

“WARNING: CHRISTMAS IS COMING”

Psalm 25:1-10

preached November 29, 2009

We have a society that has gone wild with warning labels. The first ones I remember were on packs of cigarettes, but these days, for the most part, it's just a simple response to outrageous law suits brought by individuals who were created enough, or more likely dumb enough, to hurt themselves in unbelievable ways. And with an attitude that we have to be protected from anything and everything, we have a bundle of warning tags on all sorts of products. For some of them, you have to wonder who thought this was really a threat. Some are silly, but I understand. Like a warning tag on a child's Superman costume informing the wearer that the cape really doesn't enable one to fly. And occasionally you find a warning that makes you wonder if it is really possible. Like on a personal massager with the warning that you are not to use it when unconscious. Now if you are unconscious, how do you know that you are using it? And other labels just make me say, AI can't believe someone would be dumb enough to do that.”

On a curling iron: “For external use only.” On a cardboard sun shield for a car windshield: “Do not drive with sun shield in place.” On a laser printer: “Do not eat toner.” On a microwave: “Do not use to dry pets.” On a toilet bowl cleaning brush: “Do not use orally.” On a birthday card for a one year old child: “Not suitable for children under 36 months.” On a can of air freshener: “To be used by trained personnel only.” Actually I just wondered where I can get the training to operate a can of air freshener. And possibly my favorite, on a laser pointing device: "Do not look into laser with remaining eye.” With remaining eye? Which indicates that you already lost an eye by looking into the laser. Warning labels are everywhere.

So if warning labels are everywhere, why don't we have one on the Church? Why don't we have a warning label for Christmas? But then, maybe we do. Or at least that word is out among many. This week I came across the case of a 10 year old girl in New Hampshire. A hearing was held in August, 2009. A recent case. And according to court records, the girl had been home schooled, by her mother, and was also attending supplemental public school classes. She was described as being Awell liked, social and interactive with her peers, academically promising and intellectually at or superior to grade level.” She was also involved in various extracurricular activities. But though she seemed to be doing quite well in all areas, she was ordered out of home schooling and into public education. Why would they do that? Because it was said that she was too vigorous in her defense of the Christian faith. It

was decided that the girl "appeared to reflect her mother's rigidity on questions of faith" and that the girl's interests "would be best served by exposure to a public school setting." Why is that? Because, Christianity is dangerous. And that should be no surprise because in official federal government warning about terrorists, a group to watch for were Bible believing Christians.

Christianity is dangerous, and so is Christmas, partly because of its connection to Jesus Christ, but also because it is a threat to people of other faiths, and to people of no faith. We are approaching a time of year when schools across the nation will do battle over the ability to sing Christmas carols. For years I saw it happening in Camp Hill Schools. Other religious songs were tolerable, but tying Christmas to the birth of Christ has been deemed by many to be inappropriate. And of course we have seen the battle in stores, in some of which, the phrase “Merry Christmas” has been banned. There needs to be a warning label on Christmas.

Now somehow we seem to think that this is a new phenomenon. It’s not, for we have this plea coming from Psalm 25, a psalm written by David 3000 years ago. *“O my God, in You I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.”* What he is saying is that he is being challenged because of his faith and connection to God. People around him are trying to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. Gee, that sounds like it could have been said last week. And it probably was said last week. But there are also people around here who would like to wipe Christianity off the face of the earth as well. I have heard that from atheists and agnostics near and far. And occasionally that word comes from others faiths, too. Why? Why are Christians, why is Christmas so threatening?

I know why. Because Christianity is dangerous. Christians talk about things that other people don’t want to hear. We talk about a personal God who cares about each and every one of us, who has thoughts on what we should be doing in life, and the ways in which we are to behave. Most of the world doesn’t like that at all. They seek a god that they can manipulate. Maybe the impersonal god of Star Wars, *“May the force be with you.”* Or the ying and yang of Taoism. Maybe they seek the Greek or Roman gods who cared nothing for humanity, who have no desire to interact with the world. With them, ways might be found to manipulate them, to use them, and then forget about them when our use for them is over. They seek narcissistic gods who are so focused on themselves that they will not pay any attention to the needs and desires of any other.

