

“A Colorful Christmas”
Christmas Eve 2004
Homily by Jan Edmiston

My husband Fred (who is also a pastor) tells the story of a 7-year old boy named Travis¹ who visited his congregation for the first time on a Sunday when all the children had been asked to bring something to worship that would warm and brighten the lives of people in need. They were asked to bring mittens and scarves and socks in the brightest colors they could find, and the church would be donating them to other children.

Travis came forward without a donation, because – again, it was his first Sunday visiting that church. He just didn’t know.

As the other children came forward, they brought with them piles of wool and fleece and cotton – in periwinkle and purple, red and magenta, lime green and neon yellow. Fred was surrounded by a wealth of warmth.

Travis raised his hand and said, “I didn’t know. I’ve been in the dark.” But then his face lit up and he said, “I can give my sweater. It’s not a good color but it’s really warm.” And 7-year old Travis proceeded to take off his beige sweater and hand it to Fred.

“Wow,” Fred said. “This is really nice of you, but maybe we should ask your Mom and Dad if it’s okay to give away this nice sweater. Tell you what – I will hang on to the sweater and when you come back next week you can bring some socks or gloves, and then we can *trade* them for your sweater and you’ll get your sweater back.

“But if the kids are cold, don’t you think somebody will need a sweater?” Travis said. “It’s just light brown, but it’s really warm.” And Travis’ parents concurred.

Fred kept the beige sweater to give to the shelter, along with the Kelly green scarves and the aqua mittens and the hot pink socks.

On this night of nights, we are looking for something beautiful. Some warmth and brightness and color.

Red and green, of course, have become the “Christmas colors” but it has nothing to do with Jesus. According to some historians, the green comes from the evergreen trees – symbols of eternity. And the red comes from the berries of one such evergreen – the holly.

¹ The child’s name has been changed for his privacy.

Long before the birth of Jesus, those pagan Druids used mistletoe and holly in *their* spiritual rituals. And it's thought that we Christians – in an attempt to overthrow the Druid customs – took over the use of greens to make them our own.²

Red and green were considered *so* pagan that for several centuries in Christian history Church leaders actually *forbade* Christians to decorate with holly and fir trees. One of the 6th century bishops in Germany – Bishop Martin – called Christmas greens “dangerous and heathen.”³

What's even more interesting is what *God* says about the colors red and green. The Lord warned Moses about the red and green spots of leprosy in the book of Leviticus, telling him and his brother that if a priest detects that the red and green have spread to the walls of the house and cannot be eradicated, then the house must be torn down.⁴

In the Psalms, God describes our sins as being *like scarlet*.⁵

It seems that red and green are not God's favorite colors. In the Bible are colors associated with wickedness and blasphemy and general contempt for all things holy.⁶

You'll notice that this sanctuary is bedecked in red and green and it really looks quite lovely. The truth is that the liturgical colors this season are purple (during Advent - the four weeks before Christmas) and white for the season of Christmas.

Purple symbolizes royalty, spirituality, and penitence – perfect representations to mark the coming of a holy king who will make us face our sins. And white symbolizes purity and devotion -- pointing toward the One who is perfectly loving and pure of heart. We could use more purple and white in this season, to remember *why* we celebrate in the first place.

But alas, the reds and greens win out.

Commentators point out that 2004 has been a *red* year:

- the red states dominated the elections,

² See http://www.linguistics.com/origins_of_christmas.htm

³ This would be Bishop Martin of Brancae, Germany.

See www.noble.org/Ag/Horticulture/EvergreenHollies/Index.htm.

⁴ Leviticus 14:33-45.

⁵ Psalm 1:18.

⁶ See 1 Kings 14:23, Psalm 37:35, Isaiah 57:5, Jeremiah 3:6, Revelation 6:4.

- the Red Sox won the World Series,
- Mel Gibson's movie about *The Passion of the Christ* showed us more red blood than many of us wanted to see.

The *blue* states spent the day after the elections feeling . . . well . . . blue. And the truth is that Christmas is a season when *many* people feel blue, and it's a more spiritual problem than the romance problem Elvis sang about long ago.⁷ When the song "Blue Christmas" was written, it was 1948 and we had just resoundingly won the Second World War. The economy was thriving. Churches – including this one – were being built on every corner, and everybody wanted to join them. The baby boom was about to blast off.

But today there are more *spiritual* reasons to be blue. There are more questions about the meaning of life. There are fierce and ugly divides about war and civil rights. And while flat screen TVs and i Pods have flown off the shelves, some of us wonder if it's even *possible* to get back to the more heartfelt, life-changing meaning of Christmas, a meaning that has nothing to do with buying stuff.

There are many reasons to be blue.

Blue is the traditional color for the Virgin Mary. But there was a time – several centuries in the Middle Ages when Mary wore red to recall her own passion and grief.⁸ Even Mary – who did not question what God asked of her – must have felt heavy-hearted on this night.

Symbols are important and color makes the world a more glorious place. But what matters most is *not* how we describe ourselves – red or blue or green. What matters most is how we live our lives – what goes on deep inside us – on *this* night and on every night.

When 7-year old Travis whipped off his sweater without a thought to share it with someone whose name he would never know, that beige sweater became the most vivid and vibrant gift in the pile. It was given from the heart with all the purity and innocence of a baby born on a clear night.

Jesus was great because he was the Messiah. And he was the Messiah because he gave of himself in the most perfect way, even to the point of death on behalf of the world

⁷ Elvis Presley's *Blue Christmas* was written by B. Hayes and J. Johnson in 1948.

⁸ Between the 10th & 14th centuries Mary usually wore a red mantle when depicted in art. See http://www.libsci.sc.edu/bob/class/clis710/StudentWebGuides/virgin_mary_in_medieval_manuscri.htm

he loved. He is not only a symbol. He is **our Savior**. And his presence in our lives is what gives us color and life and vibrancy.

What are we giving this Christmas? Something to add color and life to a darkened world given from the deepest place? This is our calling and our purpose – to give lavishly, to serve lovingly, to live in the likeness of Christ. It makes for a colorful life.