

Why is Christmas Such a Big Deal?      Luke 2:1-20      12/24/19

*<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:15-20)*

We live in an increasingly secular time, with fewer people interested in participation in church and fewer people seeing much relevance in believing in or following God. That creates challenges for churches like this one, but it also creates some internal dissonance for such people on holidays that were founded on religious themes. For example, we're supposed to be thankful for our blessings at Thanksgiving, but now who are we supposed to thank? And, according to Harvey Cox, Christmas has become just a family reunion and Easter a spring style show. Secular people may enjoy parts of these holidays, but may also sense something is missing.

Ronald White describes this feeling as “the presence of an absence.” People may not have the words to describe the faith dimensions of our now secular holidays, but they know the celebrations are lacking something crucial. So I’d like to talk for a few minutes about why the original core of Christmas- the birth of Jesus- is such a big deal, and how it speaks to us in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

I’ve really only got two points, both of which are rooted in the long-held Christian belief that something unique happened on that first Christmas day- that God Himself, Creator of all there is, came to visit our planet in human disguise. That’s what all the fuss was about with those angels, heavenly signs, important visitors, etc. And God coming into our world is significant to each one of us for two primary reasons.

First, it helps to answer the basic question, “What is God like?” Every civilization that has existed has grappled with that question. Many cultures settled on the idea of many gods, like the Greeks, Romans, and Hindus. Their gods were often consumed by anger and jealousy and war, which inspired similar behavior in their human followers. But God as revealed in Jesus is a very different kind of God.

For example, he is compassionate and loving. Jesus hung around with social outcasts, seeking them out and accepting them into his inner circle, for which he was criticized by the religious leaders of his day. He

healed those who came to him, even lepers, who were treated horribly in his day. And, he loved kids. Mothers would flock to him hoping he'd bless their children, as his disciples tried to keep them away so Jesus could focus on "more important things." But Jesus said, "No! Let them come! The Kingdom of God is wide open for kids!" From Jesus, we learn that God is welcoming and compassionate.

I once saw a comic featuring a little boy sitting on Santa's lap. The caption reads, "Unlike some people, Jesus loves you whether you've been naughty or nice!"

It's true! You see, Jesus was forgiving, and taught his followers to forgive others, even their enemies! His ultimate example of forgiveness came when he was dying a torturous death on a Roman cross. He prayed that God would forgive his torturers because they didn't understand what they were doing! In answer to a question about how often you should forgive someone- "as many as seven times?" they asked. "No," said Jesus. "Seventy times seven times." By then you would have probably lost count, which is probably the point! Jesus shows us that God is graciously forgiving, and that we should be, too.

Jesus was also passionate about justice, railing against religious leaders who imposed heavy burdens on people without lifting a finger to help them. He stated that his mission was to bring good news to the poor,

to liberate the captives, and let the oppressed go free. He refused to cooperate in the execution of a woman caught in adultery, instead calling out the hypocrites who advocated doing such a thing. By his words and deeds, Jesus showed us that God cares about justice for all people.

So, in taking on human form, God reveals important things about who God is: compassionate, loving, forgiving, and passionate for justice among other important qualities.

But God did something else when he became a human being on that first Christmas- he demonstrated his understanding of and solidarity with our human situation. For example, being conceived by an unwed mother in those days and times would have resulted in a great deal of shame for him and his family. Some of us know about shame, too. Because of Jesus, God understands what that is like.

And, Jesus began his life as a refugee, fleeing from murderous King Herod into Egypt. Thank God, the border wasn't closed to those seeking asylum! Anyway, Jesus understands what it is like to live with great insecurity. Most of you don't worry that someone wants to kill you, but you may know the insecurity of a shaky marriage, barely adequate finances, school grades that may not get you your degree, serious illnesses, etc. God understands the insecurity that comes with being human, because he lived it!

He also understands and celebrates the joys of life. He performed his first miracle at a large wedding feast, turning over 100 gallons of water into really good wine! He frequently went to parties with ordinary people, and was criticized for hanging out with people who drank too much! And he must have been a welcome presence at these events, because they kept inviting him back! Jesus' experience tells us that God can celebrate with you at the many joys of your life. Graduations, births, victories, promotions, achievements- God rejoices with you when things go well for you!

Jesus also knows what it means to have family issues. At the age of 12, he went with his family to Jerusalem for a religious festival. He hung out in the temple, interacting with the biblical scholars of his day. But then he stayed behind in the city without telling his parents. When they found him, they said, "*Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.*" (Luke 2:48) Jesus replied that they should have known that he needed to be in his Father's house. And then the writer tells us something that every parent and adolescent here will resonate with, "*But they did not understand what he said to them.*" (Luke 2:50) What we have here is a failure to communicate! And this was not the end of his issues with his family! Jesus knows about families!

Jesus was also frequently misunderstood and was ultimately betrayed by a close friend. And, at that time of crisis, his other friends abandoned him to protect themselves. Most of us will feel betrayed or abandoned at some point in our lives. And, it can be excruciatingly painful for us, to feel alone and hopeless about our future. God understands what that is like; He was there.

Finally, Jesus understands what it is to face death. All of us are facing death, aren't we? It's not a matter of if we'll die; it's just a matter of when! Merry Christmas! But some of you are facing serious illnesses that will take your life unless God somehow intervenes. Or, you are facing your first Christmas without someone dear to you. Know that you are not facing those challenges alone. God understands exactly what that is like, and he cares.

Because Jesus experienced shame, insecurity, family issues, joy, betrayal, abandonment, and death, we are assured that God understands all that is involved with living a human life. And that God cares about those things. God wants to walk with us through all of them. That's what "Immanuel," the name given to Jesus, means- "God is with us!" You are not alone, no matter the situation in which you find yourself.

That's why Christmas is such a big deal. In becoming one of us that first Christmas and living a human life, Jesus showed us what God is really

like, and showed that God knows and cares about what we are like! And he did that because he loves us.

So if you're feeling a little of that "presence of an absence," knowing that something is missing from your celebration of Christmas, let me encourage you to take a little time to reflect, and to thank God for his coming into our world- showing us who he is, identifying completely with our humanity, and offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins. That's the core and good news of Christmas!