

Last week I mentioned that I like Christmas cards, but even more I like all the lights of the season. We have our lighted manger scene outside on the hillside, Belpre has a really great display of Christmas lights, and there is a house in town that has this amazing light show timed to Christmas music – I'll go back several times to enjoy that.

I know there is no real cause and effect relationship, but it can seem like the lights on trees, the outdoor displays, do more than dispel the physical darkness that surrounds us. It seems for a while the lights make us want to be helpful to the needy, the lonely, the homeless. In just the last few weeks we have collected food for holiday meals, bought presents for those who have too little; send money to Africa to care for the dying and educate the young. The lights didn't cause us to do all that but they are a great reminder that we can make the world a brighter place.

Come January all the lights are put away, but some part of us wishes that their light could continue and the world would remain just a bit more peaceful, and merry and loving. The third Sunday of advent reminds us that there is a light for the world that never goes away and it is our job to proclaim that.

People complain about a world of darkness where they feel lost and unsure about what really matters or what to do next. They fill bookshelves with self help books and books telling them where to find meaning in life. They search for light everywhere except the most obvious place. They overlook the presence of Christ among them and even within them. This is where we come in. Like John the Baptist we are sent by God. We have been called to be witnesses to what is possible for our world.

There was a woman once who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart, but she was very frustrated. The world seemed to be falling apart and her personal life wasn't that great either. One day she decided to go shopping, and she went to the mall and walked in to one of the stores. She was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter.

She knew it was Jesus because he looked just like the paintings she'd seen in museums and in devotional books. Finally she got up her nerve and asked, "Excuse me, but are you Jesus?" "I am." "Do you work here?" "In a way; I own the store." "Oh, what do you sell here?" "Just about everything," Jesus replied. "Feel free to walk up and down the aisles, make a list, see what it is you want, and then come back and I'll see what I can do for you."

Well, she did just that. She walked up and down the aisles, writing furiously. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty. There was peace in families, harmony, no dissension, no more drugs. There careful use of resources. By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list. Jesus looked over the list, then smiled at her and said, "No problem." And then he bent down behind the counter and picked out all sorts of things, and finally stood up, and laid out the packets on the counter. "What are these?" the woman asked. "Seed packets," Jesus answered. "This is a catalog store." "You mean I don't get the finished product?" "No, this is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. You go home and plant the seeds. You water them and nurture them and help them to grow, and someday someone will reap the benefits." "Oh," she said. "And she left the store without buying anything."

John understood that he was just planting the seeds. If you're not much of a gardener, try imagining instead that you receive an email that warns of a very powerful virus could spread in epidemic proportions. The virus is called "Inner Peace" and seem to come from being exposed to the mystery of God's love. Be on the alert, it says, for symptoms of inner peace that could pose a serious threat to what has, up to now, been a fairly stable condition of conflict in the world. Here are some signs and symptoms of inner peace:

- + A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than on fears based on past experiences.
- + An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.

- + A loss of interest in judging other people.
 - + A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.
 - + A loss of interest in conflict.
 - + A loss of the ability to worry. (This is a very serious symptom.)
 - + Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
 - + Contented feelings of connectedness with others and nature.
 - + Frequent attacks of smiling.
 - + An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.
 - + An increased susceptibility to the love extended by others as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend it.
- The seeds we plant just might result in an outbreak of joy and hope and light in a world that had long forgotten how to experience these things.

There was a young man who wanted to be a writer. But his mother wasn't so sure. When he went away to college she said, "Son, now I know you want to be a writer. But I want you to think about brain surgery. You'll keep a lot of people from dying. And you'll make a lot of money." To which he responded, "No, Mama, I want to be a writer."

But, "No," is not what Mama wanted to hear. So, every vacation break for four years she would repeat her comments about his becoming a brain surgeon and keeping people from dying and making a lot of money, and always his response was the same. Finally the son had enough, and, when the same mantra began, he cut off his mother with exasperation, and with great passion he told his mother, "Mama, I don't want to keep people from dying, I want to show them how to live." And that is how we prepare the way of the lord this Advent. Light their way; show them the life that is possible; plant and nurture the seed of faith.