**December 29, 2013 Norwalk**

**Scripture Reading**:

Jeremiah 10:7

*Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For that is your due; among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is no one like you.*

***“Come, Desire of Nations”***

Years ago at my home church in Abilene, TX, on the Sunday after Christmas, the person leading the Children's Sermon in worship asked the kids who had assembled in the chancel what they had gotten for Christmas. Among the hands that shot up was that of a little boy who responded with full voice, "a slot machine!" In that Bible Belt community in the 1970's he might as well have said "a fifth of whiskey and a gift certificate for a prostitute." Nervous chuckles twittered around the sanctuary, embarrassed parents melted in their pew, and the worship leader hastily got to his point.

But I am willing to risk it. What did you get for Christmas -- that you are willing for others to know about?

And what had been on your list?

We have these opportunistic rituals unearthing such desires.

Find a penny and make a wish.

"Starlight, star bright.

First star I've seen tonight.

I wish I may, I wish I might

Have the wish I wish tonight."

And Christmas lists. Letters to Santa, or suggestions for mom and dad.

And it isn't just the kids. Adults write letters to Santa, too, as everyone from Eartha Kitt to Madonna to Taylor Swift to Michael Buble have sung it:

*Santa baby, just slip a Sable under the tree for me;*

*Come and trim my Christmas tree with some decorations bought at Tiffany's;*

*[Or as Michael Buble prefers it, “With some decorations bought at Mercedes”]*

*So hurry down the chimney tonight*

Of course our lists aren’t always materialistic. One of the more popular Christmas songs in recent years has been "My Grown Up Christmas List". Written by David Foster and Linda Thompson, it asks Santa or whoever might be listening for...

*No more lives torn apart*

*That wars would never start*

*And time would heal our hearts*

*And everyone would have a friend*

*And right would always win*

*And love would never end,*

*This is my grown up Christmas list.*

So what was -- or still is-- on your list?

Shaped by trends, fueled by advertisers, or conceived and gestated in the deepest folds of the soul, what is it that we really want?

And beyond Christmas, aren’t those desires ultimately at the core of our New Year’s Resolutions? Oh, the Resolution itself may be worded like, “I resolve to exercise more” or “Eat fewer desserts” or “be nicer to my mother”, but aren’t those really just pragmatic or programmatic expressions of a desire to be more healthy, or to have more meaningful relationships?

Drilled down, then, beneath the wrappings what do we really want? What is the essence of your desire?

The question is on my mind because the last verse of the hymn that we have been using as a guide through this season -- at least the last verse that we will spend time with -- speaks of desire, but at the corporate level:

*O come, Desire of nations, bind*

*All peoples in one heart and mind*

*Bid envy, strife and sorrow cease*

*Fill the whole world with heaven's peace*

Another advent carol includes a similar reference: "

*Israel's strength and consolation*

*Hope of all the earth Thou art*

*Dear desire of every nation*

*Joy of every longing heart*

I bet I have sung these songs 1000 times and have never paused to consider that little phrase. “Desire of Nations.” What in the world would that be?

* A better trade route to the East?
* A better pipeline from Canada?
* A more secure border?
* A better balance of trade?
* A higher Dow Jones Average?
* A lower unemployment rate?
* A shorter campaign season?
* A lower tax rate?

What would a nation desire?

The prophet Haggai probably voices what's likely to be a popular answer when he promises that God will…

*“...shake all the nations, so that the treasure* (desire) *of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. In this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts*.” (2:4b-9)

Treasure, then, as a nation’s desire. Is that it? Well, I doubt anybody would turn it away if offered -- at Christmas or New Year’s or any other time of year. But is that really all we want?

As I have tried to keep up with my Facebook news feed over the past several days what I have read between the lines of what my friends have posted is a longing for families to be “family” for each other; for churches to actually be “Christian” in their witness to the world; for our country to actually aspire to the lofty values it espouses; for their own lives to offer at least a glimpse of the nobility they hold appealing. No, they haven’t really phrased it quite like that. They’ve expressed aggravation at their selfish sister or lamented their parents’ indifference; they’ve decried their congregation’s hypocrisy and their political leaders’ squabbling; they’ve celebrated the moments that have been special and muttered about the maddening episodes that haven’t gone quite right. But underneath those more circumstantial tirades and celebrations are embedded those deeper longings. One was lamenting that he is alone and estranged. One trumpeted her daughter’s handmade gift. Another expressed appreciation to a sister for graciously hosting the extended family and marveled at the way everyone assembled an abundance. I didn’t read anybody pouting about the misfires of gifts, or bragging about their materialistic windfall. In all those posts, be they happy or sad, there were deeper strings being strummed.

Which is to say that, as nice as national affluence might be, Haggai, I think, got it wrong. All the money in the world wouldn’t finally quench our thirst.. After all, even when we were the richest nation on earth -- allowing the possibility that we may not be anymore -- we still ached for something more. Didn’t we? Even if our “nation building” efforts have sometimes gotten off track, haven’t they at least been born of a sense that all people should be free and afforded the capacity to flourish? Even when our political forces in Congress have fought each other tooth and nail over the mechanics of this initiative or that, don’t we still stand on the conviction that “all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among which are [Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life,_liberty_and_the_pursuit_of_happiness)” and pledge allegiance to the principle of "justice for all," and long for the day when all people are whole and well?

Maybe, then, what the hymn writer saw in the coming Messiah touches the pulse of it:

All peoples somehow bound in one heart and mind;

With envy, strife and sorrow ceased

and the whole world filled with heaven's peace…

...which was never so simple as the absence of fighting, but rather the presence of divine intention and holy well-being. “Shalom” is the Bible’s word for it, and though it is in some ways untranslatable in any succinct way, captures the sense of life that is healthy with basic needs of food and shelter and affection and opportunity met; a life free of threat and constraint and oppression. It is a life that isn’t so much flooded with “stuff” as it is one rich in substance and satisfaction, honor and relationships of mutual love and support. To be sure, people aren’t fighting, but it’s not because they are separated by fences or held apart by protective partisans, but because all those other conditions are met whose absence routinely gives rise to jealousy and covetous aggression.

May we, then, close out this holiday season with this musical prayer in our hearts and on our lips -- that all the world’s nations might come to know those conditions in which all people can thrive as God created them to flourish.

*O come, Desire of nations, bind*

*All peoples in one heart and mind*

*Bid envy, strife and sorrow cease*

*Fill the whole world with heaven's peace*

We don't sing out of a belief that God will make all our wishes come true -- that the pony will always be under the tree or that your sibling will suddenly become tolerable and reasonable or that I will miraculously have a 32-inch waist. We sing because we celebrate the confident faith that God's intention for this world -- and our own deepest desire as God's own image -- will prevail.

“Emmanuel shall come to thee

O Israel” and all the others.

Rejoice."

Rejoice.

Happy New Year. Amen.