

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE HEARING?
(THE JOYS OF THE TRUE CHRISTMAS)

So last week we talked about the True Christmas, and even a little bit about the false Christmas. The True Christmas is about baptism: being born anew – born of the Spirit. The false Christmas is about the physical birth – the birth of an infant. And of course nearly all of our current Christmas celebrations are centered around the false Christmas. So of course I am wondering how you are doing with this dichotomy. Perhaps you have not given it another thought since last Sunday. Or you shrugged it off and decided to enjoy the music and the decorations and the customs that you are used to. Why ruin such a good time of year with technicalities about theological or biblical details?

I have been listening to beautiful Christmas music myself. The William Hall Chorale did Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* years ago. It's my favorite, and playing in the background as I write this sermon. Of course, I wish that in the last five hundred years there had been great musicians who also knew the difference between the false Christmas and the True Christmas so that we would have carols and anthems that celebrate the *spiritual* birth of Jesus – the wonder of His baptism at age thirty. And our pageants would be about the followers of John the Baptist, many of whom became Jesus' top disciples, and they would head for the Jordan River to be baptized and to renew their loyalty and obedience to God in a spiritual revival movement that becomes the forerunner of Jesus' own ministry and purpose. Truly John the Baptist was a great prophet who knew that the Messiah was on the doorstep, and who told the people to get ready – to "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"

Oh yes, there is a powerful alternative celebration waiting in the wings for us, one even more worthy of great music and rejoicing and devotion and wonder than the one we now have.

Today I want to talk about the JOYS of the True Christmas. They far surpass the shallow joys of the false Christmas. For any of you who may be feeling like something was "taken away" by talking about the True Christmas, that's a lot like the old ship's captain who, after his most recent sea battle, mourned the loss of his wooden leg.

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE HEARING?
(THE JOYS OF THE TRUE CHRISTMAS)

Of course, what we really want to find is something or someone who can promise us that “everything will be all right” here. We think that would make us really happy. We think that would be the source of true joy. That is what we want to hear, and that is what careless people *think* they hear from the false Christmas. “*Peace on earth, good will to men.*” But when that is what we hear, we know it’s false. There is no certain peace or success or victory or well-being in this broken world. Sometimes things seem to go well – for a while. Sometimes we think we are safe or healthy or succeeding or successful – for a little while. And certainly most of us try to find ways to help this be true for us – for a while.

Some people thought their lives were going well for them in 1928. Some people thought that prosperity and peace were waiting for them in November of 1941. Nobody who pays real attention to Jesus thinks that this is sure or certain as a promise – not in this world. So if we get a Christmas that starts to make a lot of us feel comfortable in this world, we know it’s a false Christmas.

We do not look to the physical birth to bring us the Messiah. We look to the *baptism* for Jesus’ spiritual birth, and that is what brought Him into His Messiahship. So we do not look to the physical rewards of this world to bring us to the joy of the True Christmas. What then *are* the joys of the True Christmas?

I am only eighty-four years old, so I do not know all the joys of the True Christmas – not yet. What I do know has come to me over the years in various experiences of spiritual awakening. And I confess that along the way, I have sometimes forgotten some of the things I actually know. The world is sneaky that way. We do not have to step away from our prayers for very long before we start getting sucked back into the ways and perspectives of the world around us.

So this will not be complete or even well-communicated. But I will talk about some of the joys that are big for me. Most of them will not surprise you, for you are on this Path too.

* * *

At the baptism, and whenever we are in the presence of the Spirit and know it, there is an ACCEPTANCE that I never feel or experience from this world. I remember it strongly from the first time, when I was eleven years old – what I often refer to as my first conversion.

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE HEARING?
(THE JOYS OF THE TRUE CHRISTMAS)

I had some awareness of God already, and certainly I was already interested in “religion,” more so I guess than most kids my age. But under the Pepper Tree that day, I experienced the Spirit’s presence as a Being of Light who stood beside me and guarded me through that experience.

Up to that point in my life, I had never fully pleased anybody. My parents loved me. Some of my teachers were very helpful. My sister was a huge help and support for me. But it was clear and obvious to me that I left a lot to be desired from the perspective of everyone who knew me. I had potential, perhaps, but I was far from what I needed to become. Nobody said it in so many words, but I could feel it all the time and everywhere I went. I was never fully okay or all right with anybody. Everybody who cared about me was trying to help me to do more, to do it better, to get it right. The helpful hints and strong suggestions were endless.

