

The Message for Sunday, December 26, 2010

Title: “That’s What It’s All About”

Scripture: Hebrews 2:14-16

I. The Survey... Having a television to watch while working out at the gym is a great thing. (For me, it may be the only great thing.) I often forget to bring my headphones, so I can not hear the news. But, they run crawlers at the bottom of the screen; and they often have captioning turned on.

Last week, I was intrigued by one news story on CNN that when I went home, instead of getting cleaned up, I turned on the television and waited for the story to be repeated. The news anchor on CNN was reporting on a recent survey on attitudes about Christmas. Sixty percent of the people who responded to the survey said that the reason they observed Christmas was to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

At first glance this looks like really **good news**—for at least two reasons. The first is that for years, I have heard so many concerns about how the real meaning of Christmas seems to be fading. It is as though OUR holiday has been hijacked by a cultural shift. To hear that sixty percent observed Christmas for the original reason was good news. The other reason this seemed like good news is that it was a major, early morning news segment. It was good news that CNN thought it was that important.

The bad news is that forty percent of the American populace celebrates Christmas for some other reason. Here are a couple of their reasons. Obviously, people of other religions do not celebrate the birth of Jesus; but they, too, like the giving of gifts at Christmas. And, the atheists who celebrate Christmas simply do it for the gift giving and having some time off with family. (These were according to a similar survey I ran across on the internet.)

And yet, reasons like these should not account for forty percent of Americans. Even the news anchor had something to say about the survey. She made some comment about Christmas being the birth of Jesus Christ. The survey simply mentioned celebrating the “birth of Jesus.” I am sure that was to be careful or even politically correct. However, when the news anchor commented on the survey she said “Jesus Christ.” I did not read or see any follow up on that news segment, so I do not know if she got in trouble for saying what she said. But, this is what I did find.

As usual, I hit the internet to see what kind of reaction there might have been. Here is one. I admit that this one blogger is very jaded in his condemnation of conservative Christians; but he is among a growing number of people who want to take us on in what has become known as “Christianity and the Culture War.”

The blogger to whom I refer writes a regular blog on the internet. This is what he had to say: “Regular readers of this blog will know that this blogger is a non-believer and has been since shortly after leaving seminary. That said, used to celebrate Christmas in spite of my faithless state. Given that the best, enjoyable parts of the

holiday are entirely non-Christian in origin, and lost any pagan religious meaning centuries ago, I saw no reason not to enjoy the holiday.”

He continues: “I used to go out and buy the tree and lug it home.... We’d decorate it and give presents. We celebrated the best aspect of the holiday, which was good will and benevolence toward all.” (From Classically Liberal, December 9, 2010, <http://freestudents.blogspot.com/2010/12/christmas-and-culture-war.html>)

This is not a majority opinion, but it is an opinion that seems to be growing in popularity.

II. What It’s All About... And then, I can not tell you how many times I have heard, “Now, that’s what Christmas is all about, anyway.”

The most recent time I heard this was on “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,” just this past week. Jay was talking about some charitable deed, and ended his rather serious commentary on the deed with, “That’s what Christmas is all about.”

Really? Is that what Christmas is all about? Is Christmas *just* about doing good deeds and having a seasonal sense of good will?

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with doing good deeds or trying to muster a little bit of good will—if only for a few weeks.

Dee and I have a couple of very close friends in Nashville. They have been married almost as long as we have. This year, they decided not to give each other any Christmas presents. Instead, they gave what money they would have spent on themselves to a family they know who is experiencing some extreme financial difficulties. And, they have given the money in such a way as to remain anonymous.

In many churches, I have had people come up to me during the Christmas season and give me some extra cash, above their regular giving, and ask me to see to it that it gets to someone in need. They do not want any credit for the giving on their church record. Still others will do something special for places in mission. And, I can’t tell you how many times I have heard of people lightening up on others “just because of the season.”

These things are good. It would be *better* if we could “lighten up” on others and get involved in a mission project all year long. They are not just seasonal opportunities—or should not be. But, a little bit is better than none. And yet, that is not what Christmas is all about. Nor is Christmas simply about setting time aside to get with family or making a special effort to get to church. Again, these are good, but they ought to be practiced all year round.

III. Whom to Help?... Not long ago, when studying for this sermon, I was re-reading the scripture in the lectionary. As a staff, we had chosen it months ago. But, when I read it again, last week, it spoke to me in a different way. That is why Scripture is called, “The Living Word of God.” It speaks to us every time we read it.

In the second chapter of The Letter to the Hebrews the text says, “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, He himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. “For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.”

Now, like many of you, I have read that passage on several occasions. But this time, it spoke to me. What the text says is that God chose to speak to humanity in a way they could understand; and that is why God sent Jesus, as a human. And, by sending Jesus, God released us from the fear of sin, evil and death.

Now, let me read one more time, the verse that spoke so loudly to me: “For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.” (2:16) That is one of the most powerful things I have read in a long time. And this is what it says to me.

IV. Interruption... First, there is this. Hebrews clearly says that Jesus came. It has always been foundational to my faith that God interrupted history with the birth of Jesus. As a child, I used to look at Nativity sets (which I mistakenly called a “maternity scene” in the 6th grade). I would look at all of those little figures, especially the baby Jesus lying there in that little feeding trough. I could hardly contain the mystical enthusiasm that God would send a little baby to do what He came to do.

Later when I matured, I marveled at the Virgin birth—which I still affirm and believe with all of my heart. When I got to college, and later in graduate school, I would hear all of the ridiculous rationalizations about how a virgin birth is impossible, and that it was a myth concocted by the ancients to deal with something they could not understand. (I recently read an article in a New Yorker Magazine about the current trend in scholarship that rejects the phenomenal in the Gospels.) Well, let me simply say this.

If we believe in God, then what is it to believe in one of God’s miracles in the New Testament? If we truly believe in a divine being who has the power to create, to destroy, to forgive and to offer eternal life, then what is it to believe that the creator could create a divine baby in the way Jesus was sent?

I am still mesmerized by the whole thing: that God interrupted history—and for the right reason.

You know, I have played a guitar since I was in the 8th grade. However, it is not something that has come naturally to me. I have had to work at it. And, there is very little that I can do on a guitar or banjo that was not first taught to me by someone else. I have had to be shown all of the chords and techniques that I use.

The same is true of living our faith. Humanity did not understand what it was to live as one of God’s children. And so, God sent Jesus, in the form of Jesus to show us how to live—and how to die—so that we may live forever with Him in eternity.

In the first place, it is important to know that Jesus came.

V. Not For Angels... Second, the passage says that Jesus was not sent for the benefit of angels. Sometimes, I think religion is criticized because it spends too much time and energy on itself.

Many years ago, I was visiting in the home of a family that had visited the little church where I was pastor. It was a delightful visit. Their little girl took to me immediately. When I sat down on the sofa, she immediately jumped on my lap and pulled the handkerchief out of the breast pocket of my suit.

The visit was going on well until the family said, “You know, we are not interested in joining a church that has a building program. We don’t want to have to pay for someone else’s building. We think the church needs to be about meeting the needs of the people.”

I did not want to give them any false impressions, and so I told them that because we were growing, we were developing a plan for expansion. It did not set well with this family. They objected to the church spending on itself.

Well, the truth of the matter is, sometimes we have to spend on ourselves in order to fulfill the Great Commission—that, plus the fact we are charged with growing the kingdom and taking care of our sheep (the congregation). We could not do that without proper facilities.

Frankly, I do not remember if the family joined or not. It was too long ago. And, as it turned out, the church did not actually build until the year after I left; but when I left, all of the money was in place to build the addition.

And yet, it is true that the church sometimes spends too much time and energy on itself. This can take many forms. Sometimes, we get so tangled up in dogma that we spend a lot of time and energy arguing about the right color, or the right method of baptism; and then, we neglect the needs of a hurting world.

And, it is true that the church has an ugly record of violent conflict—as in the Crusades where Christian armies destroyed the Christian city of Constantinople; or when Europe was ablaze with the fires of heretics who had been tied to poles and set on fire; or when Protestants and Catholics in Ireland go at one another.

Hebrews clearly says that Jesus came not to help the angels but to help humanity.

VI. The Worth of Wonder... Third, there is this. In 1975, the American philosopher and theologian, Jacob Needleman (b. 1934), was an observer at the launch of Apollo 17. Apollo 17 was the last lunar landing mission of the Apollo program; and it was a night launch.

According to Dr. Needleman, there were hundreds of cynical reporters all over the lawn, drinking beer, wisecracking, and waiting for the launch of the 35-story-high rocket. As the countdown ended, there came the blast. Dr. Needleman said that the first thing you see is this extraordinary orange light, which is just at the limit of what you can bear to look at.

He said, “Everything is illuminated with this light. Then comes this thing slowly rising up in total silence, because it takes a few seconds for the sound to come across. You hear a ‘WHOOOOOSH! HHHH-MMMM!’ It enters right into you. You can practically hear jaws dropping. The sense of wonder fills everyone in the whole place as this thing goes up and up. The first stage ignites this beautiful blue flame. It becomes like a star, but you realize there are humans on it.

“And then there’s total silence. People just get up quietly, helping each other up. They’re kind. They open doors. They look at one another, speaking quietly and interestedly. These were suddenly moral people because the sense of wonder, the experience of wonder, had made them moral.” (Jacob Needleman, quoted by Eric S. Ritz in the sermon “The Fourth King in the Christmas Story,” found at www.esermons.com)

The birth of Jesus makes people have a sense of wonder—and experience wonder—and it makes them moral.

VII. What it's all about... And so, “What’s it all about?” Christmas is about: the fact that God sent Jesus into the world; the fact that Jesus did not come to help the angels but to help humanity; and the fact that because of the experience of the wonder of Jesus, humanity now not only has a moral life here, but an eternal life when life here is over.

And, that’s what it’s all about. Amen.

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