

ADVENT SUNDAY #2: IMAGES: CHRISTMAS CARDS

12.5.21

INTRODUCTION

We are presenting an Advent series called “Images,” the idea being to focus on very common images that come into our hearts and minds during this time of year and compare and contrast the ideas expressed in those images with the realities the Bible conveys. Last week we focused on “Christmas lists,” the lists that many of us make that tells family and friends what we want for Christmas. This week we are going to look at another image: Christmas cards.

I know that the day after Thanksgiving is most often referred to as “Black Friday,” possibly the biggest shopping day of the year. But for many people I know, the day after Thanksgiving is “Christmas Card Day,” when the Christmas cards to be sent out to friends and family are purchased, and when the all-important Christmas letters are begun - letters that will summarize the past year while extending holiday greetings before being enclosed in those cards.

To one degree or another, every year without fail, we all send Christmas cards. Family, friends, business associates, whatever the context, Christmas cards are a consistently constant image of what Christmas means. My parents’ generation averaged sending out some 300 Christmas cards per family. And while this has declined a little bit, celebrating Christmas in this way is still quite a strong image: Every year, it is estimated that between 1.3 and 2 billion Christmas cards are sent out just in the United States (just a portion of the approximately 6.5 billion greeting cards sent out annually in our country).

Some other interesting statistics: Women buy approximately 80% of all Christmas cards. The average price of a Christmas greeting card is between \$2-4. And they come with an incredibly wide variety of options (sounds like I’m buying a car): Some now include sound chips to play music or sound effects, while others contain LED lights. In addition, kits are now available to help people make their own cards to send out, some with incredibly detailed and intricate designs. According to their own research, Hallmark makes over 2,000 card designs, including over 1,600 individual cards and over 325 boxed-card patterns. No wonder I see people staring blankly in the greeting card aisles.

And despite the options of sending e-cards and other technology-driven ideas, physical, snail-mail greeting cards are likely going to continue to be an image that keeps on giving. Again, according to Hallmark, their research showed that up to 75% of people surveyed send Christmas cards because they realize themselves how good it feels to receive Christmas cards. According to the Greeting Card Association of America, 70% of those surveyed considered sending Christmas cards either “absolutely essential” or “almost essential” to their holiday traditions. And all of that desire creates some pretty amazing numbers, too: approximately \$2 billion in annual sales in the United States just for Christmas cards.

Christmas cards have been around for just under 170 years, first coming into vogue in England in the 1840s. A man named Sir Henry Cole — an educator and patron of the arts best known today as the founder of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London — found himself looking for a quick and easy way to connect with all his friends and acquaintances at the holidays. Early postal services were often far too expensive for the common people but, due to the recent introduction of the “penny post” in the English postal system, letters could simply have an inexpensive penny stamp affixed to them and delivered anywhere in the country. Sir Henry was a popular guy with many friends, and this new inexpensive postage meant that he was being inundated with letters

from all those people who knew him. In Victorian England, it was considered particularly bad manners to leave a letter unanswered. And the twin holidays of Christmas and New Year's were particularly traditional for the sending of letters.

But what could he do with his "incoming basket," so to speak, being filled to overflowing? He had an idea. He asked a friend of his, an artist named J.C. Horsley, to design a card that he could easily send out to many people. His design was, quite literally, a post card (actually a piece of cardboard 5 1/8" x 3 1/4") and, with that new penny postal stamp, he was able to easily, and inexpensively, connect with all those many people. The original card was a 3-panel design; it had the word "To," followed by space to write in a person's or family's name, a seasonal holiday picture of a family at the dinner table celebrating the holiday with additional images of people helping the poor, and room for the greeting, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." And the Christmas card was born.

