

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Senior Minister  
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Last week I hit the shopping mall for the Christmas sales. That sounds fierce--“I *hit* the mall”. But maybe that’s about right, all things considered. Ever notice how assaultive it feels as they repeat ads over and over, cute at first, sinister the 26<sup>th</sup> time? Burrowing deep into us to break us down, it doesn’t bring out the best in us.

The season features all of the usual stories to illustrate that point. Black Friday told of the woman shopper in California using pepper spray in a melee after Xbox consoles. She *hit* 20 customers, no isolated incident...In Arkansas a scrum broke out over waffle irons on sale for \$2. A mass of squealing, shouting humanity hurtled one another, grabbing and tossing boxes. One woman was unaware of her stretch pants sliding down her backside. Do yourself a favor and please skip that YouTube video. For it exposes our furious acquisitiveness for everything it is.

Cecile and I always say, don’t get anything for me. I don’t need anything. But we still do. So I trudged the Stamford Mall. Spying a familiar jeweler, I involuntarily heard a voice within: “*Every kiss begins with Kay.*” I hate that ad. Why do I hate it? They repeat it *ad nauseum* during hockey games. So I can’t escape it. “*Every kiss begins with Kay.*” The men in the ads are dufuses with no idea what women want. So it’s painfully realistic. “*Every kiss begins with Kay.*” But worst is how cunningly the largest jeweler in America claims *they* own the franchise on love.

As we celebrate love incarnate, born in Christ Jesus, I find that insulting. So, Kay, you own the franchise on love? Guess what, I own the franchise on truculence. So get ready. I confess to urges of upending glass counters, like Jesus in the temple. But then I see the Darien Times headline, “Pastor goes postal assaulting Christmas.” And I don’t want to embarrass you. The truth is always wanting more runs way deep within our humanity. Maybe the key is teasing out *what* we want. After all, our wanting is malleable. Our yearning is suggestible to various dreams. If it weren’t so, advertising wouldn’t exist. Maybe we need alternative messages.

Maybe we need God to untangle our wanting. Isaiah’s dreamy poetry reminds us there is more to life than meets the eye. Man does not live by waffle irons alone. There’s more behind the scenes of our days than any narrative could ever reveal. There’s more in our relationships with one another than we are at any moment aware of. And the more we explore the mystery of our lives together, the more mysterious we are to one another. If we are fully honest, seldom are we satisfied with what see on the surface. Seldom are any of us fully content in the moment. We know that there is something more, something greater, out there awaiting us.

But what is painful, given what God has in store for those who love him, is how we get sidetracked seeking something more, how we substitute lesser things. I hoped we had learned a lesson with the Great Recession. Do you recall the fever for massive, sprawling McMansions in the 1990s? Jay Walker of Priceline was my

neighbor in Ridgefield. He spent \$1,000,000 *just for the driveway* of his 28,000 sq. foot home. One million dollars and 700 dump truck loads of hauled earth. Just try and sell that home today. What we think we want very often comes to naught.

Isaiah articulates deep longing for something more. “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion--to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.” Mary’s Magnificat reveals how the life with a Roman boot on her neck has shaped her wants. Maybe our problem isn’t always wanting more. Maybe it’s *what* we want.

Isaiah tells of a world of glory beyond present arrangements, a world with oil of gladness and fragrant garlands, and a mantle of praise. This is Bible-talk for “the more” God reserves for us beyond the now. We come here to be drawn beyond a world of material predictability into a world where God mysteriously delivers his promises to those who have learned how to want them. We come to church because we don’t know why “more” often becomes the wrong kind of too much. We come because most of us struggle to fathom what we need more of and less of.

Here is the good news of my sermon. None of us are not born wanting the right things. Our desires must be trained. As Christians, we learn forming our wants in God’s image takes an entire lifetime. As consumers, if our wants are unformed, marketers will own us. But every week as we hear a gospel shaping our desire into what will satisfy as we look back upon our lives. Invisibly and incrementally, it transforms us. Buddhism, for example, teaches desire is bad and passion makes us unhappy. Christianity teaches that passion and desire are good but they must be channeled in disciplines and directions far greater than we could ever invent.

As we hear from Isaiah and Mary, a seer and a maiden, who want extraordinary things, sublime things, things that seem hardly dream possible, and our dreams gradually become one with God’s dreams. We are no longer vulnerable to mass marketing in the same way. We sing these beautiful, holy carols honed over time with the promises of God embedded within them. Then we act on the promises. We take Dove boxes and make Christmas for other homes devoid of celebration. At today’s pageant and again on Christmas Eve we invite offerings for Inspirica, moving people from homeless--like fugitive Mary, Joseph and Jesus--into homes. Even more, we end enmity and hardheartedness with our neighbors by forgiving. We notice how graciously God touches the world in Jesus and extend that grace.

We realize wanting more need not be an evil leaving us feeling used and empty. Isaiah claims there’s nothing wrong with always wanting more. God has more to give us. That’s why Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” But Isaiah also says God intervenes to form us to want life and not death, to want restoration not brokenness, to want full communion not arid alienation.

God intervenes through exodus and exile, through Golgotha and an empty tomb. In these events we discover abundant life. In this unfolding story we learn God's intentions are unmistakable: that even our likes might rejoice in the blessed assurance of life overflowing with goodness and promises of even more to come.

Still, let's admit it, we are human. No matter how good God is, it's hard to trust intangible promises over shiny durable goods. It is hard to be formed in such a way that seeking first the reign of God, we then trust God to meet our material needs. It is not easy to bridge the gulf between God's promises and our struggle. It is not easy to resist the "he-who-dies-with-the-most-toys-wins" glamor and to embrace "if any want to follow me, let them...take up their cross and follow me." It is not easy to see beyond a sensation-soaked society to the reality Christmas exposes.

It takes lots of faith to hold fast God's abundance as our fullness, wholeness and flourishing. It takes lots of faith to let God's promises to drive out fear, anxiety, and loneliness. It takes lots of faith to yearn for God-given well-being, the peace the world can neither give nor take away, and a peace passing all understanding.

We trust because there *is* more to life than meets the eye. There *is* more behind our days than any history could tell. There is more in our relationships with one another than we are at any moment aware of. There is a God who presides over all who is not immediately knowable from the facts of life. Part of us knows this. That is the part of us we bring to God's house, to strengthen, grow, and develop.

Twenty years ago during Advent I stopped by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. There I saw displayed, beneath a giant Christmas tree, a beautiful eighteenth-century Neapolitan nativity scene. In many ways, it looked familiar. All of the usual characters were there: shepherds roused from sleep by the voices of angels; the exotic wise men from the East; Joseph, Mary, the baby Jesus. They were all there, each figure an artistic marvel of wood, clay and paint.

Yet there was something different about the nativity scene. Something surprising, something unexpected, and something easily missed by the casual observer. That something was how the stable, shepherds, and cradle were set not in the small town of Bethlehem. They were set in the ruins of mighty Roman columns. They surrounded the fragile manger with broken and decaying imperial columns. Here the artists made a clear statement, voting against the touted eternal glory of global empires, voting for the unobtrusive, quiet, enduring glory of God's designs.

For in God's realm, where wanting more is fulfilled, the pillars of earthly empires are as dust. The gaudy fluorescent rows of door-busters are floor grit. In the day of the Lord "the more" we long for will finally find us in quiet and holy places. Our problem isn't that we expect too much out of life. Our problem is that we expect too little. We are too easily sated with that which will not outlast the years. We are far too impatient with the grace, peace and glory that God now unfolds before

us. Let Advent be a time for your glad wait upon the Lord. For Christ is coming.  
Amen.