

“At the Right Time”

A Christmas and New Year’s Pastoral Message

From Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer

ABCUSA General Secretary

Dear American Baptist Family,

“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman...”

(Galatians 4:4)

Have you noticed that in our fast-paced modern world, we spend a good portion of every day fighting against time? We rush from appointment to appointment, hoping to make each day as efficient as we can. We speed along highways, trying to gain precious minutes to get to the next place we have to be. We strive to save time by fast-forwarding past commercials as we view saved digital programs. I especially experience satisfaction at how much time I save in my Christmas shopping by buying online rather than fighting the crowds at shopping malls.

A week ago, I was rushing to get my son to work, and since it was snowing, I gave myself extra time to reflect the worsening road conditions. While stopped at a busy intersection, the car behind me moved forward and hit the rear of our car. I got out of the vehicle and approached the driver, who tearfully apologized. The impact created an inconsequential cosmetic blemish on my bumper, and I immediately offered forgiveness, saying “Merry Christmas! This is a season of grace and forgiveness; don’t let this rob you of peace and joy.”

The light turned green, and cars began detouring around our two stopped vehicles. To my surprise, the woman did not want to let me go. She began confessing her family’s tragedies, her inner struggles and spiritual doubts. “Why do I feel like God doesn’t hear my prayers?” Resisting the impulse to get back into my car and speed off, I felt led to respond, “Ma’am, it was no accident that you hit my car. I am a Baptist pastor, and God let you meet me *as a sign* that He has not forgotten or rejected you. He is with you, just like the Christmas story says; through Jesus, God is with all of humanity. Even in this hard time you are going through, God loves you and wants you to feel his grace.” With tears, she thanked me. Through this most sublime spiritual encounter, God spoke to my heart about the true message of Christmas. And yes, I got my son to work just in the nick of time!

The birth of Jesus Christ, as portrayed in the Gospel narratives, is a remarkable affirmation that God is in control of human history, and knows how to enter our journeys at just the right time. God does not fight against time. The will of God is made manifest, patiently and just at the right time, through Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection. It took centuries for the Messianic theme to find expression in the

birth of a Savior, and several millennia for the Gospel to spread throughout the world. Each day, month, and year serves as a witness to God's desire to redeem humanity. Time is a vessel into which God pours grace, mercy, forgiveness, peace and joy.

This Christmas, I pray that all of us who are part of the American Baptist family may take significant time to reflect upon how God's presence and power has been manifested through the surprises and journey milestones of 2017. For Baptists, the birth of Jesus is not just an historical memory; we believe that Jesus is still alive today, and as our Lord, guiding our journeys.

Looking forward, I am so excited about how God is going to strengthen and grow our ABCUSA witness in 2018! This is the right time to explore innovative ways to demonstrate God's love for our neighbors, society and world. In the new year, ABCUSA will offer several initiatives to enhance and strengthen our collective witness, in areas as diverse as creative church planting, environmental stewardship, promoting civil discourse in a divided society, witnessing prophetically, and promoting racial reconciliation. I also believe *the time has fully come* to provide a covenantal way for our churches to address a set of issues that have been in the news lately: sexual harassment, ministry to women who have suffered abuse, and human trafficking.

May God bless you all as we celebrate the timing of Jesus' birth, and the time afforded us to be God's witnesses to divine mercy and love!

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lee B. Spitzer".

Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer
General Secretary
American Baptist Churches USA