

“Rip Van Winkle’s Secret Wish?”

Jeremiah 23:1-6

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Rip Van Winkle. Most of us know this character by the author Washington Irving, at least enough to know that Rip slept a long time and things had changed greatly when he awoke. I recently refreshed my memory by re-reading Irving’s great prose, longer ago than the 20 years Rip slept.

Irving’s story is quite simple and appeals to the desire we all have, from time to time, to escape unpleasant circumstances. Rip Van Winkle was a ne’er-do-well farmer of Dutch ancestry in the Dutch-settled Catskill Mountains of New York State in the 1760’s. His lack of industry incurred his wife’s wrath which he one day escaped by hiking into the woods. There he met the Dutch equivalent of leprechauns, got drunk on their liquor, fell asleep and awoke: not the next day as he supposed, but twenty years later. In that time everything had changed: the American Revolution had been fought, King George III thrown off, General Washington elected President, and our new nation begun.

Most important to Rip, he awoke a widower; his wife’s tongue silenced by death, and enjoyed the luxury of calm retirement by being united with his daughter and her young family.

Some of us are tempted at this time of year to take a walk with Rip. Most of those so tempted feel no need for a 20 year absence. It would suffice to disappear this Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, and reappear on Thursday, January 2, 2014. Avoid the holiday hoopla in its entirety. No crowded malls, out-of-control office parties, stale Christmas letters, and anxiety about perfect gifts or maxed out credit cards.

Best of all: no fruitcakes!

If Rip were around today, I suspect this would be the time of year he would want to escape. Alas, no technology for this kind of seasonal time travel exists for Rip or for us. The best we can do is get to the library or Netflix and escape into the 2004 movie, “*Christmas with the Kranks*” based on John Grisham’s 2001 novel Skipping Christmas.

This story, too, is simple: an accountant, Luther Krank, with his daughter in the Peace Corps and anticipating their first empty-nest Christmas, convinces his wife Nora that the \$6,000 they spent on Christmas last year would be better spent on a Caribbean cruise. They forego all the trappings of the season, only to find their decision unleashes enormous pressure from their neighbors to conform. If you haven’t seen it I won’t spoil it, but check it out.

It is enough to know that the sentiment “skipping Christmas” is one most folks have cherished at one time or another. Not only with an Ebenezer Scrooge-type hostility—as Dickens so eloquently put it, “*warning all human sympathy to keep its distance*”—but with that sense of being overwhelmed by something over which we have no control. Coupled with a specter far more frightening than the Ghost of Christmas Future—the dreaded January Credit Card bill—and one has all the makings of a hijacked holiday. “*’Tis the season to be jolly,*” indeed!

But even if we don’t skip the holidays we may miss what they are all about.

In today’s reading from Jeremiah, God laments the loss of good shepherds to watch over his people Israel. He is especially disappointed in King Jehoiakim, a monarch who lived 600 years before the time of Christ. Jehoiakim abused his people through injustice, economic oppression and creative accounting. When the Pharaoh of Egypt demanded 100 talents of silver and one of gold to keep from invading the country, Jehoiakim raised the money by levying a tax on the whole land (II Kings 23:35). Worse, he kept some of the money to upgrade his personal penthouse. Jehoiakim was a bad, bad shepherd.

Jeremiah's response blisters: *"It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord."* (Jer. 23:2). Jeremiah not only promises a new generation of kings who will be good shepherds, but that God will *"raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."* (Jer. 23:5) Christians believe this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, king of kings and Lord of lords, who reigns with justice, with righteousness, who provides safety, who calls us back from Rip's secret wish and reminds us that there is no escape except in going forward to believe in and live the prophecy of redemption. This redemption is found in the one whom Jeremiah calls *"The Lord is our righteousness."*

"The Lord is our righteousness." Put that on your Christmas cards and see what response you get. It's an odd, unexpected name and cuts through the cultural dross that makes us want to skip the holidays.

"The Lord is our righteousness." A better way, see, where less is more; where prayer and reflection replace panic and running the rat race, the winners of which are still rats. A way where, as Jeremiah promises, we shall not **fear** any longer, or be **dismayed**, or be **missing** (23:4)

"The Lord is our righteousness." Come study "Christmas is not your Birthday" with Kelly O'Hara beginning Dec. 2. One friend told me their journey back to church quenched spiritual dehydration because *"I can be part of something that gives back while I'm still able to do so."*

"The Lord is our righteousness." That may not be Rip Van Winkle's secret wish, but it is the cure for ours if we find ourselves wanting to skip the next six weeks. It may not fit fantasies about the "holiday spirit" but most people I know aren't helped in their struggle by Frosty or Jingle Bells or Rudolph or the characters that will float down Broadway this Thursday, as much as I enjoy all these things. What they need is Jesus. They need *"The Lord is our righteousness."*

And “they” are “we.” We need a community that really believes the lion should lie down with the lamb; that works to turn swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; that makes straight in the desert a highway for our God. We need a community that truly is open to people regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation or handicapping condition. We need a community that delivers on its promise that you don’t have to be enslaved by drugs or alcohol or low expectations or the same old drudgery. We need this community that that will incarnate Jeremiah’s hope “*The Lord is our righteousness.*”

What do you see here? (Point to altar filled with food). What I see is hope. What I see is self-giving, self-emptying hope. Never mind the press report this past week that charitable giving by New Englanders is the stingiest in the nation. **You** prove that wrong every single week! And lest this sound too much like an appeal to participate in church activities, let me just say that the early Christians died for following the redeemer Jesus. Might we consider the opportunities of the next six weeks an opportunity to be shaped more completely by that love?

Here we go...Thanksgiving....Advent....Christmas! **Rip’s** secret wish, to wake up after the holidays are over, holds no attraction for **the people of Christ**, who need, know and live the promise of “*the Lord is our righteousness.*”