

[Story] As a little girl climbed onto Santa’s lap at the mall, Santa asked the usual, “And what would you like for Christmas?” The child stared at him, open mouthed, and horrified for a minute, and then said, “Didn’t you get my email?”

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Email! I don’t know about you. I am getting at least 100+ emails in average each day. Some emails are legitimate, but some are not. In last two months for two times, someone impersonated me in the cyber space and sent some “scam” emails to many of you. Some of you read through those emails, realized that those were scam emails, and let me know about those. And, I’ve made both a police report and a fraudulent report on those.

There are three kinds of scam emails. The first one is a “You are a winner!” scam. It tries to get us to respond because the check is waiting. The second one is a “I chose you, dear friend” scam. It tries to tell us someone died and left a lump-sum money. To help disburse this money, they need our email reply to get the ball rolling. The third kind is a “HELP” scam. It says, “One of your friends needs your help. Please send money or gift cards.” Have you gotten one of those emails?

According to the 2020 fraud and identity theft analysis by the Credit Card Insider¹, the report of fraud jumped by 104% from the first quarter of 2019 to the first quarter of 2020, and it continues to grow. It might be because of the current economic crisis in the COVID-19 pandemic this year. Desperate times seem to call for desperate solutions.

Prophet Isaiah understood this kind of desperation. There are at least two kinds of mood in the Book of Isaiah. The first half, when things were going well for the people of Israel as a nation, was a mood of warning and judgement. The prophet said over and over again—“Look at what you are doing to one another. Look at how you are living; look at the source of your wealth; look at the foundations of your society. Does your socio-economic system reflect your status as a people of God?” Prophet Isaiah asked. Then, the second half of the book changes its mood. It

¹ <https://www.creditcardinsider.com/blog/2020-fraud-and-identity-theft-analysis/>

speaks to a desperate people who have lost all, who are hungry, afraid, and homeless; they are refugees, without status or rights.

Now the mood shifts in the desperation. The tone of the Book of Isaiah, chapter 61, is starkly different as it focuses on God, not the unpleasant, and undesirable situation people are in now. God speaks a word of hope; it is a promise. It is a call to live—even in desperate times—by a different standard.

According to today's scriptures, things are bad—people are poor, brokenhearted, the captives, mourning, and more. The Prophet Isaiah comes to these desperate people and says...what? Good News! Good news for the oppressed, good news for the brokenhearted, good news to captives and prisoners, good news to those who mourn.

What is this good news? What do they get? Garlands, oil, a mantle. Uh, what? Where is the promise of wealth and goods? Where is the “you may have won” email that tells us that we could be set for life with no more effort than hitting a reply button? Where are the goods?

God comes to these people who are desperate and tells them to decorate? It doesn't seem right, does it? It doesn't seem enough. Decorations are nice, good, and all, but they hardly serve to make things better.

Honestly, decorating the homes and churches is a work. It takes time and effort. More than that, decorating our homes and churches in the midst of pandemic?!? It surely requires of us to put our extra time and effort. Unless we strongly determine to do so, it would not happen.

Decorating or decorations hardly can be counted on to change the world. But we do it anyway and anyhow because it is our tradition. Traditions represent a critical piece of our culture. They help form the structure and foundation of our families and our society. They remind us that we are part of a history that defines our past, shapes who we are today and who we are likely to become.

In the United Methodist Church, tradition is considered as one of four lenses—Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience—for theological reflection to discern the movement of God in our lives. Once we ignore the meaning of our traditions, we're in danger of damaging the underpinning of our identity because we are shaped by tradition.

No, decorating our homes and churches would not change the world around us. But we do it anyway because it is our tradition. It is who we are. It is our calling in somewhat. It's not the right time to make any radical changes, including tradition, when we go through the hardship. Keeping our tradition is one of the ways to hold ourselves and build resilience in the hardship.

When we decorate our homes and churches for the season, we are not saying that we are unaware of difficulties in life. We are not saying that we are oblivious to bad news. But, we are saying that we choose to live by good news. We are saying that we choose to live by hope and joy, not despair.

The Prophet Isaiah smiled when he said, "God will give a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." No matter how far we feel from the spirit of the season, God promises to decorate us with love and with joy, and proclaims the year of the Lord's favor.

Today's scriptures echo throughout history to announce the Lord's favor to God's people who are in the midst of oppression and desperation. God does see. God does care. These words of Prophet Isaiah give hope of deliverance to us. Here, between the expectation of heaven's peace and this world's pain, these words of Prophet Isaiah proclaim that God is poised to do something about the strife of God's people. Ashes will be turned to joy and mourning will be turned to praise as God's Anointed One, the One upon whom His spirit rests, announces the year of the Lord's favor.

Therefore, NO, we, the people of Kona United Methodist Church, will not let COVID-19 take away our Christmas this year. We will continue the celebration of our Lord's coming joyfully regardless and nevertheless. Please pay your attention to the announcement section of today's worship bulletin that can be obtained at our church website, KonaUMC.com. There, you can find the ways we celebrate our Lord's coming creatively this year. We are inviting you to join us this celebration no matter how far you feel from the spirit of the season because it is our Christian tradition. It is our identity as the followers of Jesus Christ.

Emmanuel God is with us. Please know this. Emmanuel God is with us. Keep calm...Christmas is coming. Joy is here! Amen.