

WRAPPING UP CHRISTMAS

December 31, 2017

Bill Allison

Did you have a great Christmas? I found this poem by Edgar Guest...

“Human beings are the finest towards the finish of the year;
We are almost like we should be when the Christmas season’s here.
Then we are thinking more of others than we did the month before,
And the laughter of the children is a joy worth waiting for.
We are less the selfish creatures than at any other time,
When the Christmas spirit rules us, we come close to the sublime.
We are ever in a struggle and we are often misunderstood,
There are days that the worst of us is the master of the good
But at Christmastime, kindness rules us and we put ourselves aside,
Our petty hates are vanquished and our hearts are open wide.
O, I don’t know how to say it, but somehow it seems to be,
That at Christmas time...we are almost...what God meant us to be.”

Okay, it’s December 31. Who has started putting Christmas decorations away? Take a look at this guy....

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3XkJ0RTw8c>

That’s it! It’s over! Take it and throw it in a bin. I got it! I got it!

Unfortunately for many of us, we can hardly wait for Christmas to come and then it seems as soon as it does we can’t wait for it to be over, to wrap it up, to move on, get back to normal, to put Christmas behind us...and this is not a new problem.

The early church leaders recognized it and so came up with ideas to ease the rush of moving on from Christmas.

How many of you here were at the 4:00 pm Christmas Eve service? Tim led in a song, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. What? Christmas is not one day, but 12 days? Is that true?

The 12 Days of Christmas are Christmas Day, December 25 through January 5, the evening called Twelfth Night, (yes, like the Shakespeare play) with January 6 being Epiphany or Three Kings Day, the Christian feast day that celebrates the revelation of God incarnate as Jesus Christ, who took on flesh and became one of us.

The Greek word epiphaneia, means manifestation or appearance, the appearing of Christ past, present and future, Christ becoming visible! We find the word all through the New Testament.

2 Timothy 1:10 “... and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel”

Epiphany – to appear, appearance, ie: like he appeared at the birth, at the resurrection, and he will at the second coming.....

As we move on from the celebrations and holidays into the normal pace of life. Our temptation is to pack up the meaning of this season in those boxes alongside our decorations, but the deeper call of Christians is not done or over once we pass the season, or at least it shouldn't be. We must resist the temptation to move on or wrap up Christmas. We must stop to consider what we've learned during the Christmas season.

Again, let's look at the church's liturgical calendar. January 6 through February 28 is called the Season of Epiphany, or like Gabe said last week, ordinary time, between Christmas and Lent.

Suggested topics to be preached on during Epiphany all have to do with the difference Christ's presence brings, ie: the visitation of the Magi where Jesus was presented with gold, frankincense and myrrh, the baptism of Jesus by John where the heavens opened and God spoke, the miracle at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine. In essence, any time we recognize the appearance of Jesus and the difference he makes is an Epiphany. Jesus arrived into this world through Mary and was placed in a manger in Bethlehem. He was visited by shepherds and Magi. He performed miracles, including raising the dead. He himself rose from the dead and appeared to over 500 of his disciples. (1 Corinthians 15:6) And even now he appears through his disciples and will one day appear again. We wait for his return.

So the twelve days of Christmas and the season of Epiphany are designed to help us recognize how ordinary life is different when we allow Jesus to show up and we recognize his appearing or presence. Last week we looked at the Christmas story in Luke 2. Today let's look at Matthew 1:18-25.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Verse 23, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means "God with us") is actually from Isaiah 7:14.

Right there in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, we find some insight on the special gift from God – Immanuel or God with us. It's also at the beginning of John's gospel.

John 1:1-5: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

And later, in verse 14, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

Wow, finally, God with us. Let me simplify the arc of the Bible, the Cliff Notes, in a few bullet points:

- We were created, or intended to be in a relationship with God
- But because of sin we were separated from God
- But God devised a plan to restore our broken relationship
- God loved us so much he sent his one and only son to us
- When we recognize his son, Jesus, as that gift, we are allowed access to the Father
- What was broken, can be, restored

I know it sounds so simplistic, but the gist is that the gift of Christmas is Jesus, God with us. God has come to be with us through the person of Jesus Christ. We call this the Doctrine of Incarnation, God in the flesh, and while it’s difficult to comprehend, it’s what the Bible teaches happened that night in Bethlehem.

Christmas is the beginning of a possibility of restoration with God. It’s where we first see or meet Jesus, when we allow him access into our darkness. He is the light of the world, and as we get to know more about him and his story, we gain great insights as to the difference his presence makes in us. We then become his hands and feet, his voice in our world.

So we then have the opportunity to take a message of hope to the lost, broken, hungry, imprisoned, ruined, war-torn, empty places where the light of Christ can shine into our world through people like us. For too many, Jesus is only someone who visits us at Christmas. He comes and goes like so many relatives we see over the holidays, and often we try to wrap up or put away what Christmas really means instead of letting the light of Christ shine through us.

Let’s get back to Matthew, chapter 2:1-12.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

They departed in a different way. What about you? Are you going to depart this Christmas by another way, or the same-o, same-o?

While the decorations may get boxed up and put away, the real message of Christmas should not. We must fight the urge to go back to ordinary life by looking for ways to allow his light to shine. Jesus appears when we remember him at communion, when we seek him in our prayers, when we acknowledge his presence in God sightings.

So here's a thought, whenever you do put your decorations away, don't put them all away. Leave one reminder, one ornament, to remind you and your family and everyone who asks, why you have a snowman or a manger character up in July. It's that God is with us. No matter what we're going through, we are not in this alone. Watch this video.

Video: Christmas really happened

The real wonder of Christmas isn't in our traditions or in all the lights. It's not only in the fact that Jesus took on human form and was born in Bethlehem. No, the real gift and wonder is that he can be born in us today and live in us and shine through us.

O Holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today

That he can bring his healing, his peace, his forgiveness, his purpose...If we will make room in our hearts, he will be born and live through us.