

Taking Down Christmas

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Mark 1:21-28

W.H. Auden in his poem *Christmas Oratorio* begins his verse this way:

Well, so that is that. Now we must
dismantle the tree,
Putting the 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 so late, attempted — quite
unsuccessfully —
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers.

I suppose Auden's words and sentiment sound and feel pretty familiar. We are at that moment, aren't we, when it's time to take Christmas down and return to the world at hand — it's the end of the New Year's weekend and tomorrow the world gets after it again. I don't know about you, but I'm one of those who wants to keep Christmas up as long

as possible. A lot of work goes into putting it up — boxes brought in from the garage, ornaments and decorations unwrapped, Christmas tree purchased and put up, lights strung. It's a lot of work and then just a few weeks later it comes back down. It seems so much for so little a time. But you live in Florida and you did get that North Carolina Christmas tree that was already pretty dry when you bought it and now it's snowing pine needles in your family room so before a fire starts, it's best to take Christmas down. But taking Christmas down gives me so often the sense that somehow it's over. So that is that, and all the effort toward cheer dissolves into the daily grind and routine of the New Year.

Auden in his poem continues for a while this end of Christmas lament, and then comes this halting line:

To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however
incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most
trying time of all.
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most
trying time of all.

It's a trying time, isn't it, because just like every year it would be our hope to take whatever meaning we gleaned from Christmas and bring it with us into the New Year, and not just the New Year, but into the rest of our lives. We'd like somehow to have whatever Scrooge there may have been inside us eradicated so that we can start to write a whole new chapter. But as it goes, Christmas is the shortest of

“Jesus takes each person, each worldly, earthy, crazy person one person at a time.”

the liturgical seasons and before we know it, we feel the speeding advance of the rut and routine. Bills to pay, returns to make, jobs to get back to. So perhaps we might take comfort when we turn to the first chapter of Mark's Gospel and find that the first we hear of Jesus, just nine verses in, Jesus is already an adult and ready to get to work. For Mark the good news starts when Jesus starts to work. Matthew, Luke and John spend a chapter or two reflecting on the theological idea of God coming into the world in Jesus — revealed to shepherds, visited by wisemen, and shining as light in the darkness -- but Mark doesn't have time for such ideas — for Mark the story gets started, the gospel gets started when Jesus gets to work. In other words, for Mark God is in the world, John the Baptist has introduced him; his name is Jesus and now we must pay attention to how God is doing his thing in the world in the flesh. No fooling around for Mark. God is in the flesh. And God is on the move, so let's turn right away and see what happens when God engages, in the flesh, the world.

And sure enough before you know it Jesus is in the synagogue and right before him

is standing the world. The condition of the world. A man possessed by unclean spirits. You don't get much more earthy than that. A crazy man. A mentally ill man. When God enters the world he enters the world in its deepest and most broken places. God enters the world by coming face to face with someone who no one really wants to come face to face with. A lunatic. And the first century approach to lunacy was separation. Stay away. This man is likely seconds away from being ushered out of the synagogue — but Jesus the new rabbi doesn't separate, doesn't stay away, doesn't avoid — Jesus engages. He confronts the craziness, the lunacy, the unclean spirits and draws them out. And the people say, “Wow! A new teaching!” In other words, we haven't seen a rabbi like this before. Most separate. Most stay away. Most do whatever they can to get the crazies out of here — but this rabbi he enters in, he engages, he takes even the crazy ones very seriously.

And isn't that we so enjoyed about our Christmas celebration — this thought that when Jesus came as a baby God was taking the world seriously? He was taking the condition of humankind seriously? We loved that idea

back on December 25 when the tree had most of its needles – but here now is Jesus showing what it means, getting up close and personal. Here now is Jesus driving headlong into the world and when Jesus drives headlong into the world he does it one worldly, crazy person at a time. Jesus is taking seriously this lunatic in front of him. And is there better news than that? Jesus takes seriously every single person.

Most of you know my next to oldest brother, four years older than me, is severely mentally handicapped. James Joseph McConnell. Jimmy Joe as we call him. Jim has never spoken a word. He is blind. And carries a mental capacity of little more than a five year old. His world is very small and his ability to function is very limited. He has lived for a long time in a residential center up in Northwestern Pennsylvania. He shares a residential building with about 20 other men his age. And they have all sorts of behavioral, mental and psychological issues. They act in all sorts of bizarre ways. And so it is always an amazing moment for me when I go to visit Jim to watch the staff do their thing. These underpaid workers treat these men as if they were their own family. In some sense they are. They walk them, play games with them, take them on outings, celebrate holidays with them. They take them seriously. And insist on their dignity as God's children. And it all came to light for me many years ago when a package came at Christmas time from Jim's Center. Inside was a package from Jim. And inside the

package was a ceramic Christmas tree with beautiful colored lights attached. It had been made by Jim. Now of course it wasn't made by just Jim, it was made by Jim and one of these aids. She had guided his hand to place the lights, to paint the green and to brush the glaze. She had taken him seriously enough to help him give his brother a Christmas gift. It continues today as a centerpiece of our Christmas decorations.

You know if there is anything we want in this world it is to be taken seriously. Whether it is in a conversation or our status in the world or our feelings being hurt or our dreams being realized – what we want most of all is to be taken seriously – to think and believe that somehow, someday I count. We just want to count.

And so it should come as no surprise that when Jesus delves into the world it is with one who likely imagined he didn't count. No one would take him seriously. But guess what? The kingdom of God is at hand. The Messiah has come. One person at a time.

You see, that's the good news, isn't it? Jesus takes each person, each worldly, earthy, crazy person one person at a time. That's the new teaching, isn't it? And it's good news because who among us is not a little worldly, a little earthy, a little crazy? Who among us doesn't have a few unclean spirits floating about? And if there was any joy and peace we found in these last several days maybe it was when it dawned on us that he came not just to redeem the world – but he came to redeem

us. Up close and personal. To heal the hurts, the wounds and the embarrassing spirits. He has taken us seriously.

So we can understand Mark's impatience, can't we? His impatience to take down Christmas? To take the tree to the curb and store the lights away. Jesus is ready to move on. He has many souls to touch. Worldly, earthy, crazy souls, just like us. And by grace lay his hands upon us, and now by grace to grab hold of us and to take us with Him into the world in order for that next soul - that very next soul - that waitress at the restaurant, that clerk at the store, that irascible next door neighbor, that relative we haven't managed to like for a while, that person of the opposite political persuasion, that soul of a different ethnicity and belief - to take us with Him into the world in order that the next soul - the very next soul - we would take ... ever ... so ... seriously.



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Church of the Palms

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