

SPG#151, Christmas 1

12/30/07 – Rev. Charles Pope

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7 John 1:1-18

The other night, as I found a few quiet moments in the midst of our family celebration of Christmas, I sat on the couch in the living room and looked at our Christmas tree.

With the different colored lights, some twinkling, some not, I saw many different ornaments. I saw the ones that depicted the birth of Jesus, or some aspect of that birth: tiny manger scenes, angels with golden wings, and shepherds. But I also saw the plastic Santa Claus my mother bought me at the grocery store when I was nine years old. I saw the ones that came from members of our larger family over the years, presented to certain ones of us in different years. I saw the model of the Washington National Cathedral ornament. I saw the Victorian lady ornament that I gave Mary several years ago. And there were many more.

I think our Christmas tree that night, and probably yours too, is a symbol of what Christmas means to us in this culture. It seems that after Thanksgiving that more and more things are attached to Christmas and become part of the holiday genre. The holiday itself seems to be magnetic with many things drawn to it. So, along with the birth of Jesus, we celebrate: family reunions, catching up with friends via cards, hoping for that certain something that might come as a gift, Christmas trees, colored lights, stockings, music in the stores, and of course lots of food. The climax is on the big day itself. But then the big day passes, and all the things that were drawn to the day begin to recede.

Family from out of town begin to go home. For the most part, there is no more shopping for gifts. A lot of meals tend to be leftovers. And so, as there was a sense of things accumulating around the coming of Christmas Day, now there is a sense of receding, and perhaps even a sense of loss.

I think a good exercise for after Christmas Day is to go back and retrace the background of the first Christmas. And we can do that now without the feverish anticipation of “the day.” And in so doing we may find a better place to be than just watching the holiday recede.

In the ancient world before New Testament times there was a certain kind of trickle down theory. That meant that if the collective, the nation or the country, fared well, then the families and individuals within its borders also fared well. The Psalmist today cries: “Worship the Lord, O Jerusalem, praise your God, O Zion; for he has strengthened the bars of your gates; he has blessed your children within you.” In addition, geographically, Israel as a land mass was situated between two larger land masses to the north and south and one more to the east. If Israel as a country was secure, if her leaders were strong, then the inhabitants were secure as well. The favorite monarch of 1st century Israel was King David who, in his time, brought unprecedented prosperity and security to the land. Is it any wonder that people longed for such a presence again? Is it any wonder that they longed for the security and comfort that came from such a presence? It would have been easy for a typical Jew in 1st century Israel to look for and anticipate the return of such a presence.

And it would have been easy for any one person to think of this person as a Messiah. And it would have been easy for people to expect that this Messiah David-like figure would bring unprecedented prosperity, strength, and security, just like before.

But God turned the tables on that prevalent expectation. Because there was no military hero who appeared as their Messiah. Far from prevailing expectations the Baby Jesus came as a surprise. And yet, perhaps not a total surprise. For, within the tradition of Judaism was the birth of Isaac in the Old Testament. The birth of Isaac, who was born to an aging Sara, was not supposed to happen. It was unexpected. And yet Isaac became known as a miracle child, a child of promise. And so, when Jesus was born, when the “word became flesh,” born of a virgin, it was not supposed to happen. And yet it did.

And the presence of the angels and the star indicated that this indeed was the hoped for Messiah. The trickle down theory was swept aside. In the Word become flesh no longer was God simply Caretaker and Lawgiver. In the birth of Jesus he became more our Parent. Anyone had access to God, simply by choice. Whereas before we were servants of God. In the birth of Jesus we became sons and daughters. As Paul says to the Galatians in today’s epistle, “God has sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, ‘Abba! Father.’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” Not only did we have access to God. Now everyone could actually know God as an individual. Where there had been servanthood, there was now relationship.

So, in the year of Jesus birth, around 4 BCE, the people groped and struggled with their own expectations and with the Christian era that had just begun..

And if the birth of Jesus was not enough, then the life and teachings of the man Jesus underscored again and again who he was and what had happened.

In our own times, in Christmas of 2007, in a similar way, we struggle with our own expectations of who Jesus is and what his presence means in our lives. We live in the midst of other happenings, of the letdown after Christmas Day, of big savings due to a massive sale, of the new year. And in all of the buzz it may be easy to forget that God wants to know each of us, that he not only wants our worship of him, but our relationship with Him. That he not only wants a servant, but a friend.

And so I think it is before Christians who live in our times to insert a quiet reminder into our lives that the birth of Jesus Christ is not something that recedes with the rest of the holiday. The fact that God desires relationship with each of us and all of us is always true. I have found that the Christmas season after Christmas Day is a very unusual and delicate season. And I think it important on the first Sunday after Christmas to remind ourselves of the quiet and pervasive reality of God's desire for us.

For in all the receding it is easily forgotten. And in fact there is much in our Christian lives that is quiet and delicate, that needs our attention and our intention, or it is missed. And so, toward that end, I would make some reminder observations about the quiet, delicate, and pervasive reality of the incarnation. First, that night in the manger God became one of us. Jesus is God and human simultaneously. The unique God-human mix indicates a special body, one that is not limited by time and space. That is why we see the Eucharist as a mystical experience of the body and blood of Jesus.

Second, those of us who are concerned about such things, the birth of Christ, who we are, who He is, the incarnation – we are called the church. And somehow mystically we see Jesus most clearly if we appreciate him both individually and collectively. So there is a mystical interplay between corporate and individual. There is an importance and an urgency in encountering him as an individual. And there is an importance and an urgency in encountering him together. In fact the Church is referred to in scripture as the Body of Christ.

On one level it would seem perhaps redundant and somewhat unflattering to admonish people to remember to attend the church of their choice. Or to admonish people to attend more often. But behind the unflattering admonition is the larger theological and spiritual reminder that we all share the call to private devotion and the call to public devotion, the call to individuality and the call to community. For each of us and for all of us that is a broad and pervasive call, but a very deep one. It does not recede with the passing of time or the passing of any one day. In that Christmas call God is quietly loving us as we respond quietly in our hearts.

It is curious and interesting to note that we have come up with many things to do at Christmas. And yet as the constant and quiet love of God seeks us out, there is very little to do beyond acceptance.

As the atmosphere around December 25 begins to recede, let us find within that which does not recede. Let us find the quietness within that is kin to the silent and holy night. Amen.

