

WGUMC Christmas Eve 2013 "Pulse of Christmas"

Every year during the Advent season, I like to poke around the news reports coming in from around the world and take the pulse of Christmas. I guess you could say that I have a vested interest in checking the vital signs, knowing the current health status, of this great celebration of the incarnation. So, for 2013, here are some preliminary results.

I'm happy to report that in the great state of Texas the legislature passed the "Merry Christmas Bill" back in June. It seems that tackling poverty and unemployment will have to wait. Texas politicians are hard at work preserving our right to say "Merry Christmas" in the public schools.

But Texas isn't the only place where people are worried about the fate of Christmas. In the West Bank town of Bethlehem, the tourism industry is concerned because the Church of the Nativity is undergoing major renovations. On Christmas Eve, tens of thousands of pilgrims typically flock to

Manger Square to see the 1500-year-old church built on the traditional site of the birth of Christ. But this year there is scaffolding everywhere.

That's a Christmas miracle in itself, considering that it took a major diplomatic effort to get the work even started. You see, back in the eighteenth-century, a treaty was signed giving control of the church to three different branches of Christianity—the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic Churches—and, to put it mildly, they don't get along very well. The monks interrupt each other's prayers and argue over keys and cleaning duties. They have even come to blows. So when it became clear that the church was in danger of collapse, the Palestinian Authority had to step in to get these Christians working together or at least willing to work around each other. Boy, you know things are bad when you have to call in the Palestinian Authority for negotiations.

But at least the Palestinians understand that Christ is at the center of Christmas. That's more than can be said for the American Atheist Association. In Times Square this year they put up a digital billboard. It said, "Who needs Christ during Christmas?" Then a digital hand crosses out the word "Christ" and the screen flashes, "Nobody." Another of their billboards says, "Celebrate the true meaning of Christmas," defined as, among other things: family, friends, charity, fun, Chinese food....and the Rockettes!

By this time, I'm busy checking and re-checking to see if Christmas still has a pulse. I'm wondering where is the Christ that someone isn't trying to play politics with, make fun of or make money off of? Then just when it seems as if I'll have to put the holy day on life support, here comes the new pope, like an emergency medic, to put Christ back into Christmas.

I don't know about you, but I've been delighted by what I've been hearing from this pope. This year, Francis has taken

Jesus everywhere: into a prison for a foot washing, into the crowds for some baby blessing. He recently read a letter about economic inequality and, just like Jesus, gave the money-lenders quite a tongue-lashing.

But the best thing about this pope is that he walks the talk. You know he lives in the guesthouse, not the papal palace. His *new* car is a 1984 Renault. And it is rumored that he sometimes slips out of the Vatican to go hang out with the homeless. So you can imagine what he thought of the German bishop in Limburg. Otherwise known as the Bishop of Bling, this pompous priest spent \$42 million renovating his official residence. But when the Pope found out about it, he called him to Rome, removed him from his post, and sent him to pray in a monastery. Now I hear there are plans to turn the bishop's house into a refugee center and soup kitchen.

So, I want to thank Francis for saving Christmas for me and for a lot of folks this year. He reminds us all that you won't

find Christ if you go looking in state houses and big estates, the places of power and the palaces of privilege. We're more likely to see him in St. James' Park than in Sacramento or the Saratoga hills. But you'll only find him if you're following him. The only way to put Christ back into Christmas is to let Christ back into your life.

You know what is most remarkable thing about the new pope? It's the irrepressible joy he seems to be having in living like Jesus. The look on his face tells us that there is no higher joy, there is no other reason for living, than to love with such abandon. Likewise, the looks on your faces tells me that there is still hope, that our patient indeed has a pulse, that away from the politicians and the press, away from the billboards and the bling, Christmas is alive and kicking. I just look at you and can easily believe that the grace and beauty, the peace and joy of this time will continue to unfold in your hearts and in your lives now and throughout the new year. Merry Christmas.