That is not a picture of YHWH, Jehovah, our Lord. Our scriptures show a God who pulls us close to Him, so His breath, the breath of life can be breathed into us. We look to a Lord who calls us by name, whose love will not let us go; who stands by us through the victories of David and the trials of Job. This is One who will laugh and cry with us. Yet ever since the Garden, there is a consistent pattern of God calling us, seeking us, while humanity is consistently running away. Christmas and Christianity are threats because they tell humanity that it is time to stop running. It time to turn around and bow down before God, rather than seeking ways to manipulate God. There ought to be a warning label.

Christmas and Christianity are dangerous because they contradict the ways of the world. When Mary was told that she was pregnant and would deliver the Savior of the world, she declared that this was going to change everything. The proud will be scattered and the humble lifted up. The hungry will be filled, and the rich will go away empty. Everything is going to be changed. And we don't like our world to be changed. Change causes stress, even if it is a beneficial change, if there is such a thing. For change means that there is something beyond our control. And if it is beyond our control, that means that we are not in charge. And that is a scary thought. There ought to be a warning label.

Christmas and Christianity are dangerous because it forces us to admit that there is someone more important than ourselves. When we begin life as an infant, everything is about us. If we have a need that is not being met, we let everyone within earshot know it. And we didn't care where we were or what was going on. We were the center of the universe. And many of us never gave up that attitude. We would go our own way, do whatever we wanted to do, and we didn't have to care about how our actions would affect others. But now we discover that there is someone more important than we are. And that important person tells us that we are expected to care about the people around us. That we need to humble ourselves and submit our will to His. Most of the world does not want to go there, any way, any time, any how. There ought to be a warning label.

And of course, none of that talks about the dangers that this society has done to Christmas. Though the traditional Christmas celebration over the centuries has been a quiet, meditative, spiritual celebration, it has become a secular event and a marketing tool. Though many may not like the concept of Christmas, of God coming into our world, they sure like to use it as a sales gimmick. Others are thrilled to use it as the opportunity to over indulge in a variety of ways. We eat too much. Drink too much. Spend too much. All that leads to trips in emergency vehicles, and cries to financial counselors. Christmas becomes an occasion to toss away all

discipline, and we get to do it in the name of God. The damage that we do, we do to ourselves. But of course it is not our fault. We become victims of the society and the season. There ought to be a warning label.

There seems to be a number of people who see at least a potential threat in the church, so why don't we have a warning label. I think it is because we have stopped being dangerous. On a radio talk show I heard a satirical song telling us to have a "Rama-Hanu-Kwanz-mas." It was a statement that there is no difference in the holidays because there is no difference in religions, in faiths. And we have bought into the myth. The church in America has succumbed to the rhetoric that there is nothing special about the birth of Jesus, and so we don't tell others about Him. Where many see the potential threat that our faith has for their way of life, we have forgotten it.

The final instruction of Jesus was to *"go into all the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* The early church heard that message and went forth to turn the world upside down. They went forth to introduce the world to the risen Christ; to introduce the world to the Creator; to introduce the world to the One, the only One who left the heavens to come to be with us, to live with us, to live as one of us. They knew that when Jesus came into the world, everything changed. And it was a threat to the way things had been, in religions, in governments, and in our everyday life. Those people needed a warning label. And we should, too.

It is time to get excited, not for the culture's holiday season, but to celebrate the birth of the Savior. It is time to come to the manger again, to look with great anticipation upon the omnipotent God coming to us as a vulnerable, helpless infant. It is time to make the commitment, maybe for the first time, to lift up the words of David, saying, *"Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation."* Let us resolve to obey all that he has commanded us. Let us resolve to go forth baptizing, immersing everyone we meet in the Spirit of God. It is time to go forth to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It is time to go forth without fear, spreading a message of good news, for our Lord, our God, is coming into the world and everything changes. So let the world be warned. For unto us a child is born. Unto us a Son is given. And in His name, all the world will be turned upside down. And we will not go away. We will not be wiped off the face of the earth. For we are the children of God, and we will not go away. We will not be silenced. We will lift up the name of Jesus, of

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Jesus alone, in whom salvation comes. So let the world be warned, for we are going forth to tell the world that everything changes; to tell the world the Savior has come; to tell the world that Christmas is all about Jesus Christ and no other. And we, His brother and sisters are ready to tell the story. Lord, let it be so, in your life, now and forever. Amen.