

## Does Christmas Mean Something?

TEXT: John 1:1-5, 14

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on December 19, 2021*

I was recently speaking with a man from the community who was both repelled and fascinated by the Church and religion. He had a lot of questions, but one in particular intrigued me. He asked, “What were holidays like Christmas originally designed to do for people? Is there a way to dial it back so that holidays actually mean something other than spending?”

I’ve been asked a lot of things over the years, but this question was new and is more important than I think the man asking it realized. At its core, this question is both an indictment of the Church and a plea for some shred of hope. It’s an indictment because, if the Church had been living its mission, the question would be unnecessary. But it also contains the hope that maybe there’s still some way to peel back all the layers and find something that can help us get through this life with a sense of meaning and purpose.

The core function of a holiday—any holiday—is to tell a story that helps a community bond together over a shared meaning and identity. That community might be as small as a family celebrating a birthday or anniversary, a town or organization commemorating its founding, a nation celebrating the ends of wars, important milestones, or national heroes, or religions celebrating sacred days that help define the most important tenets of their faith.

All of them serve the same function. Establishing a holiday sets apart a special time to remember what it means to be part of a group—to tell the stories about how we came to be who we are in order to provide grounding and a roadmap for our future. By doing them every year, we allow those stories to live and breathe and find new meaning in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. As we see those stories with new eyes, and sometimes new information, we sometimes adapt them to the new circumstances. The meaning of a birthday celebration can shift dramatically if the person has just been given a diagnosis of a terminal illness, for example. Our national holidays have looked different in wartime than in peace.

We might debate those stories fiercely, with some fighting the change and some fighting traditional understandings—is it Columbus Day or Indigenous People’s Day; but those debates are itself an indicator of how critical holidays are to our understanding of ourselves, what it means to be part of a certain group, who may join and who may not, and what we hope and dream for our future together. Stories are the fundamental building blocks of human relationships and human community. Holidays elevate the most important stories of a particular group and provide both an anchor to our past and a path to our future together.

For Christians, Christmas is one such holiday, although it’s not the most important one; Easter gets that honor. It took the early church until the fourth century to decide to celebrate Christmas. The big holidays for the first three centuries of Christianity were Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost. Some have suggested that the only reason Christmas was put on the Church calendar in the fourth century was to co-opt the pagan celebration of Saturnalia on December 25, since there’s no evidence that Jesus was born in December.

Whatever the reason, it went on the calendar and St. Augustine declared that Jesus was born on the shortest day of the year because, "He, therefore, who bent low and lifted us up chose the shortest day, yet the one whence light begins to increase." If they did intend to convert the pagans by essentially taking over the boisterous, gift-giving Roman holiday of Saturnalia; it's not entirely clear that it worked. By the 17th century, the commercialization and revelry associated with Christmas made the Christian inhabitants of Boston so uncomfortable that they actually made celebrating Christmas illegal from 1659 to 1681.

The Christmas story is also a lot less prominent in the Bible than many realize.

The Gospels differ in terms of how they present the Christmas story. The Gospel of Mark ignores Jesus' birth entirely, beginning instead with Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River. The Gospel of Matthew gives us only the story of Joseph having a dream, where an angel tells him not to abandon Mary because her pregnancy came from the Holy Spirit. Then it jumps to the story of the star and the Wise Men, King Herod's search for Jesus, and the escape of the Holy Family to Egypt. Matthew doesn't give the first detail about the actual birth. No story about needing to travel to pay taxes, no singing angels or surprised shepherds, no inn, no stable, no manger, no swaddling clothes.

If you want those things, you have to go to The Gospel of Luke. There are no wise men and no star in Luke; but, in addition to getting the story about getting to Bethlehem, no room at the inn, the manger, shepherds, singing angels, and swaddling clothes; you get the fulness of the angel's announcement to Mary that she's going to have a baby, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and Mary's song in response, which we have come to call the Magnificat.

