

THE TRUE CHRISTMAS

Last Sunday the sermon ended with the comment that “baptism is the real Christmas, and the coming of the Holy Spirit is the real drama going on behind the scenes.” That was far from the first time I have mentioned such a thing. To be sure, no statement of mine is to be taken seriously just because I say it. But if what I tell you is coming from years of serious Bible study and years of personal experience and, far more importantly, from what Jesus was trying to tell us and show us, then that is a different matter.

It is still important for you to check it out in your own study and in your own prayers and experience. That is part of our “free church” tradition – part of the Congregational Way. So this is not what concerns me. What bothers me is the suspicion that even after all my efforts to preach the Gospel – to tell you the truth that I see and love – it feels like some of you still hear it as something vague and fuzzy. “Baptism is the true Christmas.” “Well, I’m sure that’s important to Bruce, and he doubtless means it on some level that I don’t really comprehend. But it’s a free country, and he can think that way if he wants to.” Is that the way it seems for some of you?

It really is not part of my job to be “right.” Who is ever right about everything in a broken world? But it *is* part of my job to be clear. If I am clear, we can all keep on learning and growing, and that can be a valuable part of our worship. So if I am vague and obtuse, that is not okay. Then nobody learns anything. Then we are just wasting time, and that is not why we come together. To be sure, we come together for things way beyond mental comprehension. We come together in bonds of gratitude and to share our praise and devotion to our Lord. Yet even in emotion and love, the mind is at work. So we try not to leave that part out, though some seem to. *“You shall love the Lord your God ... with all of your mind.”*

The problem is, when I try really hard to be clear, sometimes that is offensive. And the more important the season, the more likely it is for the truth to be offensive. Christmas is a perfect illustration. We have layers and layers of emotion, custom, well-loved music, and family gatherings surrounding the celebration of Christmas. More than that, we have many layers of worship services, sermons from beloved pastors, candlelight, meaningful decorations, pageants, and some of the most familiar Scripture readings in the Bible. It is no great

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wonder that if I challenge the virgin birth, tell you that the Scripture passages read at Christmastime are not authentic but were tacked-on a hundred years later to pander to Greek culture, and tell you that what our culture celebrates is a false Christmas, well, all that is offensive. And to be sure, that *is* what I tell you.

Baptism is the true Christmas. What goes on in our culture at Christmastime does not carry the Christian Message; does not convert people to the Christian Faith; does not bring solid growth to the Christian church; does not help people to be more faithful or to have a better relationship with Jesus, the Christ of God. Christmas in our culture is a huge, feel-good diversion from everything that matters to the Christian Path or WAY. It siphons off enormous resources from God's people and leaves most of them more exhausted than renewed or converted. If you step back a few paces and look at what our Christmas celebrations accomplish, clearly they are serving Satan far more than Christ.

But never mind all that. What I really care about is that BAPTISM is the true Christmas. And as long as we celebrate the false Christmas, does it not follow that the true Christmas is going unnoticed for most people? So with apologies for being so obtuse in the past, let me try again.

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The familiar Christmas celebrates the birth of an infant, surrounded by some fantastic stories that make little sense and that contradict each other at every turn. But never mind that last part. Just stick with the fact that our culture celebrates the birth of an infant. What does Jesus tell us? *"In very truth I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he has been born again [born anew]."* (John 3:3) Of course, this saying is then further embellished, but even the neophytes among us know the principle: you must be born anew – born of the Spirit – in order to be part of the Christian Faith. But at Christmastime we totally forget what Jesus taught us and showed us. By the way, whatever Jesus taught us He also showed us. That is one of the most remarkable things about Him.

When was the Messiah born? Be careful; that is not the same question as asking when *Jesus* was born. Jesus was born somewhere between 4 B.C. and 11 A.D., legend says in Bethlehem, though He was probably born in Nazareth. But it does not matter. The *Messiah of God* was born at the time of Jesus' baptism. John the Baptist baptized Him

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in the River Jordan when Jesus was about thirty years of age. That is when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus. That is when Jesus was “born anew” – born of the Spirit. That is when Jesus received His calling and His purpose. We know absolutely nothing about Jesus before His baptism. Some people have made up some guesses, including me. But none of it is historical, and none of it is backed by any solid information. The life of Jesus the Messiah of God begins with His baptism. And after His baptism, His life takes off with a power and purpose that is very nearly unbelievable in our eyes. The true Christmas – the true birth of the Messiah – is Jesus’ baptism. And wonder of wonders, we are all invited into that kind of baptism: to receive our own true identity and purpose, to “see” the Kingdom of God, and to learn how to belong to it and how to serve it – to be born anew. On the other hand, none of us are invited to be born of a virgin. And if we were, would that further our spiritual pilgrimage in any important way?

Am I still being obtuse? The true Christmas for us is not when we are born physically. That is a necessary prerequisite, as Paul himself says in his first letter to the Corinthians: the spiritual does not come first; the physical comes first. (I Corinthians 15) I suspect that this is pretty clear to most of us. We may be glad we were born (at least on some days), but it is obvious to us that we went through numerous experiences and phases of our lives here before we had some experiences which made it clear to us that the Holy Spirit was present with us, leading and guiding us into some very different dimensions of life. So why is it not clear to us that this was also true for Jesus?

