

Christmas Eve 2011 Sermon
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So this is the 5th time I'm here preaching at Deo's Christmas eve service, which I find kind of hard to believe... Although as I was preparing for today, reading these texts which we read every year, and struggling to find something to say that I hadn't said already – It became apparent I had in fact done this a few times before.

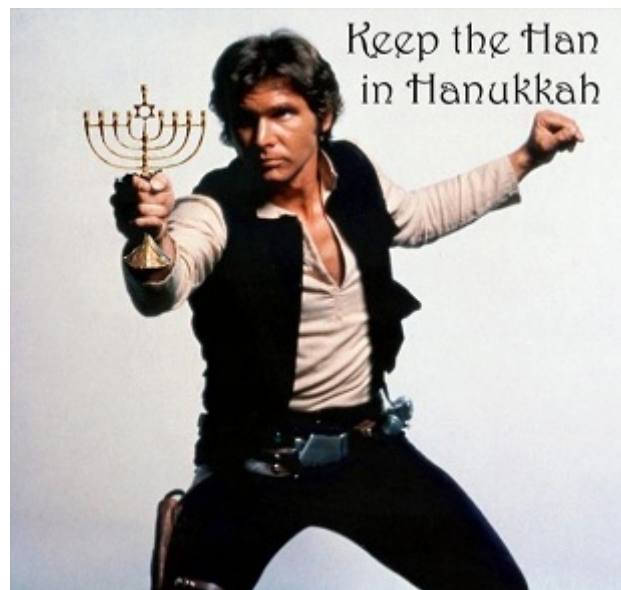
Many preachers find it difficult to preach on Christmas eve. There are many reasons for this. One is that the texts are so familiar for many of us, and keeping them fresh for people who have heard them maybe 80 or 90 times well - that's really tough. It's also difficult to preach tonight because of how varied a group Christmas eve tends draws in to worship – certainly not everyone here is a veteran at this or feels completely at home in this space – some are here because of an invitation – some are here out of curiosity – some are here out of nostalgia – some are here for the ambiance of traditional songs and symbols, and others are here to simply keep the peace with your families. You know who you are – God bless you for taking one for the team. I'll try to make this as painless and hopefully as useful for you as I can.

Further complicating my job tonight is the fact that Christmas is probably the most confused festival of the entire Christian calendar. It has a complicated history that predates Christianity as I've spoken about in previous years. There are countless ways in which Christmas is celebrated by Christians around the world - countless traditions that mingle together here in Canada, each of which are more or less sacred to the people who brought them here. And then on top of this rich conglomeration of diverse Christian and pre-Christian cultural traditions, there's a thick layer of more recent and more secular cultural stuff that has settled on top. And so it's no wonder that the reason for and message of Christmas as it exists in 2011 – is kind of muffled underneath all of those layers of culture – and it is no wonder that people both inside and outside the church can often become quite confused when considering what Christmas actually is.



I suspect maybe some of you have seen this image over here before. This is a magnet designed to be stuck on the back of a car, and my understanding is that the Knights of Columbus and perhaps a few other church groups have been selling these as a fundraiser for a number of years now. And from what I've seen out there on the road- it looks like these are pretty good sellers ---- I

think probably because there is a growing feeling that there are many in the world who are talking part in the outward, decorative, cultural stuff of Christmas without knowing or acknowledging what the true occasion or true meaning of this festival is. And while I don't disagree with the message on this magnet or even the intention behind it – I do wonder about how effective this campaign is likely to be. Because I think this message assumes that people already know what Christmas really means and why it is worth celebrating – and you know what? I don't think that this is actually true anymore – or even if it ever was true. I think there are a good chunk of uninitiated people out there who see the message “Keep Christ in Christmas” – and even if it doesn't seem pushy, which it often does – it's so foreign to them and they have so little context for it – that it simply doesn't make any sense – maybe it makes about as much sense to them as this image here would make



if you weren't already quite familiar with the Star Wars movies and didn't know who Han Solo was.

And I know that in many churches around the world tonight, there will be sermons with these little jingles in them – “Keep Christ in Christmas. Jesus is the Reason for the Season.” They are clever, memorable little phrases – hey - the second one even rhymes – nice bumper-sticker slogans maybe... But how many of us could explain to someone without any background or any context in the Christian faith what Christmas actually means when you peel underneath the layers culture and tradition that cover it like so much wrapping paper.

This past week I did a little survey – a little experiment – like Charlie Brown in that 1965 Christmas special I asked a bunch of people what they thought the “True meaning of Christmas” was. These were all people familiar with the traditions of the church – in fact a number of them were at our Bible study on Thursday.

