**THE LONG SANTA CLAUS PRAYER**

*A good man was ther of religion,*

*And was a prove Persoun of a Town.*

Geoffrey Chaucer

It was the day before Christmas, or Christmas Eve Day as they call it down South, when I received a call from Reverend Grass, who was the preacher at the Hebron Christian Church, located in a part of Oconee County proudly known by its inhabitants as Dark Corners. Other Hebrons are located in other parts of the world where people still hate and kill each other because their religions have not taught tolerance for other viewpoints.

Think about it!

The reason Rev. Grass phoned was to implore me to play Santa Claus that evening—Christmas Eve—for the children, following the Christian services. He knew, through my daughter, who attended his church, that I had a Santa suit. (I had bought it for $22.37 at K-Mart at Christmas-time the year before to be Santa Claus for the children of my young faculty colleagues.)

Rev. Grass explained that their traditional Santa—and a member of the church—had taken ill, and besides, Rev, Grass said bitterly, “He always charges $20.” I accepted with alacrity and freely.

I arrived at the church early to confer about logistical arrangements. As I walked into Rev. Grass’ pastorage, i.e., his office, I saw a sign: “Keep off the Grass.” We smilingly shook hands, as I acknowledged his wit and humor, revealing my credentials in the form of the Santa suit and a large pillow for belly simulation.

Despite his gracious thanks for my willingness to be Santa, he then sternly stared me in the eyes—and not for the last time—and pointedly said with disdain: “Why are you not attending your own church services?”: I politely replied with my best ecumenical, thoughtful, and most sincere assurance: “I’m doing it for the children here.”

Here was his plan: He would preach and pray, and there would be some songs and singing, and when they all had their heads bowed down and eyes shut during the final prayer, I would emerge from his green pasture—as I now call it—having changed into red Santa, listening for the cue, “Amen.” Then I was to rush down the aisle: “Ho-Ho-Ho,” tossing wrapped candy to the audience, arrive at the altar, and sit in front of it on a chair, and ask the little children, who would form a line to sit on my lap, if they had been bad or good last year. (It turned out that they had all been good or pretty good.)

But here is why it turned out to be the long Santa prayer: I had brought along my grown-up son, who had remained out of sight of Reverend Grass and the congregation.

Well, while the preaching and the praying were occupying the preacher and the pray-ers, my son, as planned, donned the Santa suit. All the while I stood head unbowed and totally nonparticipatory in the Hebron Christian Church, positioned between the two wide-opened doors at the back of the pews. Rev. Grass glanced at me many times, especially as he was winding down his sermon. Perhaps an extra song was momentarily added, as no one could at first find the hymnal page, including the organist.

Finally, in desperation, Rev. Grass launched into his final prayer, which went on and on. At one point, with all eyes in the church closed—except his and mine—he gestured mightily to me, thrusting his arm and finger backward toward his office. Still I stood!

He determinedly continued his praying, repeating “A-men” many times but doggedly going on as I did not move. And now many looks were being exchanged with Rev. Grass, as heads bobbed up and down, and young voices were becoming heard.

Upon his final and most angry “A-men,” my Santa son dashed down the aisle tossing candy to an overeager crowd, young and old, and he shouted, “Ho-Ho-Ho!”

The Rev. Grass was not impressed, and angrily repaired to his Green study—I guess to repair his ruddy face in order to thank everyone, as they left the Hebron Christian Church.

Everyone else, I think, had a joyous Christmas Eve.

The moral of this story is: “Keep off the Grass” in Dark Corners: at least no one was killed in the Hebron Christian Church, as is happening in the other Hebrons, located in other Dark Corners around the world!

I end with a quote from one of the world’s best known satirists and, at the same time, least known geographers, who wrote fictional geographies from facts, who wrote *Gulliver’s Travels*, in 1726:

“We have just enough religion to make us hate,

but not enough to make us love one another.”

Jonathan Swift

Merry Christmas, 1993!