

Rev Nathan Detering
“To the Person Who Emailed Me About God Before Christmas”
December 16, 2018

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Keep our hearts tender.

Keep our eyes soft.

Keep our words true.

Because this is what we are about:

We know there is no answer but to love one another.

We bear witness against unnecessary destruction.

We gather in community to practice being the person

We say we want to be.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something, and that something is not nothing.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything

That is how the light gets in.”

My laptop can only handle so much Christmas shopping

And Netflix watching and Sunday worship writing,

So recently, of course, it showed me the blue face of death

And required a total reboot,

Which in addition to resetting the font settings and restoring

The pixel count and reloading the printers and apps

And iTunes and Spotify and Google and blah, blah, blah,

Also required me to reset my spam filter,
Which I learned this week – ready for me to drop some knowledge? –
Comes, of course, from the meat product spam,
Which was created in the 1930's during the depression when people
Needed a cheap, nonperishable source of protein
And refers to 'spiced ham,'
And only came to refer to 'unwanted, junk email' when, on March 31st,
1993,
A guy named Joe Furr accidentally sent 200 copies of the same electronic
message to a group of co-workers,
And apologized to the group for sending them 'spam,'
As in fake messages just like the fake meat.
How about that?
Sermon over! Final hymn!

Except this:

When one resets your spam filter, which is something I feel like
I need for my spirit and my soul and not just my email,
In this day of too much of just about everything except stillness and love
And politics we can be proud of,
You can choose between low strength filter, medium strength,
And not letting even friends' messages through high strength,
And because I was feeling generous and hopeful and not scrooge like,
And trusting maybe too much of the nature of human nature,
I set it on low, because I really only use one email address
And it says 'Rev' and none of you would spam me, right?
And no one in the wider world would spam a person of the cloth, right?

I mean, never.

So imagine my surprise when not 2 minutes later in comes

The first of many personal messages just for me....

Saying Dear Nathan, Do you want to save up to 85% on printer ink?

Dear Nathan...apply this new ointment to get rid of skin tags in just minutes!

Dear Nathan....are you a Christian single looking for love? Want to meet someone of faith to mingle with and maybe even make a match?

Dear Nathan...relieve discomfort in your ears; never hear ringing again!

Dear Nathan, get all your hair back fast!

Dear Nathan, check out these mountain bikes on closeout sale (ok, save that one).

Dear Nathan, every hour 4 Americans are killed by guns. Forward this email to four new people encouraging them to take action!

And then this one, which I summarize from because when

I printed it out it was 7 pages long, not including color photos.

Dear Minister Nathan,

Maybe those folks who called out a 'War on Christmas' were right!

From society's steady drift toward secularism, to schools banning Jesus

From Christmas events, to Americans admitting they'd rather open

Presents than attend church – in seemingly every measurable way,

Christmas is trending toward a Godless holiday.

In a culture saturated with false gods and idols, the Bible

Teaches there is only true God.

(and then a page of scripture references to prove the point).

*Do you know that 90% of Americans will celebrate Christmas this year,
Yet just 51% will attend a Christmas church service. How did Santa
Overtake Jesus in popularity?*

(insert photos and pages of more dire statistics)

*Minister Nathan, have you considered the wonderful love of God
As expressed in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?
Open your heart, Minister Nathan, and receive Him as your personal Lord
And Savior, ask him to forgive your sins, and you will have eternal life.
If you are reading this today and you've never committed your life to God,
Would you now?
If so, visit this important website below, and get ready for your eternal
destiny.*

Signed,

John5003@aol.com

PS Merry Christmas!

Well. I mean, there's a lot there. But after my eye roll,
And before reactively hitting 'delete' and setting the sender John to 'block,'
I thought to myself this week, *why not?* Why not what?
Well, why not respond?

So here friends, is my reply to John5003:

Dear John,

Thank you very much for taking the time to reach out during what is a busy
time for all of us, particularly clergy and church staff.

Do you know there are five Sundays in December this year, on top of all of the extra Christmas Eve services.

Ever wonder how come God doesn't pay overtime? Maybe we should unionize.

So listen: I think in the past your emails might have gone straight to my spam Folder. Sorry about that!

But I got this note and didn't want to go too long without responding
Because you took the time to reach out in a lengthy way,
Which I appreciate even though we both know email is great for sharing information but less so for sharing emotion, and I sensed a lot of emotion
In and between your words!

I have some emotion, too....because these words like God and Jesus and Christmas and sin and eternal life are such loaded words and each of us
Have so many personal stories that have to do with family and childhood
And hurt and doubt and wondering when we hear them
that sometimes I think each should come with their own trigger warnings.
Religion and especially God's name has been used by people as a weapon,
John, and when that happens we need to be gentle.

I know this because when I use some of these words in my preaching I can watch people's faces and bodies, some open and eager, others wincing or dismissive,

Some leaning forward in the pews, others as far back as the pews will go.
The thing about ministry, John, is that I'm trying to reach all of them

Where they are, because preaching is less about talking and more about listening...and everyone, no matter who, deserves to know they have been heard.

I mean, I don't know the Bible as well as you, but one passage

I love is how it says that *everyone should be quick to listen, and slow to speak and slow to become angry*. That's from James 1:19.

And that's also the thing about Bible, John – you can find a word or passage that supports just about anything, because the Bible was written by people, and translated from oral stories to Aramaic to Hebrew to Greek to English, and compiled over centuries and centuries, and reflective of its time and place and context and authors.

Which doesn't make it irrelevant or false or spam-worthy; it just makes it inconsistent.

Do I believe that Jesus was born of virgin Mary and angels sung on high? No.

But do I believe that the story teaches us something true and important about how the holy, the transcendent, God is revealed in humble places, of poor, undocumented parents, for example, in a manger? Yes.

Sometimes I think the fundamentalism on the right and left sound a bit the same, both saying that these stories have to be literally true or literally not true.

I mean, isn't there truth in fiction?

And yes, John, I understand if that last paragraph has you screaming at your screen. It happened a bit with me when I was reading your email.

How we learn to disagree with each other without hating each other

Is maybe some of the most religious work of our time, John...even more
Than putting the Christ back in Christmas or ending the supposed war on
Christmas.

Which leads me to this, John, and it's going to be hard to read, but stay with
me: I read in your note a longing for the 'good ole days' when
Christmas was celebrated for its true spiritual meaning and there wasn't all
this commercialism and shopping.

But here's the thing, John:

This kind of Christmas – the true Christmas that was only about Jesus and
spiritual matters – never really existed.

Because in fact, Christmas over the centuries has always been a hodge-
podge of celebration, merriment, giving presents, getting together with
family and friends, buying frivolous decorations, and religious story,
With most of the traditions having their origins in the celebrations of the
winter solstice.

Stay with me, John.

Because long before lights and cell phones and t.v.'s and illuminated our
homes, the darkness and cold and retreating sun made many people
depressed and even rather scared.

So, when the ancient people started to see the sun return – as it will on
Friday, after the shortest day of the year – these people celebrated the event
with big dinners and singing and even exchanging gifts (sound familiar?)
Some of their symbols of revelry are still with us – holly and ivy and
wreaths and decking the halls with greens (!)

A tradition they also had is one you've hopefully tried, John: kissing under the mistle-toe.

Another fact, John: The early Christian church did not celebrate Jesus' birth at all. In other words, there were no Christmas Eve services and no pageants and emails asking arguing about it all and no signs in Sudbury asking me To put the Christ back in Christmas!

Only over centuries, and only after these solstice feasts turned really wild and really out of control, did Christians seek to offer an alternative, calling it "Christ's Mass," or Christmas.

Another fact: nobody was as hard on Christmas as the Puritans, the folks who built the pews our folks sit in, who thought that Christmas wasn't biblical and Jesus wouldn't have approved of any birthday celebrations. They ordered shops to stay open on Christmas, banned holiday cakes and candles, and also managed to have the Massachusetts Congress declare Christmas illegal from 1659-1681.

And last, John, Unitarians are actually to blame, so I'm sorry.

Because Christmas as we know it didn't really get going until the mid-1800's, and that was largely because of one story – A Christmas Carol – written by Unitarian Charles Dickens.

Another fact: how many of us have Christmas trees at home?

Well, for that you can thank Charles Follen, minister of our Unitarian congregation in Lexington, MA, who introduced the idea of the Christmas Tree to New England, a tradition that has German and pagan roots. And, best of all, Unitarian James Pierpont wrote "Jingle Bells."

So in writing your email to me you actually came to the source.
 But I can't apologize. Because I'm not sorry. Because while I agree
 That all the consumerism and show-off-ness and over-the-top-ness
 Can obscure some of the sacred lessons of the nativity story,
 And drive too many of us try and Amazon shop our way towards salvation,
 And show up and off our economic disparity,
 And add debt upon debt upon debt,
 It's also true that I love Christmas – love the lights and the ornaments
 With my kids pictures on them and inflated Santa Darth Vader will put on
 my lawn this week and treasuring and treasuring of people that happens
 when I think of a gift they will love,
 And mounds of wrapping paper the dog is rolling in,
 And the singing and candlelight of this beautiful sanctuary the night
 before...
 And, even yes, the sadness....of a first Christmas without my dad,
 Because now come the stories of him at Christmas, he possibly the best
 Gift giver ever, including my first real nice bicycle he put a bow on
 And had waiting for me by the tree when I was 7.

John, all this is God to me. Love, family I love, people who draw me out of
 myself, and a congregation of people I love, lessons and carols
 That sing me toward being a better person, a better people.
 You ask me to believe and believe and believe in this God....
 And I guess what I want to say, John, is that God isn't about belief to me.
 It's about experience, it's about imagination, it's about remembering God is
 not God's name, but instead little experiences we have that teach us

Life is more than lists and appointments and commutes and vacuuming,
But also how the way the sun rose over Lake Winthrop last Tuesday
Stunning the dog and me into stillness,
And how a relationship with an extended family member deepens after years
of gliding the surface
And how a church in Natick Center put out empty chair for all the babies
Killed in Newtown six years ago, chastening me to remember my promise
To work for gun control in the midst of all the holiday hoopla.
God for me, John, is not a noun. It's a feeling, a moment, a movement,
A hug, a protest sign, a march, a face, a horizon.
It's never enough, John, it's never enough....but it is.....

And so, Merry Christmas to you, John.
Maybe, in the New Year, we can write each other more.
I have much more to say, as I expect you do, too.
Good thing we have years to hear, eyes to see, mouths to speak,
And arms to open.
I expect both our Gods want from us nothing less.

Yours,

Nathan

PS. Amen.

Outline:

Emails

Keep Christ in Christmas and sad Jesus because its his birthday

Peter Mayer song

God is a movement on water not a hipster beard to believe in