

December 24, 2017 (Morning)

Luke 2:1-7

Praise for the Gift of Christmas

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In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Words of God for the people of God. Let us Pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and our Redeemer.
Amen

Two young boys were spending the night at their grandparents' the week before Christmas. At bedtime, the two boys knelt beside their beds to say their prayers when the youngest one began praying at the top of his lungs:

“I PRAY FOR A NEW BICYCLE ... I PRAY FOR A NEW PLAYSTATION ... I PRAY FOR A NEW BASEBALL GLOVE ...”

The older brother leaned over and nudged the younger brother and said, “Why are you shouting your prayers? God isn't deaf.”

To which the little brother replied, “No, but Grandma is!”

Christmastime in the United States is probably more associated with gift-giving than probably anywhere else in the world. In fact, perhaps the movie that is most beloved by many in this country for capturing the desire to give and receive the perfect gift is “A Christmas Story” about a little boy's quest for a BB gun in Indiana at Christmastime in the mid 1930's.

So, gift-giving and receiving, but also focus on our common humanity through work at a favorite charity, an emphasis on family connections, a focus on children, attending church on Christmas Eve...

- These are all rituals of Christmas in our country. They are etched into the culture of which we are a part. But what does that culture look like religiously?

According to an ABC poll taken this past summer, 13% of Americans claim not to have any religious affiliation at all, another 20% claim they are Christian but do not call any church in any denomination, home and another 4% of Americans claim a religious affiliation as that of

something other than Christian. That's 37% of Americans who stand outside of the rituals of the church. <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=90356&page=1>

Trinity alone has about 30 able-bodied people who, if asked would call Trinity home but rarely, if ever come to any church function, including worship and have not done so in many years. That's 13% of our membership. And since Presbyterians keep the best and most accurate membership records of any denomination in America, you can bet that percentage is even higher among the rest of Christianity.

So it would be safe to say that although 83% of Americans *claim* they are Christian, only a bit over half are actually practicing Christians within a specific branch of the Church and actually have the basic idea of what being a disciple of Jesus means.

A good question to ask then on this Christmas Eve might be: what do the Christmas rituals that begin in November and end on Christmas Day now really mean to a huge portion of the population of our country?

An old story circulating in the Netherlands tells of an ancient church, older than the Reformation. Its sanctuary, like so many others that had come through that turbulent period, was austere and simple, with plain, whitewashed walls.

The people of that church had a tradition, so old that no one remembered its origins. As worshipers entered the church, they would stop and silently bow in the direction of one particular whitewashed wall.

No one knew why. They just did it. It was tradition.

In modern times, it was decided to renovate the church. The restorers began to strip the accumulated layers of whitewash off the interior walls. When they got to this particular wall, the one that everyone bowed to, they discovered a fresco that had been hidden under successive layers of whitewash. It was a beautiful, centuries-old painting of Christ.

No one in the parish was old enough to have remembered it. Yet, everyone had been bowing to it, without recalling why. It was the restoration experts who had revealed the truth behind the tradition.

Many in our culture still bow to the traditions preserved in the church, but without recalling why. This is tradition without truth, reverence without referent.

An unchurched couple shows up with their new baby, figuring baptism is something they want, but without knowing why. An unbelieving neighbor, vocal in his unbelief, climbs a ladder each year to hang Christmas lights from the eaves of his house. A family whose loved one is dying asks the hospice chaplain to stop by and "say a few words" by the bedside. What words? They're not exactly sure, but they figure the chaplain will know what to do.

Maybe the role of the church in a postmodern age is to provide the restoration experts that society needs to recover its soul. It is to offer love and shelter and belonging and then explain

why – that God actually has become a human being and lives among us. We give at Christmas because of God’s great sacrificial gift. We give because we are in touch with God’s spirit of generosity – a generosity that is best told in story-form. Like the story of the birth of Jesus.

Christ, the son of the living God, came to Mary as our brother so that we could be a brother, a sister, like him.

While America buys and sells more at Christmas and then later wonders why, we are called as Christ’s brothers and sisters to invite the whole world to a more excellent way.

For, the true meaning of Christmas is about possibility in the midst of the impossible. It is about miraculous divine birth out of innocent vulnerability; it is about divine hope shining forth at a time when all appears lost.

It is not the kind of thing that comes from a confidence in our own skill, knowledge, ability or positive mental attitude. Rather, it is something that comes as that which is other than human but at the same time is very human.

It is something that comes solely from the fact that the God claimed by the Israelites is also the God of Jesus, the Christ, and this God is the kind of God who comes into our own human existence to reveal what divinity really is; and to call us to that divine way through suffering and sacrifice.

It is a possibility that is so surprising that we are caught completely off guard and unaware, and so are left with wonder at the simplicity of its expression at Christmas in this God-child – a helpless infant who has nothing of his own by which to survive; – yet an infant who, because he is Immanuel, *God with us*, has and will forever, change the world and all humanity.