But suddenly, in the Spirit’s presence – even though I knew there were many adventures ahead and lots of challenges awaiting me – suddenly I was completely and totally accepted. The love of the Spirit Guide was there with me. I was being guarded and guided. I was not allowed to go across the vast gorge between me and the people I saw at work and at play across the chasm. It was not time yet; there was much to do in the physical realm where I already was, before that would be appropriate. But the day would come when it *would* be appropriate. That was a certainty. That was all made very clear to me. The Being of Light beside me was not disappointed in me. Yes, I indeed needed to learn and grow – and I wanted to, very much. But the love and acceptance were already there.

Later that day I found myself back in the nonaccepting world where I had always been. It was no worse or better than it had always been before. It was just the way it was. Only now I knew a different reality – a place where I was fully accepted. And whenever I remembered, I could feel that acceptance again.

Before long, I found myself in high school, and that was hard for me. Eventually I found some friends, and some of them cared about me quite a bit, at least at moments. But they were a tiny handful around me. The bonds of friendship could be strong one day and mostly gone the next. And there were bullies, and others who were smarter or more popular or more preoccupied with other things.

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE HEARING?
(THE JOYS OF THE TRUE CHRISTMAS)

Mostly it was a time to be endured: get your homework done, and do your chores at home and on the weekends. And my horse and my dog were my greatest refuge. But if I could endure it, eventually I could move on to college. I could hardly wait. High school was no fun for me.

It turned out that college was not a lot better, except Mariana was there, at least from my sophomore year on. And there was more freedom in some ways. Then I graduated, got married, and went to seminary. I was busy enough with studies and fieldwork not to care as much about acceptance, except that at any moment along the way, someone could be threatening enough or displeased enough to remind me that things were far from perfect here. And lots of people were having an even harder time than I was, and some of them I cared about. That made things really difficult.

Then I became a Pastor, and most of my time and energy were devoted to trying to be a good Pastor. What is a good Pastor? Always kind and loving and brilliant and entertaining. Visit those who are sick or in the hospital. Preach wonderful sermons that please everybody. Guide all the boards and committees. Raise money. Bring in new members. And I found some wonderful support from members coming awake to the Spirit. But there were always those in opposition, some of them angry enough to be quietly at work – spreading false rumors, lowering their pledge to make the numbers look bad – to see if they could discredit me enough to get me fired. Behind the scenes, the church is never as peaceful as some people think.

Some days it was easy to forget that I was the Lord's beloved. But I was. And when I could remember and receive it – and be grateful – then I was okay again for a while. That's one of the joys of the True Christmas – the true coming of the real Messiah: Jesus, who has returned to us as the Holy Spirit, makes it clear that we are the Lord's beloved. The false Christmas never does that; it does not know how.

* * *

A certain level of "fear" is always with us, I suppose. But by this time I had a young family – two children and a wife – to support. Being a Pastor does not take the concerns away. In this world, it is a man's responsibility to be the protector and provider for his family. What if something went wrong? What if I could not do that well enough?

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE HEARING?
(THE JOYS OF THE TRUE CHRISTMAS)

Being a Pastor, especially a young Pastor, I did not make very much money. I had not learned yet how many games a New England Board of Trustees could play. The church was always presented as poorer than it really was. They kept telling me they would love to pay me more, just as soon as they could afford it; meanwhile, why was I not bringing in more members who wanted to support the church more than the current members? Actually, in those days there were more members coming in, and they were giving more and more money too. But the church was already far behind in its maintenance programs, and many things were costing more than the Trustees had expected. So raises were small, often barely enough to keep up with cost-of-living increases.

Of course, the fear of failure and of being fired was only off in the wings somewhere. And it was only *one* of the fears. What if Mariana or the kids got sick? What could we do? I tried to carry insurance, but it was never enough. And on and on. This was not the big part of my life; it was just part of the shadows. Each time I remembered the presence of the Spirit, the fears would melt to insignificance. “*If God is for us, who is against us?*” It did not mean that there was no reality to the fears; it just meant that they were no longer terrifying. We choose and live and decide things by faith. It is difficult to be very upset by the images of what might go wrong or bad – *if* we know that GOD IS WITH US. That’s one of the big joys of the True Christmas.

* * *

And that extends even to the fear of death. If the pain gets bad enough, we blink out. If everything goes wrong enough, we die. But that only shortens our time here. The mountains are beautiful, the stars are wondrous, and there is beauty and poetry and history and new discoveries going on all around us. But if we do not live to see it all, so what? If our time in this wondrous world, which is also a veil of tears, gets shortened, is that somehow unendurable?

