

When I was a kid my parents hung up the Christmas cards our family received. They ran string across the tops of doorways in the dining room and the living room, and as each card arrived we hung it up in a row as part of our Christmas decorations. At a glance they reminded us of the different people who formed the web of our lives. The increasing number of cards announced that Christmas was drawing ever nearer.

Christmas cards give family and friends a simple way to express our faith each year. Even if the message on the cards is secular, this widespread exchange of greetings is unique to the holyday of Christmas. Cards have even resisted the rush we see in retail. Stores decorate for Christmas while it's still October, but Christmas cards usually don't start arriving until after Thanksgiving. They respect the Advent season, and they're expected to be in by Christmas Day.

We exchange cards to stay in touch with people. Some are close friends; others more distant. Some people don't communicate with us except at Christmas. Some others whom we see nearly every day never send a card. Some come with a pre-printed signature. Others send a newsy update on family activities or photos to show us the changing height of the kids and the changing weight of the parents. Some cards are funny. And some are humorous in spite of themselves. One year I received a card addressed to Paul and Darla Turner. I still don't know who she is.

As Christians we can use Christmas cards to express our belief about this season. The choice of the picture on the card, the message that it contains, and even the postage stamp we choose give us ways to spread the news that Jesus is the reason for the season.

St. Paul's Letter to the Romans is hardly a Christmas card, but it actually opens up that way. In his earlier letters, Paul used a very simple formula to greet the people who would read his words, but when he wrote to the Romans, he got more elaborate. Our second reading today is the first few lines of that letter. Paul says he is writing as an apostle, and that he is announcing the gospel he has received from Jesus. Then in two swift phrases, Paul describes who Jesus is: he "descended from David according to the flesh" and is "established as Son of God through resurrection from the dead." Those two phrases condense the meaning of Christmas: Jesus is human like us, yet he is divine. He was born in the line of David, but he is also the eternal Son of God. For Paul, that's not just the reason for the season; that's the reason for our life. Because Jesus is human and divine, we listen to his teachings, and we decide what is right and wrong based on our belief in who he is.

Paul not only believed in Jesus. He acted on his belief. He was an apostle. He shared the good news he received. One simple way we do this is through our exchange of Christmas cards. By picture, message, photos and news, we send and receive the word that this season is special, that this is why we live. We announce what we believe: Jesus is Lord.