

Are you on team,

I've already taken down Christmas tree and decorations

or on team, *this will be an Easter tree too...?*

Ha. I don't think I know anyone

who keeps their Christmas tree up that long

—though a few years ago,

Amanda Hilton, one of our new elders, and I

had a competition

to see who could keep their tree up the longest.

Amanda won - I think she made it until February.

I'm on team we're leaving this tree up

at least until Epiphany,

though I do put away

most of the other Christmas decorations.

When I got in my car

last Sunday to go to church,

the day after Christmas,

I went straight to the Christmas radio stations,

Still holding onto

the merriment and joy of the season.

But instead, songs about stars, babies, mangers and roasting chestnuts

I heard an announcement on repeat

—this channel has been removed until next season.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised

since I started listening to Christmas music Nov.1.

But it struck me

how quickly Christmas ends for us culturally.

Many of the decorations do come down,

tacky sweaters—some of you just call them, sweaters—

go to the back of the closet,

lights come down

and yard inflatables are put away.

My girls asked me,

why are there 12 days of Christmas

—this is prompted by the puzzle

that has taken over our dining room table, still yet to be completed.

I explained to them that Christmas
marks a church season of celebration
and that other churches in other parts of the world,
celebrate Christmas until Epiphany,
when we celebrate the Magi coming to see Jesus.

But as we know

Walgreens already has
their Valentine candy out.

Last week during his benediction,
Whit mentioned an excerpt from a poem
by the Rev. Howard Thurman
about the work of Christmas.

Here's what Thurman wrote in case you missed it:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

And that is where we are.

The gloria of the angels is now faded,
the magi—though epiphany is to come—
will go back home,
albeit a different way,
and the shepherds have gone back to shepherding.

Many of us have put away the manger scenes
and hung a new calendar on the wall.

2022 has been
—with its own hopes, resolutions and dreams.

Which makes Christmas feel like a memory
instead of the ongoing season (even liturgical season).
Yet Thurman is right.
Now is the time for the real work of Christmas.
The nitty gritty details
of living out the hope
that we believe was born
into and is still alive in the world.
The living out of what it means
that the word became flesh.

You know, the church with all her flaws
—her leanings toward busyness
and too many programs with not enough substance;
her sometimes silence
in matters of upheaval and injustice;
her struggle with being hospitable
to everyone made in God's image;
her rules and doctrines
that sometimes matter more
than her heart for the gospel
—for all the flaws we could name about her,
the church is still called and willing
to do the work of Christmas.

The church, and really,
now I am talking about us,
you and me,
we are called to the work
that Christmas opens our eyes to.
The work that Christmas reminds us
still needs to be done.
The work that is ours to take up
—because if not us,
then who
and if not now,
then when?

The work of Christmas
is the future we can imagine.

Think of how if everyone of us,
just us here at FPC,
what if everyone of us
were to make it a priority in the new year
to do the hard interior, personal work Christmas?

What if we took on the attitude
of being satisfied and present?
Satisfaction might mean
we would work on consuming less
and enjoying the sense of enough.
That we have enough
And there is enough to go around...

Being more present might mean
that instead of fleeing problems, griefs, and difficulties
that we stay in the moment
and let grief work to heal us,
let difficulties teach us new things
and we might work out problems
with patience and love?

What if we all made resolutions
to awareness and compassion?
It might mean
that we would be more intentional
about whom and what needs are around us.
Would look like volunteering at the Soup Kitchen
and working with school systems policies
to give children healthier meals?

It might mean that instead of my usual default to being overly judgy,
that resolving to be compassionate
means that in all our responses
we would consciously make the effort
to quell our own judgmentalism to each and every frustration,
to the person who disagrees with us,
to the person inside each us,
that judges herself and doesn't forgive himself well.

What if we made resolutions
to mental health openness
that encompasses all God's weird and quirky people?
Would the other things we've already said
like compassion, patience,
and presence fall into place?

Dang, this really is sounding like work, isn't?

When I look at the list Thurman rightly suggests
as the work of Christmas:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

I realize this is a list that we can't tackle alone.

But it is a list that the church can take on.
What a gift
to really believe
that the word made flesh,
that God coming to us in Christ
enables us to do the work of God!

As we ordain and install
a new class of elders,
the work of Christmas
is the work we expect them to lead us into.

In commissioning the Pastor Nominating Committee,
we are entrusting them to seek our next leader
who will carry the vision already set in place here
for the work of Christmas to continue.

I'm not really one for resolutions,
especially ones that are made
at the beginning of the year.
Mostly because I don't like failing.

And I don't really like hard work
that makes me take a look at myself,
and change my behavior for the better.
But I am willing to be held accountable,
And I am willing to try.
Especially when we get to try to do this together.

Especially when it means
that we can promise together
to commit that the work of Christmas
is now upon us.

That the spirit of the season
can be the light in our hearts
even if we take down the lights in our homes.

So, I guess it really doesn't matter
what team you are on—
team take down the tree and décor
or team leave it up.

What matters is that we are the same team
that is ready to do the work of Christmas.