

*Free Balancing and Alignment*  
**Rev. James Van Schaick**  
**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Third Sunday of Advent**  
**December 17, 2017**  
**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

Some of you have heard me comment over the last month that Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. And it is. I look forward to Thanksgiving more than any other day of the year. It's just a wonderful family time without the stress and strain of decorating the house, agonizing over what to get everyone, fighting the crowds at the mall, and staying up late wrapping boxes. It is gratifying to me that for years now the public has resisted getting caught up in sending Thanksgiving cards, despite the greeting card industry's best efforts to sell us the idea.

Of course, by saying that Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, I am implicitly saying that Christmas is not. So I'd better come clean. I admit my tendency to be a little out of sorts during the Christmas rush. It's just hard to stop and reflect on the meaning of the season while feeling that you're being pulled in a dozen directions at once. It's also not easy to avoid being at least a little dismayed at the annual reminders of what Christmas has become.

I'm not aware that anyone was killed this year in the annual Black Friday rush for bargains, although we certainly heard about the usual outbreaks of violence and related injuries. Listening to the radio a few weeks ago, I heard a show's host describe a confrontation he had with a woman. It seems he had gotten the last of a particular item off the shelf, and a short time later caught the woman trying to take it out of his cart. This resulted in a lot of yelling, but fortunately, no fisticuffs.

But one altercation, in Missouri, I think, left a man with a shattered hip when he was slammed into a display after tussling with another K-Mart customer over an electronics item. In one store, three adult males wrestled over a giant toy car. If you care to look, you can find the store video of both those incidents on the Internet. Widespread altercations in Alabama made it necessary to close one mall early. One man was shot, and another stabbed, at the Willowbrook Mall in New Jersey. That one caught my eye because that was where the Van Schaicks did most of their Christmas shopping when we lived in New Jersey.

The more egregious examples of people running amok in pursuit of Christmas joy may be recent, but the emphasis on the commercial side of the holiday is not. It was 80 years ago when President Franklin Roosevelt succeeded in officially making the date of Thanksgiving one week earlier in November so that people

would have one more week to shop. Since then, the “Christmas season” has continued to grow longer and longer, to encourage people to shop earlier, and hopefully, more often. This year, I was a little dismayed, but not surprised, to find a radio station playing one Christmas carol after another a full two weeks before Thanksgiving.

Our concerns about the gross commercialization of Christmas is all sort of ironic, actually. Most of the symbols that we and the world have come to identify with Christmas, things like the ubiquitous Christmas tree, were actually taken from the Roman festival of Saturnalia. It was the pagan celebration of the winter solstice. The tradition of gift giving came from the same place.

You probably already know that we don’t really have any idea what time of year Jesus was born. Early Christians simply adopted the festival of Saturnalia for the commemoration of the Savior’s birth. One version of the history says that church leaders of the fourth century were so disturbed by the excesses of the celebration of Saturnalia that they deliberately designated its beginning as Christmas day. Then they established the four weeks before Christmas as a time of fasting and prayer, hoping that the peace and devotion of Advent might moderate the wanton consumption of Saturnalia. We know how successful that was. I think it is fair to say that Christians tried to take over a pagan holiday, but it has inexorably taken us over instead.

It’s not just the commercialization of Christmas that sometimes has me down. You see, I remember very vividly the intense and wonderful feelings I had as a boy, anticipating the coming of Christmas. Many of you probably remember that feeling. And in a way, I’m in mourning for a part of me that was all but given up in adulthood. It was the part that was able to spontaneously and authentically give itself over to a pure, innocent sense of *joy*.

This year, a little thing happened that has restored some of the balance in my Christmas. I have been spending some time with my nose in books or on the internet lately, trying to find some good “non-scripture” readings for our Christmas eve service. It was during my search that I came upon a poem from the 1950’s by a poet named Lawrence Ferlinghetti. I learned in a quick trip to Wikipedia that Ferlinghetti is a 98-year-old poet and painter. According to the article, “Ferlinghetti’s work challenges the definition of art and the artist’s role in the world. He urged poets to be engaged in the political and cultural life of the country. As he writes in *Populist Manifesto*: ‘Poets, come out of your closets, Open your windows, open your doors, You have been holed up too long in your closed worlds... Poetry should transport the public/to higher places/than other wheels can carry it...’”<sup>i</sup>

The poem I found, entitled *Christ Climbed Down*, is a good example of that philosophy in action. I decided it wasn’t really a “Christmas Eve” poem, but I’m going to share it with you now. In it, Ferlinghetti very powerfully describes how the meaning of Christmas has been recast by perhaps the most materialistic society in

world history –ours. If you don't understand some of the references, remember that Ferlinghetti wrote this nearly 70 years ago.