In America, Christmas cards as we know them today first appeared in 1915. A start-up postcard printing company, the Hall Brothers Company, published its first Christmas card. A decade later, they changed their name to the name we still know today: Hallmark. Most greeting cards of the time were much like our modern postcards: a picture on the outside and maybe someplace to write on the back. One of their innovations was making cards in a bi-fold, book design: a colorful picture on the outside to be opened to reveal some sort of verse of greeting on the inside and, often, space to write in additional greetings. This new, far more discreet greeting design became the industry standard, still used today and, with the inclusion of an envelope, now allowed people to not only send greetings, but also additional correspondence or picture that could be included.

And for many people, the cards they receive also become an additional decoration in their homes. We have a wall in our living room that winds up being devoted to displaying all the cards we receive. I never get tired of looking at them.

Well, it might surprise you that, just as surely as God has shown us His Christmas wish list (which we talked about last week), He has sent out Christmas greetings cards as well. He bypassed Hallmark; He bypassed the post office, too (maybe God doesn't like long lines either). But His Christmas greeting cards most certainly got delivered. In fact, they have continued to be delivered right down to the present day. Some of them we call "prophecies," and they tell us the amazing depth and extent of God's love for each and every one of us. So, as we take a look at some of God's greeting cards, **let's begin with a word of prayer.**

TEXTS

God's greeting cards come to us through both the Old and New Testaments — and there are many. Some of those cards come to us through the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, such as this one: ***Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel — Isaiah 7:14.***

There are two amazing greetings in this verse:

- 1) First, this is all going to be by God's design. He will provide the "sign" — Someone to be looking for.
- 2) That name: "Immanuel" — which translates as "God with us." In some miraculous amazing way, this Someone who will be a sign for us will be God Himself, in some way living among us.
- 3) And then, needing to be understood in this amazing greeting, the signature: "Love, God."

Another greeting card “delivered” by Isaiah: ***The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned — Isaiah 9:2.***

What a wonderful card this is! God sees our situation; we are “walking in darkness. He has a solution: “a great light.” God is going to be providing a great light to erase the darkness, to change our land from one of “deep darkness” to one where “a light has dawned.” And listen to the assurance of this promise: Even though this greeting is being sent some 700 years before that first Christmas Day, God’s greeting card is written as if it has already happened. What amazing certainty we can find and claim and celebrate in God’s promises! And again, don’t forget the understood signature: “Love, God.”

One more from the “Isaiah section” of this amazing greeting card manufacturer: ***For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over His kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this — Isaiah 9:6-7.***

Wow: what an incredible card this one is! Let’s break down God’s Christmas greetings in this one:

- 1) Again, we find out that we are going to be the recipients of a gift - specifically a son.
- 2) But what an amazing son. The government, the kingdom, over which He rules will not rest on any kind of human strength, nor will it depend on any kind of human intelligence or ingenuity. He will rule in His own strength — divine strength — more than enough strength to sustain and maintain His government.
- 3) And what titles, what throne names, He will not just represent but personify, reflecting all this power and capability combined in One perfect ruler:
 - a) Wonderful Counselor: He Himself will contain all the wisdom His kingdom needs; as Isaiah would later say of God Himself: ***Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as His counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten Him, and who taught Him the right way? Who was it that taught Him knowledge, or showed Him the path of understanding? - Isaiah 40:13-14.***
 - b) Mighty God: the same title as God Himself, used through the Scriptures, reinforcing that this coming One will be just as divine; as the psalmist wrote: ***The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to where it sets — Psalm 50:1.***
 - c) Everlasting Father: a ruler who will never be overthrown and will never pass away; as Isaiah said of God Himself: ***[Y]ou, Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Your name — Isaiah 63:16b.***
 - d) Prince of Peace: the Biblical concept of “peace” extends far beyond the idea of merely the absence or avoidance of conflict; it also includes the idea of wholeness and completeness, as well an integration, a coming together, one with another that leaves no issues unresolved: ***The Lord’s justice will dwell in the desert, His righteousness live in the fertile field. The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever — Isaiah 32:16-17.***
- 4) And again, don’t forget to include that signature: “Love, God.”

Now, let’s go over to the New Testament “section.” Once again, we will find some wonderful greeting cards from our Heavenly Father — each one of them personally sent with His infinite

love and amazing grace. Now as opposed to the promises of the OT, these show us the fulfillment of those promises through the wondrous Christmas gift of Jesus Christ. And these are just samples of the wonderful cards that are there to be read and absorbed and claimed by all of us.

Here's one of them; I found this one in the Luke section of God's greeting cards: "***[T]he Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost***" - ***Jesus Christ, Luke 19:10***. Think of what this is saying: I was the sinner, I was the rebel against God and all His goodness - yet God sent His Son, His holy, perfect Son, to go out and look for me. What a greeting to send!

And then these famous words of Christ's, as God might have personally expressed them in a greeting card: "***[My one and only Son] is the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to [Me] except through Him***" — ***[God speaking] John 14:6***. What incredible blessing, not only that God would provide a way, but that He would provide any way for anybody to be brought into peace with Him. And He did it — through His one and only Son. How could any greeting card hold more meaning?

Here's another one, from the apostle Paul: ***The death [Christ] died, He died to sin once for all — Paul, Romans 6:10a***. And in the love story that this card relates, the Christmas gift, which was God's plan of salvation, His Christmas gift would die. But this death was so complete, it accomplished everything God desired in one, singular, horrific moment — in a death so spiritually violent that it severed the relationship between God and His Son, but in a sacrifice so totally satisfying that it could be applied to everybody on the planet.

And how about this card, also from the "Paul" section? ***God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God — Paul, II Corinthians 5:21***. The hits just keep on coming! In this card, God greets us with the news that, through Him by the gift of His Son, sinless became sinful; perfection took the place of imperfection; wholeness substituted for brokenness — all to allow what was completely shattered by sin to be completely restored from sin.

And rarely do I use a paraphrase instead of a translation, but the Living Bible expresses one more greeting card from God that I simply couldn't resist — again expressing it from God's perspective: "***[I am] on one side and all the people on the other side, and Christ Jesus, Himself man, is between [us], to bring [us] together, by giving His life for all mankind — [God speaking] I Timothy 2:5-6a (TLB)***". What an amazing greeting is this, that God by design placed His one and only Son in between two such opposing forces — the holiness of God versus the sinfulness of man — all with an impossible outcome in mind: to bring those two opposing forces together. How? One death for everybody. And His death was no more a mindless, random accident than was His birth. It was all gifted in one perfect Christmas package, and God greets us with the verses that spell out so clearly God's intentions for all we celebrate.

APPLICATION

Now why do we send out Christmas cards? Probably a bunch of reasons; here are some that came to my mind:

- 1) The obvious one — We wish to send out sincere holiday greetings to family and friends, sharing the joy that we have come to know in the season.
- 2) The other obvious one — We wish to remind our families and friends that they are in our hearts and minds, and that they are always loved. That's why, beyond "newsy" stuff, that

we make sure to always include: “Love” from us and our families to whoever we’re greeting.

- 3) We wish to get people caught up on the news of our families.
- 4) We wish to re-establish connections with families or friends from whom we have maybe become a bit distant over time.

Now, in a similar vein, God sent out His “Christmas greeting cards” for some of the same reasons:

- 1) He wanted to send His own sincere holiday greetings, reminding the world, regardless of their viewpoints, of the real “reason for the season.”
- 2) He wanted to remind everybody that they were always in His heart and mind, and that they were always, without fail, loved.
- 3) He wanted to make sure everybody was caught up with the news of the incredible promises and fulfillments that were offered to everybody in the person of His Christmas gift, Jesus Christ.
- 4) He wanted to re-establish connections with everybody He could who had become distant from Him over time.

And where do we see God’s love and feel His love the most? When we simply add two little words to the end of each of these “greeting cards”: “Love, God.” It is those words that make all the difference between these simply being words, and these words translating the awesome, overwhelming depth and presence of the love of God. It’s amazing how impacting it was to me, just this week, when I began reading these prophecies as “greeting cards,” and also read those NT verses reflecting what Christ came to accomplish, and then added God’s signature. It made those words come alive in a way I have never experienced before as I felt the love behind both God’s promises and then the fulfillment of those promises in Christ. None of this was random or accidental. It was God specifically planning all that we celebrate at Christmas to extend one specific greeting to all mankind: “Love, God!” I praise Him for that experience.

