

## **'SHOTGUN JESUS', ANGER, AND A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION FOR 2010**

On December 18, 2009, U.S. television stations reported on a controversial Christmas display on a lawn outside a private residence in the town of Nipomo, California. The display showed Jesus pointing a double-barreled shotgun at Santa Claus' dead body, which was sprawled on the ground in front of Jesus. Rudolph the red-nosed Reindeer was sprawled across the hood of a nearby pickup truck. The display was created by a Mr. Ron Lake. He described it as a "work of art" which expressed his "repressed creativity." Many of Lake's neighbors called for the removal of the display because of its violent themes. However, police declared that they had no authority to remove the display, as it was on private property. Mr. Lake declared that the display was a form of expression protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. Lake asserted that the display was meant to denounce the commercialization of Christmas.

Most all people within the church lament that the celebration of the birth of our Savior has become a boon to our economy. Christmas has become less about God and more about giving and receiving increasingly more lavish gifts, overindulging in food and drink, visiting Santa Claus at the Mall, presenting Santa with wish lists and putting up elaborate decorations. Speaking for the faithful, preachers regularly rage against the commercialization of Christmas. They want the commercialization of Christmas stopped! They see crass commercialization as doing violence to the truth behind Christmas. But how do we do it? How do we stop the commercialization?

If you think carefully about the display and each of its components, it is not about God's righteous judgment on the secular celebration of Christmas; rather, it depicts our all too human reaction to those who inflict pain on us. Lake's display encouraged those who oppose the commercialization of Christmas to use the tried and true method of choice for human beings for millennia: "Get Mad and Get Even. Make War on the Enemy." Lakes' display depicted Jesus as an angry victim enraged by the commercialization of Christmas. Santa Claus was the "symbolic representative" of the enemy: those who have used their power to commercialize Christmas with impunity. The 'only option open to Jesus' was killing the "commercializer". If we are honest, we can see the shotgun approach in our reactions to the economic and moral injuries inflicted on us by others.

During 2009, we all experienced an economic injury. We learned that many of the companies which manufactured our goods, provided services, insured us, managed our investments and paid our annuity checks were teetering at the brink of ruin. We found that financial institutions lent money imprudently. We learned that corporate executives had received lavish bonuses even when their companies failed. The economic decline hit even the people who had done all the right things. They had scrimped, saved and paid off their debts. They had planned for their retirement. They invested their funds in RRSPs and mutual funds. They had purchased annuities. They had invested prudently. Doing all the right things did not help the prudent man or woman. The economic collapse deferred retirement for some, caused some to come out of retirement, and caused those who could no longer work to tighten their belts to the straining point. People were, and continue to be, angry at this state of affairs. The media and the public called for the firing of executives (a kind of economic death). Executives who were in line to receive bonuses received death threats. The fear of death led many executives to decline their bonuses.

Mr. Bernard Madoff was the poster boy for those who inflicted economic injury. We learned that the man with 'the Midas touch', the investment counselor without peer, had run an elaborate Ponzi scheme. Madoff took money from new investors to pay dividends and capital back to old investors. A

Ponzi scheme can not last indefinitely. Madoff knew that his days were numbered and he would eventually be exposed. When he was finally exposed, he knew his goose was cooked; therefore, he pled guilty. Many of Madoff's victims attended and testified at his sentencing hearings. They demanded maximum punishment. They wanted Madoff to die in jail. Madoff's exposure spawned many questions. Can anyone be trusted? How can we stop this criminal behavior? Who should pay (that is, suffer) for all the pain, suffering and injury we have all suffered.

We are not alone in our feelings of victimization and anger. God is also angry with the commercialization of Christmas. God also abhors cheating, stealing and dishonest gain and will one day judge us according to our deeds. In the meantime, God is quietly at work in the world. God works through Jesus. However, Jesus does not use a shotgun or perpetrate violence in His work. As the Gospel of John declares, "**For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.**" (John 3:17). The Bible testifies that Jesus became the willing victim of human rage, anger and sin. When Jesus died on the cross, He let humankind, the authors of a thousand sham religions, turn a shotgun on Him, the one and only Son of God. Jesus, not Santa, lay sprawled on the ground. The Bible also testifies that, as Jesus suffered on the cross, a convicted criminal dying beside Him came to believe that Jesus was God's Son, was suffering as payment for our sin, would resurrect from the dead and pave the way to heaven for us. He asked Jesus to remember him when he got to the new Kingdom. Jesus promised the thief would be with Him in Paradise that very day. (Luke 23:42-43) A Roman officer, who had witnessed Jesus' death, declared that surely Jesus was the Son of God (Mark 15:39). People came to see Jesus' divinity and His love for us in His innocent suffering and death, in the perpetration of violence against Him. His suffering changed a hardened criminal and a hardened officer of an enemy army. Jesus' suffering and death continues to change hardened criminals. His innocent death changed me. People will not see His love for us and His divinity when Jesus is portrayed as a shotgun toting vigilante.

A shotgun-toting Jesus will not stop the commercialization of Christmas or change hardened criminals and hardened hearts. A loving Savior who died for us **will** change us, will cause us to confess our sins, forgive others for their sins against us and create in us a sincere desire for changed lives. A Savior that rose from the dead can resurrect new things in us: real forgiveness, real faith in God, and the power to change. The Apostle Paul declared that faith in Jesus changed him... ***'for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.'*** Just think about what our world would be like if we really were content with our situation and could do God's will with the possessions, gifts and skills God gives us, regardless of whether we are rich or poor?

Are you angry? Were you injured by the global recession, the commercialization of Christmas or the action of some other person? Are you angry and want the ones responsible to face judgment? Let me propose a New Year's resolution: put down your shotgun and go to a church near you. Come to Grace, if you have no church. Come meet Jesus and be open to the transformation of your life. Come be empowered to forgive your enemy and lead a new life... "It'll teach them a lesson."

In Christ,  
Pastor Ed