One of the joys of the True Christmas is that **WHATEVER HAPPENS HERE, IT IS NOT THE END**. And it would not matter very much even if it were. Not for us, and not for those we love either.

So what do you think about Jesus and *His* joy? He had an extremely difficult life here, from our perspective. He was incredibly faithful, yet His ministry only lasted for three years. But what do you think about what happened to Him – how His life ended – in the long

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE HEARING?
(THE JOYS OF THE TRUE CHRISTMAS)

run? “*He sitteth on the right hand of God.*” A poetic statement, but that’s the scriptural summary. He is resurrected and comes into His own. His love is so vast that He is permitted to come to us as Holy Spirit and guide us on our own pilgrimages down through the generations.

However hard His path was on this earth, it did not last long here. And His joy in shepherding the rest of His followers is doubtless mixed with some disappointment and wonder at how hard it is for some of us to catch on. But He is not in a hurry. And He sees what is in store for us far better than any of us do.

* * *

So what is the “inheritance” that Paul talks about? “*And if children of God, then heirs.*” Do you have the joy of knowing **YOU WILL SOON COME INTO YOUR INHERITANCE?** That is one of the joys of the True Christmas. Do you ever picture it, even a little?

A spiritual body. Resources beyond your wildest imagination. Bonds of love and friendship stronger and more dependable than anything we have ever experienced here. Purpose and meaning for your life – far clearer and more important than anything we have known here. Love and appreciation for all you are and for all you do, and all along the way.

And none of it can be taken away by the forces that so corrupt and interrupt things here.

The false Christmas knows little of any of these things. The love and gratitude we feel toward Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith – it is joy that wells up beyond any of our explaining. And it is neither theory nor creed. We sense and experience the love of Jesus in dimensions beyond all our physical realities. His power and wisdom and love and purpose are clear enough to bring us endless joy, yet mysterious enough to elude all tiny explanations.

The True Christmas is far more in simply knowing His presence than it is in any of the events or challenges of this world’s realities. Being with someone you love is the deepest joy of all. And while that is rich and wondrous even here, **TO BE WITH JESUS AND WITH GOD AND WITH EACH OTHER IN THE KINGDOM COMING** is and will be the greatest joy of the True Christmas.

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE HEARING?
(THE JOYS OF THE TRUE CHRISTMAS)

Then I hear Paul in a clearer light: *“I reckon that the sufferings we now endure bear no comparison with the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is in store for us.”* (Romans 8:18) That is not something anybody can put in a package under a Christmas tree. But it is blessing and love and acceptance and hope many times greater than anything promised or expected by the false Christmas.

Do Paul’s words drift by too quickly to sink in? I always need to match the words with the life behind them. Here is the life behind Paul’s words: *“More often overworked, more often imprisoned, scourged more severely, many a time face to face with death. Five times the Jews have given me the thirty-nine lashes; three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned [that’s supposed to be the death penalty]; three times I have been shipwrecked, and for twenty-four hours I was adrift on the open sea. I have been constantly on the road; I have met dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my fellow-countrymen, dangers from foreigners, dangers in the town, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers from false Christians. [You caught that, did you? Paul knew about false Christians.] I have toiled and drudged and often gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food; I have suffered from cold and exposure. Apart from these external things, there is the responsibility that weighs on me every day, my anxious concern for all the churches.”* (II Corinthians 11:23-28)

So then I hear his words again: *“I reckon that the sufferings we now endure bear no comparison with the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is in store for us.”*

* * *

The false Christmas has its joys, but in my view they are paltry indeed in comparison to the joys of the True Christmas. And that brings me back to our Scripture reading for this morning. Never mind what *we* think; what does *Jesus* think is the greatest Christmas present of all?

Funny you should ask. Actually, strange that we do not ask more often. We are in the eleventh chapter of Luke, far from the end of the Gospel. But Jesus tells this story about a friend who comes at midnight to ask for a favor – a little food for a guest who has shown up unexpectedly. It is a charming little story, and it reminds us to be patient and persistent in our prayers. But Jesus ends the story with

CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE HEARING?
(THE JOYS OF THE TRUE CHRISTMAS)

a mind-blowing comment: *“How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”*

“How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Where did that come from? Does Jesus know about the Holy Spirit just because He received it at His baptism? And clearly – at least I think it is unmistakable – Jesus knows that the gift of the Holy Spirit is the greatest gift there is.

Is that what we learn from the false Christmas? Not in a thousand years! But it *is* what we learn from the True Christmas. Baptism: spiritual birth – BEING BORN ANEW, BORN OF THE SPIRIT – that is the greatest gift of all, and it is the gift of the True Christmas.