

T'was the Week after Christmas

John 1:1-18
January 1, 2017

Introduction: why does Christmas matter?

Twas the week after Christmas and all through the house,
Not a creature was skinny, not even the mouse.
Our bellies were stuffed full of cookies and pies,
And we thought we'd cut back, but the scale never lies.

The house, which before was all cleaned for our guests,
Seemed now a fit place for owls to make nests,
With the tangles of ribbon and boxes galore,
And torn wrapping paper knee-deep on the floor.

The children were running about with their toys,
Which were mostly broken, but for those which made noise
And kept me awake as I tried to expire
In my new dog-chewed slippers by a smoldering fire.

"Our waistlines are thick and our wallets are thin."
I thought as I sank to my chair with a grin.
"I suppose that this holiday just barely pays,
Since it comes every three-hundred-sixty-five days."

Do any of you ever feel like that after Christmas? Do you ever feel like "Now, was that really worth all the trouble?" I know, it's terrible to say that out loud. But I'm guessing I'm not the only one who's felt that way. Think about all the time we spend gearing up for Christmas. We have four weeks of Advent. Prime shopping season starts the day after Thanksgiving. (Or back in September if you work in retail.) The excitement builds gradually throughout December as we listen to our Christmas music, have our parties and concerts, and make big plans for the family get-together. Or from a kid's perspective, as the pile of presents under the tree gradually grows, the level of excitement builds and builds until they can hardly stand it any longer. Finally, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day arrive.

And then December 26 comes. You've spent over a month preparing, and after one day it's all said and done. The Christmas music stops playing. You usually stop hearing Christmas sermons. I realize that I'm breaking that rule today. But for the most part life pretty much goes back to normal. And what do you have to show for it, other than a messy house, a few extra pounds, and maybe a few nice things that (chances are) you didn't really need? And now there's all the clean-up work. You'll have to take down the decorations and the tree and pack away that nativity set. So I repeat my question: "Is Christmas really worth all the trouble?"

You didn't know you'd be hearing such a depressing sermon today, did you? Maybe you're wondering who invited the Grinch to preach this Sunday! But all exaggerations aside, I've hit on something real here, right? Christmas is fun and exciting, but it can be overwhelming too, and we sometimes can find ourselves wondering why we make such a big deal out of it when after it's over life really just goes back to normal. What really is the big deal about Christmas? What difference does it really make for the rest of the year?

That's a question I'd like to reflect on longer. In one sense, we all know the answer to that question. Why is Christmas a big deal? There's an answer that I expect all of you know, and it starts with the letter J: Jesus! We frequently remind ourselves that "Jesus is the reason for the season." That's true, of course. And yet, Jesus isn't just the reason during one season. He's not like Santa Claus who only shows up one night of the year. Jesus is the reason for the whole year. He's the reason for the decade, the century, the millennium! In fact, when we read John chapter one, we realize that Jesus as the creator is the reason for all of time and space. How does one day (or even twenty five days) of celebration do justice to him? If Jesus is the reason for all of life, how can we just put him back in the box with rest of the decorations when Christmas is over?

The Exodus and the Problem of Human Forgetfulness

I'm afraid that many of us are probably guilty of doing just that. Why? It's human nature. We're fickle and forgetful. There's a story that illustrates this wonderfully. It's a true story, and we read in the Old Testament book of Exodus.

The children of Israel were in Egypt. They'd been trapped in slavery there for over 400 years. They thought God had forgotten them. And just when things were at their worst, when the Pharaoh began killing their children, we are told their cry went up to God, and he remembered them (Ex. 2:23-25). That's a strange comment, saying that God *remembered*. Has God ever been known to forget anything? This sense of remembering has less to do with knowing something or a recalling a fact, than it has to do with taking action to fulfill a promise or to be faithful to a relationship. When God remembered his people, it's a way of saying that the time had come for him to fulfill the promises he had made to them. He was going to act according to what he said he would do.

And God follows through. He rescues his people, but it's no walk in the park. After motivating a reluctant Moses, confronting a wicked pharaoh, pouring out ten destructive plagues, sending down a pillar of fire, parting the Red Sea, and sending manna and quail to feed the people in the wilderness, God left nothing to doubt about whether he was real or whether He remembered his promises to his people.

But notice what happens next. God leads the people to Mt. Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain for a few weeks, and what do the people do? They conclude that God has forgotten them. They give up on God and make a new god for themselves. Moses returns to find them worshipping a golden calf. God hadn't forgotten them, but they had forgotten him.

That seems a bit hard for us to imagine. After just witnessing the miraculous, saving power of God, how could they so quickly lose their faith in him? How could they so quickly move from following Yahweh, the Living God, to worshipping their jewelry? How could they forget so easily?

