

The sounds and sights of Christmas. I love them. No doubt you do too. Christmas is supposed to be audio-visual. I love the music and sights of the season. Already we've been blessed this Advent with some of the best sounds and sights ever.

Have you seen what I've seen? Downtown Carrollton is aglow with mystery and enchantment. Last night Jackie and I went through downtown on our way to a Christmas Party. After the party we went back through downtown on our way home. It is beautiful. The awe of conversion grabbed me as I passed through the square last night. Most of our neighborhoods evidence the visual aspect of Christmas. Allison Circle is slowly being changed as one house after another gradually becomes decked for these celebratory days.

And what of the church houses? I got to thinking Friday evening that I've only been in one other sanctuary this season. Tomorrow I'm lunch with several of my ministerial colleagues from the Carrollton Ministerial Alliance. I am going to ask if it is OK if I stop by their worship centers some time this week to see their yuletide décor. I love seasonal decorations in our church houses. They certainly enhance our worship of God.

Just look around this sacred place of worship. Why this right here ought to be enough to move us into deep declarations of praise to the Father of Joy. Wow! Think back to this past week as another Living Christmas Tree produced a breathtaking visual. Seeing really is believing.

There is the visual and there's also the audio. So, have you heard what I've heard? I heard the bands playing in the Carrollton Christmas Parade two weeks ago. I've listen to music in my car and in my office and in my home. I went to the Townsend Center last Sunday afternoon and heard the University of West Georgia Choir and the Sanctuary Choir of First Baptist Church do the first part of Handel's "Messiah." What a sound! I never tire of the singing of scripture – especially "Messiah."

And what of our own music ministry? Talk about an audio Christmas! The musical sounds that came from that majestic tree and on the platforms and in the aisles and from all the instruments in the orchestra last week were Advent blessings beyond compare.

What would Christmas be without the sounds and sights? Christmas and Advent are supposed to affect all the senses – touch, smell, taste, hearing, and seeing. What would it be without these – especially the sounds and sights? In today's world I suppose there have to be signs reminding us that Christmas is almost here. The audio-visual have their effect. They tell us that Christmas is nearly here.

I wonder. Would we know it was Christmas without the audio-visual? What if we didn't decorate our houses and church houses? What if there was no Christmas music? What if there were no Handel's "Messiah" or Christmas carols? Can you imagine what Christmas would be like with no Christmas movies or novels, no parades, no eggnog or boiled custard, no Christmas cookies or Yule logs, no parties, no greeting cards? What if there were no sights and sounds to remind us? Would we realize it was Christmas? Maybe we would. Maybe we wouldn't.

It's an age-old problem. From "way back when" people have always wanted reminders that "this is it" – whatever "it" may be. You've heard the expression: "If it looks like a duck and it walks like a duck and it sounds like a duck, then it must be a duck." Could it be, though, that sometimes it doesn't look like a duck or walk like a duck or sound like a duck and yet, it is a duck? Well, perhaps not, but it does make for interesting conversation. Like the conversation a fellow named John – John the Baptizer to be exact – had with some of his disciples a long time ago.

He was locked up in jail because he had been preaching and his message just happened to agitate a few folks – especially some of the politicians whose lives just weren't measuring up when it came to

living right. Sometime earlier he had been down at the Jordan River telling people they needed to get right with God by repenting of their sins and demonstrating that repentance through a ritual called “baptism.” It was one of those audio-visual kinds of things – hearing the splash of water and seeing one get wet. He even baptized Jesus, whose birth we are getting ready to celebrate.

Now in prison, John was hearing all the things that Jesus, the Messiah, was doing. But he really wasn’t sure Jesus was the one. The text Allyson read in Matthew 11 never says why he may have questioned if Jesus was the Anointed One of God. Whatever the reason, he sent some of his own disciples to find out if this really was the One or it just looked, walked, and sounded like the One.

Upon receiving them, Jesus articulated some most confirming words to those disciples of John the Baptizer in response to his and their question. Jesus said, **“Go and tell John what you hear and see ...” (v. 4)**. Jesus then afforded a litany of sights and sounds that authenticated He really was the One. These were focused on physical and spiritual needs and how those needs were being met. The disciples returned to the imprisoned Baptizer. While the text never says, it is implied that what Jesus said was enough for John.

When John’s disciples told him, I can only imagine His reaction. Possibly a smile came across his bearded face and a sense of peace overwhelmed him. He knew his Bible, which was the Hebrew Old Testament, knowing exactly what Isaiah had said. Anthony read it from chapter 35: **“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy” (vv. 5-6a)**. The audio-visual effect worked.