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Let’s pause here for a minute. Right at this point we can see some of the damage done by the creedal insistence that Jesus was born of a virgin. The virgin birth is an offense to the true meaning of the Incarnation. Jesus was born as a human being – fully and completely human. Yet if you were raised a Catholic, then this does not seem right. Jesus is divine and very different from normal humans. Never mind the fact that all of us are spiritual beneath the physical layers and that all of us have a divine destiny, even unto eternal life. But Jesus is different from us – holier and closer to God, and divine in purpose and destiny. And this is proved, so to speak, by His virgin birth. And Mary is “the mother of God.” No Catholic cringes to hear that phrase. I cringe every time I hear it. Can we not recognize blasphemy and idolatry when we hear it? Some human female is the mother of the numinous, eternal Creator of all that is or ever shall be?

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If you were raised a Catholic, it does not matter that Jesus was baptized. It does not matter that He received the Holy Spirit at His baptism. It does not matter that He shows no signs of His calling, His mission, or His purpose until after His baptism. If you are a Catholic, Jesus' life is all part of God's plan from the beginning, and He does not have to go through any of the normal human processes. He is born from the virgin Mary, fully formed, and His destiny and purpose are all laid out in front of Him from the moment of His physical birth onward. Jesus tells us that we must be born anew – born of the Spirit – but this does not apply to Him? He comes fully endowed with the Spirit from the moment of His physical birth onward?

That is a completely different religion from the one I profess and believe in. Jesus is God's Messiah because He leads us into the New Life that He Himself has walked into, and we follow Him because what is true for Him can be true for us also. If His life here among us has nothing to do with life as we know it – if He does not wrestle with the same temptations and go through the same trials and levels and awakenings that we do – then following Him is a charade, a pretense, a mockery. If I pay any attention to Jesus' life – to what we know of His teachings, His encounters, His experiences, His purposes – then what Jesus experiences and goes through here is more real, more profound, more difficult, *and more meaningful* even than what I go through or what others of my kind are going through. To turn it all into a charade or a puppet show is one of the worst sins I can imagine.

Obviously there are millions of Catholics, and of course Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Pentecostals, Lutherans, and others, who believe in the false Christmas, and I am only one man, one voice. Many of them have been taught the creeds they believe in (but have not thought much about) from the time they were small children. Many of them were told of dire consequences if they failed to believe the false Christmas or even dared to ask any serious questions about it. Only, I was not raised a Catholic. I really believe in the Incarnation – that Jesus was born as one of us, fully human – and all the realities and trials and challenges of being a human were as true for Him as they are for me and for you. Jesus came into His role and purpose as the Messiah of God because of His baptism – because He received the Holy Spirit. And He wants that for us too. Not the role of Messiah, but the role and destiny that the Holy Spirit wants for each one of us. We are invited into baptism and into the Kingdom. That is what Jesus keeps telling us and showing us. So He tells us about the WAY into the Life He has found. *“You must be born anew.”*

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Let me repeat it: Physical birth is not the true Christmas. Jesus is Jesus of Nazareth, yes, but His physical birth does not make Him Jesus the Christ. Baptism is the true Christmas. If we want to celebrate Christmas and the significance of Jesus' life for us, we cannot tack it on to His physical birth. Can all of us let that finally and fully sink in?

Let me try it from Paul's perspective. Paul never heard of the *virgin* birth, but he still says some pertinent things. A very slight rewording: "You stupid Galatians! You came awake to the spiritual; do you now look to the *physical* birth of Jesus to help you on your Path?" (Galatians 3) How many lights and how much tinsel do you have to put on a Christmas tree before it brings you closer to God? How many Christmas carols do you have to sing before you finally and fully know that you are beloved of God? Can any of us "get there from here" without the Cross and the Resurrection? Without the coming of the Holy Spirit that finally activates the Christian church after the Cross and the Resurrection pave the WAY? The physical birth of Jesus contains *none* of the essential ingredients of our Faith. If we celebrate the physical birth of Jesus instead of His baptism – instead of His being born of the Spirit – we are always going to be in the shallow end of the pool.

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I have a friend who complains at me because of what I say about Christmas. At least he hears me. And he is biblical scholar enough to know that what I say about the Christmas stories is accurate and correct. So he does not dispute my perspective about the virgin birth or the discrepancies between the story in Luke and the story in Matthew. He understands about the genealogies and how they represent a tradition far older and better established than the birth narratives that were tacked-on over a hundred years later. He realizes that Mark and Paul never heard of the virgin birth. But he still complains at me. His point is: The Christian Faith is now under such heavy fire and attack in our time that it is no time to weaken anybody's connection to the church or the Faith. So I should keep quiet about my views of Christmas, the Second Coming, and the errors of creedal claims invented in the fourth century A.D. He insists that this is not the time to reform or correct any of the beliefs or practices of the church; we need to all present a united front and let everybody believe as much as they possibly can without challenging or questioning any of it.

