

“THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF CHRISTMAS (#2):  
DECK THE HALLS”

(Luke 3:1-6)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-6-09]

-I-

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Luke 3:1-6 and Pray.

2. [Congregational sing-along of all 3 Verses of “Deck the Halls” <sup>1</sup>]

3. How do *you* prepare for the coming of Christmas?

A–In the carol we just sang, it speaks of “*decking the halls with boughs of holly*” – that is... physically decorating our homes, neighborhoods, & businesses with special decorations.

B–It speaks of “*Donning... gay apparel*”, or wearing special Christmas clothes such as festive sweaters, scarves, lapel pins, and hats.

C–It says “*Sing we joyous all together, heedless of the wind and weather*” – in other words, during the holidays, don’t worry about the problems and cares of our life, but instead focus on the coming joy of the season.

D–And these are all ways that this song encourages people to prepare for Christmas.

4. Now granted, it’s not a Christian or faith-based song at all – we’re not going to be adding it to our [Methodist hymnal / regular praise song list] anytime in the near future.

A–But last week we began a new series called “The Great Big Book Christmas,” in which I’m inviting us to pretend we’re little children again, hearing and experiencing some of the classic *secular* holiday stories, poems and songs (like this one), but then also *connecting* them to the *true* story and meaning of Christmas from the Bible.

B–So we began today with this sort of non-sense song that *wasn’t* originally a *Christmas* carol at all, but a Welsh dancing song from the 16<sup>th</sup>-century that was merely meant to be a whimsical, fun way to celebrate the *New Year*.

C–It actually wasn’t until the Victorian “re-invention” of Christmas in the late 1800s that we Americans “rediscovered” this song and turned into a “traditional” English carol, adding the modern *Christmas* lyrics that we know and love today. <sup>2</sup>

-II-

5. Now again, while it’s not a *Christian* song, it’s theme nevertheless IS preparation, which is precisely the spiritual theme for today – the 2nd Sunday of the Christian season of Advent.

A–Remember that the candle we lit earlier on the Advent Wreath symbolized *preparation*?

B–Well, “preparation” (unlike the theme of “*watching/waiting*” from last week is a more *active* concept – more than simply HAVING a certain *attitude/mindset* about the Christmas holidays, “preparation” means we’re called to *actively DO* something!

C–Now, as I said earlier (and as this carol implies), many times we think that “preparation” is all about the physical / tangible things we do to prepare for the holidays – e.g., the decorations we put up, the clothes we wear, the parties we host, the food we prepare.

6. But today’s scripture from Luke 3 gives us a *different* picture of how we should “prepare” for Christmas. [Contemp. Service ONLY: Let me read it to you... (Read Luke 3:1-6)]

A–Verses 3-4 are today’s key, because it speaks of John the Baptist...

(MSG) “...*Preaching a baptism of life-change leading to forgiveness of sins...* [calling out] *Prepare God’s arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!*”

(NRSV) “...*Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...* [crying out] *Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.*”

B–In other words, he’s saying that we need to “prepare” for the coming of the Messiah (e.g., to prepare for Christmas) by “*turning our life around & doing things differently*” – the biblical concept is called “*Repentance*” (Greek *metanoia* = “*turning*”).<sup>3</sup>

C–You see, while I think it’s okay to prepare for Christmas *physically/tangibly* in at least *some* of the same ways everyone else does, as followers of Christ we’re ALSO called to “prepare” for Christmas *spiritually* by *doing things differently* than everyone else.

7. So in the time we’ve got left, I want us to think about four ways that we as Christians can “*Repent / Do things differently*” this year in our Christmas preparations than perhaps we’ve done in years past:<sup>4</sup>

A–First of all, I want to suggest that we can **SPEND LESS** – I mean, do we really need to spend a lot of money buying family and friends things that they don’t really need *anyway*?

1–I was at the mall the day after Thanksgiving, and found myself going from store to store, looking for things to buy for people for whom I’d already finished my Christmas shopping.

2–But the sales were so good that I “*had*” to buy *something* more, right? Well, I didn’t; And I’m glad, because “*spending more*” is *not* what Christmas is all about.

B–And in fact, when we learn to spend *less* on those who really *don’t* need it, it frees us to do the second thing: ...to **GIVE MORE** to those who *do* need things.

1–In other words, “*Live simply and GIVE, so that others can simply live.*”

2–I’ve noticed a lot of our Sunday School classes doing things differently this year by collecting gifts for needy families at their Christmas parties, instead of sharing gifts among themselves – *that’s* the spirit of giving that makes a difference!