But is it perhaps possible that these people were more like us than we would care to admit? Think about it. After the all the excitement of the plagues and the red sea crossing began to wear off, perhaps life began to start feeling rather *normal*. Because maybe people thirty-four hundred years ago are a lot like us, and they easily become bored with the humdrum routine of daily life. So maybe when they were sitting under Mt. Sinai, they forget about who God was, not because they had such bad memories that they literally forgot what had just happened to them. Think about that sense of *remembering* that we just talked about when we said that God remembered his people. Remembering in that sense means not just recalling a fact but living up to a promise or being faithful in a relationship. That's the sense in which the people forgot about God. They didn't forget what had happened, or that God existed, but they were unfaithful to him. They didn't put their trust in him. In short, they were fickle, unfaithful people in relationship with a faithful, unchanging God, and something as short as a month or two without a big show from him led them to conclude that he has abandoned them. So what if God split the Red Sea for us? Sure, we'd get excited. But maybe, we'd stop thinking about it sooner than we care to admit. Maybe, we'd even start to wonder if God was still there.

That's my point here. As human beings, we are fickle and forgetful. Whatever big thing happens to us, life soon goes back to normal and we live like we've forgotten it even if we still remember it mentally.

Let's look at a more trivial example. What happens when you get a wonderful Christmas gift from a family member? Some of you can probably think of something right now. But Christmas gifts are usually just like any other new thing we get: the excitement wears off soon, and that gift becomes just another thing in the house. No matter how useful or nice or fun it is, it still doesn't change how you look at life much. And why should it? It's just another physical possession.

But what if God gave you a truly life-changing gift? The fact is, God *has* given us an amazing gift. God gave the greatest gift he has ever given in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. And we know that! We know that it changed the world. We probably even know that Jesus has changed each of our lives. But does that baby born in ancient Palestine really affect the way that we view life every day?

As we think about that, let's go back and look at John chapter 1. This chapter is incredibly rich in theology, and it would probably take a whole sermon series to unpack it, but I'd like to make just a few observations about what it says about Jesus.

Jesus is the Eternal Creator.

Firstly, Jesus is eternal. John refers to Jesus as the Word, and explains that not only was Jesus *with* God in the beginning and that he created the world, but that in fact, Jesus *was* God. And if Jesus *was* God, then he still *is* God. The same Jesus who came into the world in Bethlehem and who we celebrate at Christmas is the eternal God who created us and the whole universe and who is Lord over us now. That means that Jesus' birth is more than just another historical event: It means that Jesus is both the central figure of history is still present with us now as Lord.

Jesus the eternal creator entered his own rebel world.

But there's more to it than that. "The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (14). The eternal, holy and perfect God entered into the midst of a world full of pain and brokenness and sin and evil. John writes "In him was life and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has

not overcome it.” Verses 10 and 11 describe the same thing. “He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

There’s a tragic kind of irony there: God is being treated like an exile and a foreigner in his own creation. He came bringing light into a world that barely knew what light was. That’s the reason why Christ’s coming to earth, out of the thousands of years of human history, becomes the central event. Not only did the creator God step into his own creation. He stepped right into its pain, from the very first by being born through the painful experience of childbirth through which all humans enter the world. In his life he surrounded himself with people in pain, and ultimately, he himself died nailed to a Roman cross, carrying the pain and suffering, the guilt and the shame, of all humanity; the very people who betrayed him.

Jesus offers his rebel world the chance to receive and become children of God.

John continues to explain that Jesus came so that we might receive him, and that, by God’s grace, we might become children of God. John writes “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to be become children of God” (12). We who were God’s enemies, and have no right to be anything else, have been brought into God’s family because of Jesus.

Application: Remember, Receive, and Rejoice.

So, let’s go back to the question we asked earlier; how should Christ’s coming into this world affect the way we look at everyday life? Because the gift God has given to us through Jesus is not a nice-Christmas-present kind of gift that doesn’t really change us much. It’s a walking-through-the-Red-Sea kind of gift, and it changes everything. How do we live in the light of that reality? Let’s think about three responses: Remember, Receive, and Rejoice.

Remember

First: Remember Jesus. As John is reflecting on the profound meaning of who Jesus was and what he did, he is calling his readers to *remember* the significance of Jesus. Again, this is the kind of remembering that is more than recalling an event, but is about being faithful to a relationship. It’s about remembering a person, not just a fact. Think about remembering your wedding anniversary or your best friend’s birthday. You don’t remember those things just because they are facts about something that happened a long time ago. You remember them because that person is still alive and you have a relationship with him or her. And we remember Jesus because he is still alive and has a relationship with us. We read in John that he is the eternal, living God who was Lord of creation, of the manger, of the cross, and of this Sunday morning. He is the Lord of history who stepped down *into* history to bring light into a dark world; to make us children of God.

