Christmas,.....even if it is too commercialized. We are people of hope. People who see the beauty in a Charlie Brown Christmas tree.

So,...May you and I embrace the Christmas Spirit. May the Spark set our hearts on fire.....and inflame a growing passion for life and living.

Moreover, let us not forget that the source of that spark is the gracious love of God, and our narrative includes Jesus, too.

So, let us not hesitate to tell our stories of life stories, our honest stories.

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Fear not,.....God will shine through our stories.