3–You know, even in tough economic times like now, most of us can afford to *give* more than we do to those in need through things like our church’s “Christmas Relief Fund,” by sponsoring a child from the Kioni School in Kenya, by giving of our time serving lunch or dinner at M.U.S.T. ministries.

C–A third way we can “*repent/do things differently*” is for us to **WORSHIP FULLY** – to make worship of God a *priority* during the Advent-Christmas season.

1–You know, the sad thing I often find is that many of us (even as Christians) are so caught up in our secular preparations for the parties and get-togethers we have with our families/friends that we “*don’t have time*” for church during the holidays.

2–Now I don’t mean to step on toes, but it baffles me, for example, how often I hear church members say that they “*can’t come to any Christmas Eve worship services*” because “*that’s our family night*”!

3–My goodness! Is the reason we have Christmas in the first place merely so that we have family get-togethers? Or is it to celebrate the birth of the one who loves us (and our family members) with an unending love?

4–Folks, bring your family and/or friends *with* you to worship during the Sundays of Advent, on Christmas Eve, and even the Sunday after Christmas, because *worship* is God’s tool to help us experience the true reason for the season (and the irony is that if we’ll do that, we’ll find our families drawn even closer together precisely *because* we’ve worshiped together!

5–So, take a publicity card from the Narthex / Crossroads and *invite* someone to worship *with* you this season!

D–Finally, in our holiday preparations God also calls us to **LOVE ALL**. In John’s gospel, Jesus calls us to “*Love one another, as I have loved you.*”<sup>5</sup>

1–Now, I think this means that our *practice* of expressing love to others should be an essential part of our holiday celebration.

2–There’s a lot of people in the world who’ve never really experienced the kind of love that God wants to give them – but God can only give it *through* us; WE are His hands and feet to love others.

3–This season, for example:

- (a) tell your friends why they’re so special to you;
- (b) reach out to that estranged family member you haven’t spoken in years;
- (c) go out of your way to smile and say “Merry Christmas” to someone at the store who looks a bit down;
- (d) bake cookies and take them to your neighbor or workmate;
- (e) visit or send a card or make a phone call to someone who’s homebound.

4–This Advent and Christmas, reflect God’s love through how you love others unconditionally.

–III–

8. So then: *Spend less; Give more; Worship fully; and Love all.*

A–These are four ways I believe that we can practice what John the Baptist calls us to do in today’s scripture.

B–More than simply “*Decking the Halls*” (or ourselves) with decorations and food and parties and festivities, my prayer is that *this year* (most importantly), we will all learn to “*Repent / Turn and do things differently*” as we prepare for the coming of Christmas.

9. [PRAYER]

### ENDNOTES:

1. Modern Verses of “Deck the Halls”:

Verse 1: *Deck the hall with boughs of holly, Fa la la la la, la la la la,  
Tis the season to be jolly, Fa la la la la, la la la la.  
Don we now our gay apparel, Fa la la, la la la, la la la.  
Troll the ancient Christmas carol, Fa la la la la, la la la la.*

Verse 2: *See the blazing yule before us, Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la,  
Strike the harp and join the chorus, Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la  
Follow me in merry measure, Fa-la-la, la-la-la, lala-la  
While I tell of Christmas treasure, Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la*

Verse 3. *Fast away the old year passes, Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la,  
Hail the new, ye lads and lasses, Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la  
Sing we joyous all together, Fa-la-la, la-la-la, la-la-la  
Heedless of the wind and weather, Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la*

2. Find out more about the origins of the carol “Deck the Halls” at the following websites: [www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns\\_and\\_Carols/deck\\_the\\_hall.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/deck_the_hall.htm); [www.carols.org.uk/deck\\_the\\_halls.htm](http://www.carols.org.uk/deck_the_halls.htm); and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deck\\_the\\_Halls](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deck_the_Halls).

3. It should be noted that this is the meaning of John the Baptist’s quoting of the prophet Isaiah in Verses 4-6. It’s a reference to the fact that in ancient times, before a king traveled through a town, he would send heralds/forerunners ahead not only to announce his coming, but to command the townspeople to literally “prepare” the road over which his entourage would travel: potholes were to be filled; rough places smoothed

out; and the tight curves and crooked bends were to be straightened out. So by using these tangible concepts of preparation, John was saying that we need to “prepare” spiritually for the coming of the Messiah in our *own* lives in the same way.

4. These four ways have actually been articulated by “*Advent Conspiracy*”, a national movement that challenges people to make Christmas different. It’s a movement that encourages us to repent of the commercialism of the holiday in order instead to replace it with a commitment to the four practices of Christmas preparation I mention here as practical ways of “repenting.” To find out more about the National Advent Conspiracy, visit [www.adventconspiracy.org](http://www.adventconspiracy.org).

5. John 13:34.