

“Words of Reflection”

Christmas Eve, Year A

December 24, 2016

Isaiah 9:2-7      Psalm 96      Titus 2:11-14      Luke 2:1-20

First Presbyterian Church of Sandpoint, Idaho

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Merry Christmas! (Merry Christmas)

Those words are a greeting, a sign of the season, something we say to claim and extend something meaningful, and often it gets a response, (as you just proved). But what does it mean? Christmas... if we really want to define it, we do what we do with anything we're wondering about: we Google it! On Google, Christmas brings up one billion, nine hundred ninety million results! And it only takes 1.38 seconds to gather those together. We won't look at all of them tonight, but the first one is from Wikipedia, as it says, “Christmas, or Christmas Day (Old English, Christ-ess-mass-eh, meaning ‘Christ’s Mass’) is an annual festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ, observed most commonly on December 25<sup>th</sup> as a religious and cultural celebration among billions of people around the world.”

The next listing is from History dot com, the History Channel, as it says, “A Christian holiday honoring the birth of Jesus Christ, Christmas evolved over two millennia into a worldwide religious and secular celebration, incorporating many pre-Christian, pagan traditions into the festivities along the way. Today, Christmas is a time for family and friends to get together and exchange gifts.”

Let's look at one more, the third of the top three Google listings for Christmas. Two out of three are claimed by the History Channel. History dot com asks, “Did you know Christmas wasn't always celebrated on December 25?” You have to click the link to learn more about that, but it is true and even the Bible supports that assessment. This third listing continues, though, saying, “Christmas is both a sacred religious holiday and a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon. For two millennia, people around the world have been observing it with traditions and practices that are both religious and secular in nature.”

These are the top hits of almost two billion choices, the culmination of collective information and knowledge in a digital age! And none one of them get it right. Shades of truth, shades of gray, but all of them miss the point and their focus slips from Jesus to the secular to the commercial to the exchange of gifts. Their focus is off. Their scholarly assessments and the way they use words prove either that they don't comprehend Christmas, or the way most people in the world understand Christmas is limited; either way, the potential that is there in Christmas is mostly missed.

When I made the bulletin page I didn't have a sermon title, so I just put "Words of Reflection" rather than calling it a sermon, or lesson, or teaching. "Words of Reflection" is meant as a category, but instead, I decided to use those words as the sermon title itself. At some point in the future when this sermon is listed on Google, it will show "Words of Reflection" because Christmas is all about God's gift to the world, the Incarnation, God becoming flesh among us.

Another thing these internet summaries do is say Christmas is about the birth of Jesus Christ. This sounds like a person, first name Jesus and last name Christ. But this is actually a mix of name and category. Jesus is the name, Christ is the category. Christ is not Jesus' last name, it's a title. In English, we usually we put the title in front of the name, like "Pastor Andy" or Doctor so-and-so. Christ Jesus would be more accurate in this sense.

It is true that Jesus was born in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago, and Christmas is about this birth. But we don't call it Jesusmas. Merry Jesusmas! It is Christmas, Christ-mas because in recognizing the birth of Jesus we are also claiming the enfleshment, the embodiment of the Second Person of the Trinity, the first born of all Creation through whom all things seen and unseen are made, the Christ. In receiving God's gift of God's self, through Christ, this is the birth of Jesus. But also, this is not an isolated historical event; Christmas is ongoing. And contrary to our culture's gift-giving practice, Christmas is not an external process, like taking off wrapping paper and opening a box. Christmas, the gift of Christ, involves an internal transformation, a change of identity that unites our here and now with all of eternity and everything that sustains it. In receiving the gift of Christ-mass, we discover that we are already gifted with God. Christmas invites us to a deeper awareness of what God has done, is doing, and shall do all along.

In all three of those Google illustrations, we keep hearing about a difference between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the cultural. Maybe the greatest Christmas present would be the realization that there is no difference, there is no secular, and God is as active and involved in and through culture as in the church. If Christmas is about the Incarnation, where God is in all things, and all things are in God, then because of this, all things are sacred. By being born in Jesus, Christ is showing that God is on our side and salvation has come. Simply by being part of creation, we are worthy of redemption because the Creator has deemed it so. Christmas invites us to become more aware that God's Word, the eternal power and presence of the living Christ, is what creates and holds together every part of the fabric of creation.

The title of this sermon is "Words of Reflection" to point out that we are now the reflections of the Word. Our lives are part of that fabric of the very creation God enters. The living Christ continues to shine in our world, all around and in and through us. Many people ignore this light and deny their own identity

as children of God. But recognizing that living light, welcoming that glorious presence, claiming our Christ identity, helps us live into the gift of peace beyond understanding. Joy to the World, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King, is not an exercise of the mind; this is beyond thought process. This is experiential and our heart language is best suited to receive and absorb this drenching in grace as we die and rise with Christ. Our bodies are participating in the living, breathing creation all around us. Our bodies are more than a transportation device for our brain. With each breath, we breathe God's grace. God's love enters in. God's gift is absorbed. Christ's body is nurtured. We are reflections of the Word.

In our Western culture of rugged individualism, competition, commercialization, and violence, don't give in to the pressure and believe everything you hear about Christmas, and don't take Google's word for it at face value. Christmas isn't about surface-level identity, and there is no separation in the presence of Christ. The gift of Christmas seeks nothing less than transformation, connection, collaboration, unity, and the saving presence and action of God's grace made flesh.

Let your heart open the gift, and live as Reflections of the Word, the Word made flesh, God's living Christ seeking incarnation to let light shine and glory abound. Don't be fooled by talk of separation, but in all things, partner with God and work together for good. Merry Christmas! Amen.