Do you hear what I hear? Do you see what I see? Christmas is about the audio-visual. Christmas is hearing and seeing. Christmas announces Good News to the poor – the “poor in spirit” whose lives are spiritually bankrupt and in constant need of a Savior. The poor in spirit? That’s you and me, by the way. None of us will ever be rich enough in our spiritual lives. We can never take in enough of Jesus.

The decorations and music and merriment are reminders that we’re not always what we should be because there are moments when we’re offended by the Christ. He offends us whenever we are trapped by our own selfishness. The Good News we hear at Christmas is that there is a way out of our entrapment. It is on a Highway – a highway called the “Holy Way” to borrow Brother Isaiah’s word. I hope you hear that today. I hope you see it too. No matter what you’ve done or not done, your life can be changed as you get off the road of your own making and travel on the road marked by holiness and mystery and wonder. It is the Way of the Lord Jesus.

Now when you get on this Highway, you’ll meet some people who’ll help you experience the audio-visual of Christmas. You’ll see there are some pretty hefty needs out there – physical and spiritual. You’ll find that roughly two-thirds of the world, a bit more than four billion folks, doesn’t know anything about Christmas, let alone Christ. More than half the world’s population, over three billion people, is poor. 500 million are orphans, 700 million live in slums, 100 million are sustained by garbage, and 500 million people are on the verge of starvation at this very moment.¹ 15,000 children died yesterday because of starvation or some form of violence. Another 15,000 will die today. Still another will die tomorrow.² Merry Christmas, anyone?

Do you and I hear the cries for help? Do we see the blind, the crippled, the deaf, and the sick, those afflicted with death because of AIDS, malaria, or TB? An audio-visual Christmas presents us some opportunities to speak and do. Tabernacle Baptist Church might not be able to correct every injustice in the whole of the world, but she can certainly do a few things.

Don’t believe it? Then come over here Tuesday morning and experience an audio-visual Christmas. Spend some time with some of the volunteers from the ecumenical ministry of the Soup Kitchen as they distribute Christmas cheer to the needy of our community in the church’s parking lot. If that’s not enough then go to the Fellowship Hall this Thursday evening for another audio-visual

Christmas during one of Tabernacle's blessed moments each year as the Christmas Store touches more needy in our community.

That's what an audio-visual Christmas concerns, doesn't it? Touching a life here and there. Making a difference wherever a difference is to be made and that is everywhere. Giving up so another can have. ***“Go tell John what you hear and see.”***

Mary Clarke was once a Beverly Hills beauty, at ease with extravagance and a weekend beach home. Then a divorce caused her to toss out her middle-aged American life and start again. In the late seventies, she moved across the border to Tijuana. She exchanged her dazzling gowns for the black habit of a Catholic nun, her English for Spanish, and her opulent Los Angeles home for a Mexican prison cell. For 25 years, now, she has been the Prison Angel of Tijuana, a tiny woman known as Sister Antonia who ministers to the miserable. She actually lives at the prison in a 10-by-10 cell.

A very practical mission is hers. She provides aspirin, eyeglasses, false teeth and bail to petty thieves and impoverished convicts. She even washes and prepares for committal the disfigured bodies left in trenches by drug mobs. She sings in the prison chapel to lift the spirits of the depressed. She counsels rapists and drug dealers as well as prison guards. She brings Good News in unexpected ways.³ It's audio and it's visual. Mary Clarke gave up so others could have. As Sister Antonia she travels on a highway called the Holy Way. Life is different for her and those to whom she ministers. Isaiah would be proud. Thank God she's traveling on the Way of which he spoke eight centuries before Jesus arrived.

“Go tell... what you hear and see.” May an audio-visual Christmas move us to give up so others can have. That's what Jesus did. He gave up so we could have. He gave up the glory and took up humiliation. May each of us dare to give up so others can have this Christmas. A whole lot of misery is out there and Jesus came to heal it – even the misery in here. The misery in your lives and mine. He still hears and sees it. Here and everywhere.

So what have you heard and seen?

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
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All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.

¹ From an article by Father Martin Ritsi, Executive Director of the Orthodox Christian Mission Center in St. Augustine, FL, “Climbing to New Heights” in OCMC Mission Magazine 17 (Spring 2001) 1. ocmc.org.

² Raymond Bailey, “Little Things Mean A Lot” in Baylor University's Center for Christian Ethics quarterly journal, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics (2001), p. 54. This particular issue is devoted to the “Moral Landscape of Creation.”

³ Mary Jordan, “Tijuana's Live-In ‘Prison Angel’: American Nun Brings Hope to Inmates on Border” The Washington Post, April 10, 2002, p. A01. From the website of The National Institute of the Renewal of the Priesthood. www.jknirp.com.