We only lose one Christmas carol if we eliminate Matthew and Mark: We Three Kings (and Matthew never specifies a number for the Wise Men). Take out Luke and we lose almost all our carols, as well as bucket loads of classical renderings of Mary's Magnificat, the Hail Mary prayer, and the speech given by Linus on stage in a Charlie Brown Christmas.

What about the Gospel of John, you ask? John doesn't skip Jesus' birth like Mark does. But John is unconcerned with any of the earthly details. John is uninterested in what happened. He wants to tell us what it all means, which is why I picked it for this morning to help answer the man's question about the meaning of Christmas. It begins with who John believes Jesus is, in verses 1-5. But if you think you'll get a clear description, you'll be disappointed.

The Gospel of John speaks in symbol and metaphor and it kicks us off with a concept from Greek philosophy by talking about "the Word." Capital W. In English, that's misleading. The Greek word is *logos*, a concept first used by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus 600 years before Jesus was born. Heraclitus used the word *logos* to describe the divine intention for the universe. John uses *logos* in the same way. We know that because he intentionally takes us back to the epic poem of Creation in Genesis 1 by starting his Gospel with the words, "In the beginning."

John establishes in verse 1 that he considers the Word—the *logos*—to be none other than God. Because of course it would be. If *logos* is the divine intention for the universe, then it must exist within God. That intention, John says, created the world and is life and light itself. When God said on Day 1 of creation, "Let there be light," that was God's divine intention being made manifest on the earth. It could not be overcome by the dark void that Genesis says covered the face of the deep. John 1:1-5 is a re-telling of Genesis 1:1-5.

John then fast forwards to John the Baptist for a bit, in the section we didn't read, to identify that light—that divine intention—with Jesus. Then it's back to this gospel's one-line version of the Christmas story: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." I've preached before about the "father/son" language here being a metaphor. Saying that Jesus' glory is as of a father's only son is, I think, John's parallel to humans being made in the image of God on Day 6 of creation in Genesis. His point is that Jesus is the logos, the divine intention of God made manifest in the world as a human being.

That one line also goes a bit further, to define God not only as light and life, but also as grace and truth. John is proclaiming that those things are God's intention for all creation, and have been from the very beginning, and if you have any questions about what that looks like when lived in a human life, he would like you to meet Jesus—the divine intention made flesh. It is only in John that Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." It is only in John that Jesus says, "I am the light of the world."

Christmas is the holiday when the Church elevates that story. We trim it up with angels and shepherds, wise men and a stable; but the core of the story is that God's own intention; God's heart; God's love for the world was and is willing to become one of us, giving us a chance to see God as more than just some force out in the universe but as someone very personal; someone who suffers with and for us; someone we can know and who knows us.

That's what the stories about Christmas in the other gospels tell us. In Luke the stories emphasize the poverty and lack of privilege of Jesus' family. Born in a feeding trough in a stable where only shepherds, whose word wasn't even counted in a court of law, were allowed to be witnesses. And while Luke emphasizes how much God gave up to become human; Matthew reminds us that kings know other kings when they see them and the wise men recognize it and travel far to bring the best gifts they have. Further, all of heaven participates, especially the angels. They appear in dreams, they sing in the nighttime sky, they come to virgins with awkward news. A star proclaims the light of the world in the only way it knows how.

Whether all or any of those details are factual is entirely beside the point. We tell the story at Christmas to remind ourselves of who we are as Christians: We believe that God is personal and knowable and relatable. We believe that God's loving intention for the world is full of grace and truth; not judgment and lies. We believe that God can be made manifest in the poor as well as the rich. We believe that God works, first and foremost, in and through human beings from within human history. We believe that, no matter where no matter what, God is with us. We believe that Jesus is none other than God in the flesh; love in human form; and our only job is to become the same.

It can be argued that, by taking over Saturnalia, Christians made it harder to get that message the hearing it deserves. But Luke tells us it was like that in Bethlehem, too. Boisterous. Crowded. Everyone worried about paying their taxes so that nobody really noticed what was happening in a random barn. And still, precisely there, Jesus was born. Amen.