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*“...Therefore, Christian men, be sure wealth or rank possessing, you who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing.”* *– John M. Neale*

I love the English Christmas Carol, Good King Wenceslas, composed by John M. Neale in 1854. It is the story of Wenceslas, Duke of Bohemia in the early 900s. Raised with a Christian education, he became Duke at only 18 years old. He spent his short reign establishing and reforming the law to improve the lives of the poorest in the kingdom. He was just getting started, when his pagan brother, Boleslaus the Cruel, assassinated Wenceslas on his way to church.

A Holy Roman Emperor later in the same century, Otto I, posthumously crowned him king of Bohemia (in the region of the Czech Republic). He was also confirmed a saint and martyr by Pope Pius II centuries later. Like most saints from the middle-ages, there are various stories and legends infused into the narrative of his life. Poems and songs about him in Czech are still sung to this day and, at various times in history, have even served as a national anthem in that region.

In the English song, he looks out the window to see a peasant freezing in the cold. He and one of his servants go out into the elements to supply food, wine, and fuel. As they go along in the frozen ground, the servant struggles saying, “Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger, Fails my heart, I know not how; I can go no longer.”

The king responds, “Mark my footsteps, my good page, tread now in them boldly. You shall find the winter’s rage freeze your blood less coldly.” And lo and behold, the footsteps of the king warm the servant enough that they can continue on. Someone with a superpower of warming others in the freezing cold is my kind of saint!

I love this song, because it emphasizes the goodness in caring for others, but as I read through it, I thought to myself, “why is this a Christmas carol?” There is no mention of Christmas or Jesus. Of course, Jesus taught us to love our neighbor, but that is a theme of many hymns that none of us would think of as Christmas carols.

The clue is in the opening line, “Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen.” The Feast of Stephen is Dec. 26, the second day of Christmas. St. Stephen was one of the first deacons of the church tasked with sharing the resources of

the church with needy widows. He was also the first Christian martyr (the story is found in Acts 6 and 7). The day is widely celebrated in Europe – in particular in England, where it is called Boxing Day, a day typified with giving to the poor.

Each year, Christmas in the USA migrates farther from the church and more into the mall. Fun side projects like Santa, family dinners, and giving gifts to friends and family have taken priority over worshipping the God, Who was born into the world. I don't know about you, but I use up a lot of my time and energy trying to come up with present ideas for people, who not only don't need anything, but have even provided for their own wants. At some point, most years I pitch a fit about the waste of it all.

Unfortunately, I don't see that changing. Many of us have a foot in both worlds: church with a focus on worshipping and serving God AND relationships with people, who have little to no interest in the Christ part of Christmas. How you manage that balance is up to you. If you can, I would encourage you to attend Christmas eve worship – both for your own edification and as a witness to others in your life about the significance of the day. You could even invite them to join you. The worst that can happen is that they say no. That said, if I don't see you here, please know that I am absolutely not judging. Your relationship to church is your business. And....

...the good news is that Jesus Christ is always and forever. So, you can celebrate the Christ part of Christmas some other time that hasn't been completely taken over by retailers, the Hallmark Channel, or family expectations. You can honor St. Stephen's Day on Dec. 26 by singing "Good King Wenceslas" and volunteering at or donating to an organization that serves the poor.

Church Christmas lasts until January 6, so after the family have gone back to work or their own homes, after the Hallmark channel has gone back to mysteries, and after the stores have moved onto Valentine's Day merch, you can come here and celebrate the gift of life in a baby born long ago.