*Christ Climbed Down*  
by Lawrence Ferlinghetti<sup>ii</sup>

Christ climbed down  
from His bare Tree  
this year  
and ran away to where  
there were no rootless Christmas trees  
hung with candycanes and breakable stars

Christ climbed down  
from His bare Tree  
this year  
and ran away to where  
there were no gilded Christmas trees  
and no tinsel Christmas trees  
and no tinfoil Christmas trees  
and no pink plastic Christmas trees  
and no gold Christmas trees  
and no black Christmas trees  
and no powderblue Christmas trees  
hung with electric candles  
and encircled by tin electric trains  
and clever cornball relatives

Christ climbed down  
from His bare Tree  
this year  
and ran away to where  
no intrepid Bible salesmen  
covered the territory  
in two-tone cadillacs  
and where no Sears Roebuck creches  
complete with plastic babe in manger  
arrived by parcel post  
the babe by special delivery  
and where no televised Wise Men  
praised the Lord Calvert Whiskey

Christ climbed down  
from His bare Tree  
this year  
and ran away to where

no fat handshaking stranger  
in a red flannel suit  
and a fake white beard  
went around passing himself off  
as some sort of North Pole saint  
crossing the desert to Bethlehem  
Pennsylvania  
in a Volkswagen sled  
drawn by rollicking Adirondack reindeer  
and German names  
and bearing sacks of Humble Gifts  
from Saks Fifth Avenue  
for everybody's imagined Christ child

Christ climbed down  
from His bare Tree  
this year  
and ran away to where  
no Bing Crosby carollers  
groaned of a tight Christmas  
and where no Radio City angels  
iceskated wingless  
thru a winter wonderland  
into a jinglebell heaven  
daily at 8:30  
with Midnight Mass matinees

Christ climbed down  
from His bare Tree  
this year  
and softly stole away into  
some anonymous Mary's womb again  
where in the darkest night  
of everybody's anonymous soul  
He awaits again  
an unimaginable  
and impossibly  
Immaculate Reconception  
the very craziest of  
Second Comings.

Depression around the holidays is actually a fairly common problem. And if you do some research, you'll find that one of the pieces of advice that psychologists give people about the holidays is not to set your expectations too high. For example, if you and your sister always fight when she visits for Christmas, you'll probably fight again. If your neighbor always goes you one better on outdoor

decorations, he'll probably do it again, so don't set yourself up for disappointment by expecting anything different. The poem I just read you is also about expectations. But Ferlinghetti's message differs from the psychologists' in one important way. The poet is not saying to lower your expectations for the holiday. He is saying that what we need to do is trade in our old expectations entirely and get completely new ones – higher ones – the right ones.

I think that's what the gospel reading from John is telling us today. An expectant group of people is quizzing John the Baptist, wanting to know if he is the one that they have been waiting for. "Tell us what you say about yourself," they demand. "Are you a prophet? Are you Elijah? Are you the Christ?" John calmly and emphatically tells them that he isn't. They need to have different, higher, expectations. "[The Christ] is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (John 1:27) The Savior we await is nothing less than the one who is the light of creation.

Here's the thing. What human hearts really long for is the true joy that comes with the light to which John has been sent to be a witness. What will fill the void in us is not the things that compel us stand on a line outside stores at midnight on Thanksgiving. It is the hope, peace, and love that are promised us by the one who first breathed life into our bodies and set us on our way in the world. Isn't that right? Deep inside, don't we all sense our need and longing, whether we have words for it or not? Can anyone look into the faces of the crowds of holiday shoppers, or read news stories of people hurt or even killed in the rush for the best bargains, and honestly say that we have any hope of finding what our souls crave in the places where we've been looking for it?

There's a disconnect in our lives between what we really want and need and the things we pursue. Hopefully, this is a time and a place where we can admit things like this, to ourselves and to each other. In here, we can get our lives balanced and re-aligned. Ferlinghetti's poem very powerfully reminds us of something that it is so easy to forget in the hustle and bustle of the season: God waits for us, whether we make the time to welcome him or not. God waits, silently, "in the darkest night of everybody's anonymous soul," to be born anew. And if we can just empty ourselves of the world's priorities, even for a moment, and listen intently for God's, then this Christmas we'll finally get what we've really needed all along.

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<sup>i</sup> Wikipedia, retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence\\_Ferlinghetti](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Ferlinghetti)

<sup>ii</sup> Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Christ Climbed Down," *Coney Island of the Mind*, 1958, New Directions, New York City.