So let’s not be like the Israelites who might have remembered the event of walking through the Red Sea, but forgot the One who did it for them as they walked through the wilderness. Jesus is Lord not only of our Red Seas, but also of our long, dull wilderness treks. Now, maybe God is showing up in your life right now in a powerful, amazing way. And that’s wonderful! Rejoice in that! But maybe he seems quiet. You’re going through a spiritual dry spell. Maybe you wonder if God is even there. We need to learn how to rejoice in those times too. Sometimes that means that we just keep walking in faith, putting one foot in front of the other even when we can’t see the path ahead. We need to trust Jesus--to remember him—in all of the ordinary days and weeks that fill our year. In other words, we don’t put Jesus back in the closet with the rest of the Christmas decorations. We don’t treat him like that new gift that you have already gotten used to. He is our savior and lord who is faithful to save us every day. He is there. He remembers us! We need to remember him.

One of the best ways to remember Jesus in this way is by regularly reading God’s word. Why do we read the Bible? To gain more information about God? Yes, there is that, but it’s also more than that. We need to read Scripture like we are reading a letter that has been personally addressed to us, because that is what the Bible is. It is God’s written revelation of himself to us, and it’s been personally signed through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We remember Jesus by regularly listening to him as we read Scripture and then responding in obedience. Remembering Jesus is the dance of daily life, and the music to which we dance has been written on the pages of Scripture.

Like I said before, we have some Bibles and Bible reading guides available in the Fellowship hall today. I would encourage you to think about how you want to actively remember and listen to Jesus throughout the year by reading and studying his word.

Receive

The second response is to receive Jesus. John tells us that those who receive Christ become the children of God. If you have never received Jesus into life as your savior and lord, it is never too late or too early. That's the most important choice any of us can make.

But many of us have already received Jesus. Does that mean that we're done? Isn't receiving Jesus once enough? Didn't his death for us cover our sin once and for all?

The answer to that is, "Yes, absolutely! Jesus died once-and-for-all. Anyone who has received Jesus is a child of God. But there is also a sense in which receiving Christ is something we need to do daily.

We can understand this better when we compare our relationship to Christ to the marriage relationship. Think about the vows a couple make to one another on their wedding day. When they say "I do" and promise their love and commitment to each other, that's what marries them. They don't need to get married again. It's "a done deal."

But does that mean that after the wedding day, the couple can simply forget those vows, as though they were just a hope to jump through? No, those vows are realities of their relationship that need to be lived out every day. Each day, they need to choose love commitment for the other. All committed relationships are like that. Receiving a person as a spouse or caring for someone as a friend is an everyday choice.

So just as we need to *remember* Jesus every day of the year, we also need to *receive* Jesus every day. Those who receive Jesus become children of God, but as his children, we need to make a daily discipline of receiving him and trusting him as our savior and lord.

Again, one of the ways we actively receive Jesus is by responding as we regularly read his word. The goal of reading God's word every day is so that we can both know God and *obey* him. Christian living is about the regular discipline of saying *yes* to Jesus every day and in all situations. We read God's word and then we say "Yes, Lord. I want to live that way. I want to be that kind of a person. I want Jesus to be the center of my life, the source of my identity and my hope. Help me be *that* kind of person, Lord!" In other words, we need to receive Jesus daily as our savior and Lord.

Rejoice

Remember Christ, receive Christ, and finally, rejoice in Christ! He is the eternal God who brings us out of sin and darkness and into his light. That is something really worth celebrating! We celebrate what Jesus has done for us, and we also celebrate who he is.

So celebrate Christmas all year round! In January! In July! Go ahead. You can stop listening to Christmas music. You can take down the tree. You can put the nativity scene back in the closet. And yes, you can stop eating Christmas cookies. But don't put Jesus back in the box with the ceramic nativity set. Don't stuff him in the closet with the lights. God coming in the flesh to die for us is the central event of history, and it's the center of our lives, too. So let's daily remember that the baby in the manger is the Lord of all. Let's continue to receive him and trust in him as the one who came to die for us. And let us joyfully follow our resurrected Lord!

Tis the week after Christmas and Christ is still Lord.

His word remains sharp as a two-edged sword:

Living and active, it cuts to the heart,

With truth to reveal and life to impart.

Tis the week after Christmas and Jesus still saves,

His death defeats sin and his life conquers graves.

His arms remain open to all who believe,

Repent of their sin and their savior receive.

Tis the week after Christmas and Christ is still King.

Wise men still seek him and angels still sing.

So rejoice in your savior, lift up your song,

And worship King Jesus all the year long!

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