But now, after Christmas, what happens to all the cards we receive? While some may be saved, most will get thrown out, or recycled. But beyond that, virtually all of them will be forgotten — certainly the often cliched verses of the cards themselves. Letters and pictures may be saved, but eventually they will be put in a “save box” or scrapbook, or else find their way to the recycling bin. And soon, with a New Year having arrived, all things Christmas are quickly put away, as our attention becomes focused on other matters.

But what do we do with God’s greeting cards? What do we do with these amazing prophetic promises, and then their equally awesome fulfillments? Are they forgotten? Are they reduced into a memory pile of other cliched scripts and verses we have read? Or do they resonate with the same life with which God gave them?

You see, God never intended His promises to be forgotten or otherwise left behind. He wants them to be a part of our everyday present-tense lives — so much so that, as a result of their life in us, two things should always be a part of our lives in Christ:

- 1) We want nothing more than the Holy Spirit’s continuing to make us into the image of Christ (nothing more important to us than that), and
- 2) We can’t wait to share God’s promises and fulfillments with those around us living outside God’s Kingdom.

And God wants all those promises to remain alive in our own lives, pulsing within us, no matter the season, no matter the time of year.

Now like what we mentioned last week, there is nothing new in these verses that have been shared today; many of us have likely heard these verses countless times before. Especially for those of us who have grown up in church, it becomes so easy to let these precious promises (and others like them) fade away into an obscurity overwhelmed with the busyness of our lives.

But there is another option — we can pray that God keep them alive in our spirits, causing us to be constantly “wowed” by what they are telling us about God’s everlasting love for us. And one way to do that? Adding what God led me to add as I was reading them this week: “Love, God.” And why not? The Bible is a love letter from God to His wayward people. Moments like Christmas remind us of how far God stretched His love to provide a solution to our brokenness. Reading these verses by adding “Love, God” is not only completely appropriate and reflective of holy truth, but a way of reading them that I for one will never forget.

CONCLUSION

And as we close: We use greeting cards to keep us connected with loved ones. But God had a much bigger idea than that. He wants to be connected to everybody — those who love Him, and those who hate Him. That’s why John wrote in His first letter: ***He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world*** — *I John 2:2*. Remember His wish list? So how can we use the idea of greeting cards to reflect God’s greeting cards?

First, how about start praying that God put somebody in your mind to whom to give a Christmas card. Pray about somebody you know — but somebody you’ve maybe had difficulty with in the past, or somebody to whom you are just barely connected. Then go look for a card that really tells the story of God’s Christmas love in a simple but clear way. Pray that God direct you to the best, the most perfect card imaginable. Buy that card, and then give it to that person — not through the mail but directly, hand to hand. And maybe plan to get together with them sometime soon, which would give you an opportunity to explain why you felt it important to give them that card. And continue praying for them.

Why do this? Think about what Christmas was — God sending His Son into a completely hostile world with a message that was even more important than His own Son’s well-being. What could be more important than His own Son’s well-being? How about an eternity of fellowship with God instead of separation from God, that’s what! Christmas gave mankind a completely gracious option that could never otherwise have been realized. Everything about Christmas is a greeting card from heaven itself, with the signature “Love, God” intended for everybody on the planet. So, for those of us who have come to know that love through His Son Jesus Christ, we can ourselves become a part of Christmas - a gift from God for somebody else to experience, that Who we’ve come to know because of this season can now become Who they’ve come to know. That’s what we’re here for.

And second, and something we think way too little about, what about our Christmas card for God? What are we returning to Him? That’s not a card written on paper but rather one written on our hearts. What are our cards saying? How are our lives being changed by God? How are we continuing to become more in the image of God’s Son, His Christmas present to us? That’s the card that matters most to God. Let’s pray!