

“EVERY CHRISTMAS CARD A BLESSING,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Christmas Eve, 2016

Friends, tonight—to state the obvious—Christmas arrives! In keeping with ancient Jewish and Christian custom, it began with sunset without having to wait for the morning’s dawn. If you’re like me, you’ve all been busy getting ready for Christmas. In fact, there’s been so much to do these last days of Advent seem almost a blur. Yet helping to slow things down a little and keeping me mindful of what Christmas is really all about are the Christmas cards that my wife and I have received.

Like every year, the cards have come in all shapes and sizes, each beautiful in its own way. One card received was an artful snowflake cutout, dressed in silver. Another card displayed a white, steeped, nineteenth-century frame church on Christmas Eve with worshippers arriving in a horse-drawn sleigh through drifted snow. However, most of the other cards sent to us by family and friends have been explicitly focused on the Christmas story. Inside and out, they are adorned with images of Mary and Joseph as travelers, herald angels in flight, shepherds tending flocks, wise men following a star and bringing gifts, and—most popular of all—the manger scene. Jesus is shown sweetly cradled, tended by his mother and surrounded by barnyard animals, symbolizing the peace and tranquility between humankind and nature that our savior makes possible.

Now some of these scenes are borrowed straight from the easels of humankind’s greatest artists, especially from the Renaissance and its golden age of religious painting. But almost as many cards received at our household mailbox reflect the inspired work of more contemporary artists and designers.

Whatever their differences, all these cards are similar in the hopeful messages that they impart. As our happy deluge of Christmas cards affirms for us every year, there are, it turns out, a thousand-and-one creative ways to say “God bless you!” In a sense, every Christmas card is a prayer card, expressing the hope that through God’s grace we will come to find peace, joy, and love amid all the tribulations of daily life on this planet.

Should we choose to notice, all of these cards, without being too preachy, are also a reminder and encouragement for us to turn anew to God and his son Jesus as the source of all our blessings and the hope for our lives, present and future. Even a vague, seemingly evasive “Season’s Greetings” points to something more deeply spiritual unless we are total amnesiacs who have lost all recall that “Jesus is the reason for the season.”

Moreover, it's God's goodwill towards humankind, made manifest in the birth of Jesus as the incarnation of his own spirit, that fosters all expressions of goodwill between men and women at this time of year. Yes, every Christmas card sent is a positive prayer coming our way.

Of course, stacking them up at home, we can take our Christmas cards for granted. We can treat what's written inside each card as mere platitude and dismiss it all as Christmas cliché. But if and when we do, we underscore our own shallowness and lack of imaginative capacity—our inability to recognize a blessing bestowed and a prayer raised up for us. And we miss out on a lovely gift—because there is no gift lovelier than a blessing and prayer that someone shares with us.

Several weeks back I heard that exchanging Christmas cards is going out of fashion. Texting is quicker than any snail-mail card, making Christmas cards seem quaint. The costs of cards and postage are also going up making others think twice about keeping up what once seemed like a sacred custom. In fact, a changing world can make old venerable ways of doing things obsolete. Yet, in our often darker, troubled times, when Christmas is also being almost secularized away, we all can benefit from positive messages which testify that God is not through with our world yet and that he generously loves us—as revealed in the gift of his son sent into our midst to be our savior and redeemer.

Perhaps those today who are going paperless and cardless this Christmas are saving a tree or two. I won't entirely discount saving a tree as a good thing. But let's make sure that any desire to be modern and sensibly sensitive to the environment that God created for us at the beginning of time does not inadvertently chop down or chop out the wonderful message of Christmas that gets shared through every card sent. We need to be reminded, encouraged, and uplifted with the right and beautiful spirit so often capsulized in the poetry of our Christmas cards which calls us to trust God, love one another, and not be afraid.

I can't speak for anyone else but I know what I am going to do this Christmas. Namely, sit down with my Christmas cards and read again each one, savoring the friendship that prompted someone to send it and the prayer and blessing right there for me. May God bless us all in this Christmas season. May our celebration of the birth of Christ in every way inspire and encourage us anew to walk in faith with hope, courage, love, and peace. **Amen.**