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I kid you not. This is what he tells me. And he means it sincerely enough to withdraw most of his support and friendship from me. But that's like trying to tell Jeremiah that he should not mention the New Covenant because we are still having a lot of trouble getting people to believe in or keep the Old Covenant.

Part of our problem, I am convinced, is that we are still trying to "sell" a Christianity that is badly crippled – that is weighted down by some of its serious blunders and mistakes to the point where many people cannot abide it. An institution that cannot admit any of its mistakes is no better off than an individual who can never admit any of his or her mistakes. Repentance is one of the biggest concepts in our Faith. Why are we so afraid of it? The opposite principle – denial – is what keeps our lives blighted and keeps us going around on the same merry-go-round of errors and bad habits.

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Possibly – probably – I have been obtuse again. Or perhaps more likely, you already heard me long ago and do not need to hear it again. But we are in the middle of Advent again, and I know that, subtly or not so subtly, the society all around us generates a certain amount of pressure on us – pressure to renew our loyalty to Christmastime as our culture presents it and believes in it: Everybody be nice. Everybody be generous. Everybody drink enough to dull the senses and bury any objections or complaints. Jesus died on the Cross so we could all give presents to each other and so we would buy a little something for the children and families less fortunate than we are.

Most of us have certain "favorite" things we like to do during the days leading up to Christmas. We know a special concert or a church that has a lovely Christmas Eve service. We have some favorite movies, or we look forward to a special gathering with some special friends. And we are wooed again by special music or smells or decorations or gatherings that fill us with emotions that are important to us or with longings that seem powerful and good. At least I hope this is true for most of you. And I hope you let yourself enjoy such things thoroughly and that you give thanks for the blessings which come with them. But that is no reason to confuse such things with the true Christmas.

I still enjoy *Miracle on 34th Street*, though I suspect you have to be nearly as old as I am to really get into it. I love to watch *A Christmas Carol*, especially with George C. Scott as Scrooge.

But after I get through watching it and crying with delight at the transformation that comes over old Scrooge, I also have to “clean up” sometimes after the impression it tries to leave with me.

Old Scrooge, the story says, has learned to celebrate Christmas as well or better than anybody else in town. But he has plenty of money, from his days as a miser, with which to celebrate. Yet even Scrooge’s millions cannot solve any of the problems that the ghosts of Past, Present, and Future Christmas have presented him with. He pays for the operations that heal Tiny Tim, and that’s wonderful. He treats Bob Cratchit with generosity and friendship, and I love that. He attends family gatherings, and his nephew and family like him again. Excellent. He gives big donations to charity, and he does special favors, often anonymously, for various individuals. I truly enjoy this ending to *A Christmas Carol*.

But none of the real issues are touched. The starving children under the robe of Christmas Present are still there. The homeless families that cannot find work are still in the tunnels where we saw them. Nothing is said about the drugs or alcohol that are a huge part of the scenario. And what moves Scrooge to this great transformation? The only things the movie touches on are his fear, his loneliness, and his approaching death. To be sure, the presence of the Holy Spirit changes how Christians feel about and deal with fear, loneliness, and death, but it is the presence and love and guidance of the Holy Spirit that brings the changes, not their own decisions to be generous. What happens to Scrooge’s transformation if he does not have a lot of money? Does *A Christmas Carol* have anything to do with the *real* Christmas?

But what can we expect, after all? How can a movie portray what actually happens to a person on the Damascus Road? Does Scrooge ever encounter the Holy Spirit of God’s Messiah? And if he did, how would the movie show the difference between his doing some good deeds that the world approves of and his turning his life over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Watching Jesus and Paul and Luther and others, it occurs to us that the Holy Spirit does not care one whit for what the world approves of or does not approve of. Does Scrooge go forty days into the wilderness to encounter both Satan and the Holy Spirit? And does he come out of the wilderness with a whole new vision of who he is and why he is here?

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Clearly the movie tries to depict a transformation. Scrooge is now here to care about people and be generous. How watered-down would we have to get before we realized that this does not really portray the kind of love that changed Peter and Paul and Mary Magdalene, and then growing numbers of disciples who had never even met Jesus in the flesh?

If you are not born anew, you cannot see the Kingdom of God. That is what Jesus teaches us. That is a very different kind of Christmas. Maybe old Scrooge had been born anew and the problem is that there is no way to put such a thing into a movie. As Paul said, "*Flesh and blood can never inherit the kingdom of God.*" But at least we should know and remember that the true Christmas is about more than physical birth – about more than a manger or a silent night. The true Christmas is about baptism: receiving the Holy Spirit, being born of the Spirit, turning will and life over to the guidance and caring and love of the Holy Spirit. That changes our lives and the values we live for and the things we care about. And even though we can talk about it and tell stories, some of it goes beyond our words and takes us into mystery – the mystery of the purposes and the mercy and the love of God.

In any case, I hope all of us in *The New Church* will remember that Christmas is not about a virgin birth; it is not about any kind of a physical birth. Christmas is about being born anew – born of the Spirit. Baptism is the true Christmas: the coming of the Christ – the coming of the Messiah of God.