And the responses I got were kind of fascinating to me. To be sure there were people who talked about Jesus birth, and some even used fancy and important words like “incarnation” - although

most tended to have a hard time explaining why the specific circumstances of Jesus' birth were significant enough to merit the massive festival that we have today... I want to be fair though, to the group in our bible study who on Thursday finished looking at the whole Gospel of Mark, by acknowledging that they wouldn't have any of the Christmas story fresh in their minds, because Mark, like the Gospel of John, doesn't include any information at all about the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Whereas the Easter story is featured prominently in all four gospels – the Christmas story we are familiar with only appears in Matthew and Luke.

Anyhow, when I asked people about the true meaning of Christmas, these are some of the basic things they told me:

“Christmas – that's easy - it's about peace on Earth” (Peace)

“It's about getting together and spending time with family” (Family)

“It's a time when we get some well needed practice treating people the way we really ought to be treating them during the rest of the year” (Charity / Goodwill).

“More about what we (give), than what we get”

Those were the most common responses in my little and very unscientific survey. There were a few other ones as well – I also had someone tell me something to the effect that the true meaning of Christmas was to go to church and be with the Lutherans – and thank you for that.. Of course, I would be quite foolish to argue.

What's interesting to me about these responses, is how little they seem to have to do with the story that we just read, and that we read year after year.

Let's think about our Gospel from Luke in the light of these categories that we say that Christmas is all about.



Peace on Earth:

We have a really problematic tendency toward romanticizing the circumstances of Mary and Joseph’s Christmas Adventure, but the truth is that the setting of this story and the way it plays out are by no means peaceful. Mary and Joseph’s country is under occupation by a nation that does not know the God of Israel. And Ceasar Augustus issues a decree that all that fell under the umbrella of the burgeoning roman empire are to be registered, so that they may be taxed. And it would have been quite dangerous to refuse to do so, even though doing so was extremely onerous. Look how far Mary and Joseph would have had to travel to comply with this decree. From Nazareth to Bethlehem, as the crow flies, is about 130 km – but they probably wouldn’t have gone this way because Samaria would have been fairly hostile territory toward them and so they probably would have to have crossed over the jordan, in order to bypassing Samaria. I mean could you imagine feeling very peaceful if Harper instituted a law that required you to walk from here to Penticton and back? I don’t think so. Then imagine doing it if you or your wife were nine months pregnant. It’s hard to see peace as a dominant theme of this story. And harder still if we add to it Matthew’s account that King Herod, in effort to get rid of Jesus, ordered the slaughter of all male children under age 2.

Family

As for family. While there may be some aspects of this in the holy family’s care for one another - there is a story to be told between the lines of this text. Bethlehem is Joseph’s home town, right. And that being the case, why on earth is he knocking on the door of the inn seeking accomodation there. Surely there must be someone they can stay with. Even the most shirttail relative would surely take him and Mary in for a while, particularly in her delicate state. Or her pregnancy, in fact the reason why family is not a part of the picture. I recall volunteering at Inn from the Cold – Salmon arm’s former emergency overnight shelter program a couple of years

ago – and I was shocked that a couple of guests spending the night were a teenage girl and her partner – she was pregnant – and that was the reason they didn't have anywhere to stay – the family had kicked them both out of the house. Could Mary and Joseph have been without family to stay with for this same reason? Or were they reluctant to ask, for fear of the response they might receive?

Charity / Good will

You know - it's awfully hard to see either of the things in this story either. Granted, the census would have put a lot of people on the road, and there would not have been a lot of extra space available as a consequence. But what kind of callousness could there have been on the part of an innkeeper, and the innkeeper's guests, to see a woman in labour, and make her give birth where the animals slept. Surely someone could have given up their spot so that Mary would have a clean and safe place, to give birth to her baby.

It's about what we give / not what we get

I know that this idea about the meaning of Christmas that people talked about was in connection to material gifts, but you know what – I'm going to take a risk here and say that this one is especially false. In fact, the unwrapped story of Christmas has nothing to do with what we give – and everything to do with what we receive - namely the gift of God's presence among us in the form of Jesus Christ. Be as generous to others as you are able but know the truth – that you have nothing to offer God that can remotely compare to the gift that was given to the world in the form of that little baby – who was given not just for the deserving or the important – but for all, and so the first to hear the news heralded by the angels are these blue-collar shepherds in the nearby countryside.

Peace on Earth, Charity, Good will, Generosity and the support of family. You know what – if we read the circumstances of the Christmas story carefully – we see that every one of these things has failed.

But we see, that it is precisely in the middle of all these failures that our Fragile God, born in the night, enters into our world. A light shining in the midst of darkness – which the darkness did not – and cannot... overcome.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN.