

“But Wait ... There’s More!”

Christmas catalogs start arriving at my house in early September, and if it weren’t for the increasing importance of Hallowe’en as a holiday, I’m sure that the stores would have all of their special merchandise up as well. Christ Carols begin blaring through loudspeakers in every public place before we even turn the calendar page to December, and there are a number of homes in my neighborhood that put up their Christmas trees in time for Thanksgiving dinner.

While the world rushes headlong toward commercial ecstasy, something very different is happening in many churches. A person newly engaged with a worshipping community probably has some questions about the disconnect between the way we keep Christmas and the holiday as it celebrated in the larger world.

Just as you need to preach your building and your liturgy, you also need to preach the holidays, especially Christmas.

This will require all the tact and grace you can muster, because the last thing in the world you want to do is to condemn what the rest of our culture holds dear.

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Americans spend a lot of treasure on Christmas, not just for presents, but also for decorations and special foods for special meals – and some even on gifts to charitable organizations.

To be avoided at all costs is any reference to the Church’s ownership of “the *real* meaning of Christmas.” The gifts, the meals, the holiday cheer are quite real in and of themselves. They are the tangible expressions, the “what” of the celebration.

What we need to say is, “But wait ... there’s more!”

What the Church has to offer is the “why.”

Why do we wait until the last minute to celebrate Christmas? Because God’s people waited a long time for God’s Advent, for God’s coming into our world in a new way. Advent as a season of preparation is well established in many denominations, but a relatively new phenomenon in others. Its customs around a wreath and candles and calendars are worth exploring and explaining. I have seen some wonderfully creative expressions of these customs in local congregations, often “home made.” The best of them make it clear that we do not wait for waiting’s sake, but devote the time to looking for signs of God’s real presence in the world.

Why don't we sing Christmas Carols during December like everyone else does? Because we have some pretty cool music of our own to help us wait. Many congregations will change prayers for Advent, and perhaps use violet or dark blue to cover the altar and decorate the pulpit. But nothing trumps the role of music in creating a special feeling in worship. That we are intentional about not singing carols during the season of preparation sets it sharply apart from what goes on outside the sanctuary.

Why do we keep thinking about Christmas for a couple of weeks after December 25th? Everyone gets born, but God's coming into the world as a human being in Jesus is so wonderful that, from that first Christmas night until weeks later, people were awed by it. First, of course, there were the angels who couldn't bear to stay in heaven but who came in hosts to the skies around Bethlehem to sing their praises. Then there were the shepherds, the lowliest of the low in the society of Judea, who gathered around in wonder. 12 days later it was a group of magi, who practiced secret and illegal arts as conjurors and soothsayers, who noticed that the heavens themselves bore witness to the nativity of our Lord and who came at great risk to pay homage. And even 40 days later, as the infant Jesus is presented at the Temple in Jerusalem, an elderly woman and a zealot sympathizer get to see with their own eyes the anointed one who will teach and preach and heal.

The practices of our culture around Christmas are not misguided or wrong or any less real than your church's customs. We need to take the opportunity to share, gently, the more that we know is there.