It is this same God who has promised to be with us, with his people, with us individually, as we live as a community of Christ’s people of sacrificial love in the world

– and we do that out of our appreciation for what God has done. —Dennis Bratcher, “The Christmas season,” crivoice.org/cyxmas.html. Retrieved June 5, 2010.

Like Tony. Tony was with a particular disease that blinded him soon after birth. However, when he was about seven years old, his doctor read in the *New England Journal of Medicine* of a new surgical procedure that showed some promise for correcting his particular eye problem. A young surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston had developed it and so the local doctor and the surgeon began communicating. The boy’s full medical record was sent and in time a decision was made to try the surgery.

Tony had a favorite teddy bear which he kept with him at all times. This teddy bear had begun to show signs of wear. One eye was missing; one ear was chewed off; and the stuffing was oozing out through several holes. Tony’s mother had offered to buy him a new bear, but he didn’t want a new one. So, the old one went with him to Boston and remained close through all the x-rays, tests and consultations. In fact, the boy and his teddy bear were not separated until the anesthesia

was applied for the surgery itself.

When the surgery was completed, Tony was heavily bandaged and had to remain still for a number of days. But each day the surgeon was in and out of the room to encourage him.

Finally the day came for removing the bandages. For the first time in seven years Tony could see. Though his vision was blurred at first, it gradually clarified and for the first time Tony could look into the faces of his parents.

Before long it was time for Tony to be discharged and to go home. On that final morning, the surgeon signed the necessary discharge papers and he gave Tony a big hug and said, “Listen, I now have a stake in your continual progress. I expect to get letters from you regularly. Do you understand?”

Then Tony did something totally unexpected. He said to his surgeon friend, “I want you to have this,” and he handed him his teddy bear. The surgeon’s first impulse was to say, “Oh no, I can’t take that.” But something stopped him. With a flash of sensitive genius, the surgeon understood what Tony was trying to do. He wanted to give his dear surgeon-friend the most precious gift at his disposal, so full was his heart with love. The wise surgeon accepted the teddy bear with a hug and a thank you, assuring Tony that he would take mighty good care of his friend.

For over 10 years that teddy bear sat in a glass case on the 10th floor of Massachusetts General Hospital — one eye missing, one ear half chewed off, and stuffing oozing out of several holes. In front of the teddy bear was the surgeon’s card and just beneath his name he had written this caption: “This is the highest fee I have ever received for professional services rendered.”

A little boy had given the most precious item he had, out of a love-filled heart.

This is a parable of Christmas. It is what is at the heart of our rituals as Christians. Two thousand years ago our gracious God, with a heart filled with love, looked out upon a blind, sin-marred, tear-stained world. Had you and I been in charge we might have destroyed the whole mess and started over. But God’s great heart was too full of love to allow that.

So God gave us the most precious gift at God’s disposal; himself. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” —Gregory A. W. Green, “All That Glitters,” December 25, 2005. firstpres-charlotte.org/sermons. Retrieved June 10, 2006.

The world around us may have forgotten why they participate in the rituals of Christmas. But you know – that’s really not *their* problem – that is *our* problem.

Maybe it’s time we got busy inviting folks to come and see the beautiful fresco underneath all of the whitewash.

One way to do that is to invite people to come to Trinity – a place where we see that fresco and know well of its beauty and meaning.

Now I know it is Christmas Eve and your minds are on upcoming travel and/or celebrations. But I want to challenge you in the new year to invite those you know to come – to come to worship – to come to one of the many fellowship events we have, to come and assist in one of our mission projects - but most of all to come and be a part of a small group that will begin the week of January 15.

I designed this small group experience so that hopefully, even non-churched people can see the glory that is underneath the many coats of cultural paint. So, again, although I know your mind is preoccupied right now, I want you to consider doing two things between now and January 15.

1. First, I want you to consider becoming a part of a small group yourself. I know that it is a big commitment – once a week for 12 weeks. But I want you to look at it as an opportunity – an opportunity for you to grow in your appreciation of the love of Christ – that beautiful fresco at the center of our community of faith.

2. And second, I want you to consider inviting others to come and be a part of that experience as well – whether they are church or unchurched –whether they are Christian or not.
– because the restoration of the love of God at our center which is all inclusive
– that which we know and celebrate at Christmas – is at stake.

Christmas is about love being born in the most unlikely of places. I can tell you, for many out there that most unlikely place is now the church. So I challenge you in the coming year to disavow folks of that notion by inviting them to come where you have experienced the birth of that love – right here.

Let us pray. Gracious God, much of our world continues to acting out rituals they no longer understand. Forgive us for being such poor proclaimers of your Good news. Help us to find ways to reclaim and restore the meaning of your coming to us in Christ to a world that could certainly use some good news.

And now bless these gifts that they may be used to reach out and love and teach in your name. We pray in Christ's name, amen.