

The Purpose of the Visit

Isaiah 52:7-10 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." ⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. ⁹ Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Titus 3:4-7 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶ This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Luke 2:1-7 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

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Are you disappointed with Christmas? It's a pretty common feeling. For instance, I'm often disappointed with Christmas dinner. Cathy and I'll plan the menu, check the spice rack, make out the grocery list, and go shopping for the feast. The special cherry congealed salad is made in advance and pies and cakes are baked at least a day early. We ponder over the probable thawing time for the turkey to make sure that process is on schedule. And on Christmas day, the cooking takes several hours and lots of coordination in our tiny kitchen. It finally all comes together after several days of advance work. We sit down to eat, and in less than an hour the turkey is no longer stuffed, but we surely are, and we're staring at leftovers and dirty dishes. The glorious reward for our efforts is so short compared to all the time and energy required.

Sometimes the whole experience of Christmas can have that feel. There's so much effort put into Christmas – and then it's over so quickly. All that time shopping, but opening presents doesn't take long - and then there's wrapping paper to gather up and bows to save for next year. Perhaps you sent lots of Christmas cards but didn't hear back from old friends. Or there's the sweater that you received but it doesn't fit – obviously because clothes sizes are smaller than they used to be. We can be disappointed because it didn't snow – or frustrated with travel because it did snow. We turn on the news and our bubble of "Joy to the World" pops as we hear about Christmas gifts stolen, heating oil costs, and conflicts and casualties around the world. We've sung carols about how "the poor baby wakes, no crying he makes," but our infant granddaughter never got the memo. "In our attempts to create the magical Christmas experience we run ourselves into the ground emotionally, physically, financially, and relationally. Then, after weeks of pressure and preparation, all for the purpose of creating one perfect day in an imperfect year,"¹ it's rarely a perfect day at all.

In our art, in our music, and on our Christmas cards we've constructed an idyllic vision of a peaceful and glorious nativity that ignores the harsh conditions, the parents away from their home, the pain and exhaustion of childbirth, and the cow that has added to the amount of available fertilizer. In the wrapping paper and ribbons, the tinsel and the tree, in the turkey and the dressing, the carols and the concerts, and even the Christmas children's plays and live nativity scenes, the significance and the central message of Christmas have both become burdened and overshadowed by all the trappings. We sometimes unconsciously expect the euphoria of peace and tranquility to settle on our lives on Christmas Day, as if some divine fairy dust had induced a holy spell. But it's like the first time you stayed up past midnight on New Year's Eve - and realized that the world was the same at 12:01 AM as it had been at 11:59 PM.

When Joseph was visited by the angel, he was told to name the baby “Jesus,” a name that means “his help is from God.” In those days, names had meanings and the meaning had significance. The angel said, “He will rescue people from their sinful lives.” The angel continued by saying, “and the people will call him Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us.’” You will name him “help is from God” – and he will rescue people from their lives of sin - and they will declare that in him, God is present among us. (Matthew 1:21-23) There’s the significance of Jesus – he is God with us.

Then there’s the theme, the central message of Jesus. It isn’t new. It’s been God’s message all along. Isaiah declared that God’s message was to untie bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke, share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house; cover the naked, bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, and to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 58:6-7 and Isaiah 61:1-2) Last Sunday, we studied how Mary came to accept her pregnancy and burst out in song. She declared that God would use her son to scramble the thoughts of those who were proud, bring down powerful rulers, lift up those who were trampled in life, fill the needs of those who were hungry, and send the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53) A few years later, as a young adult, Jesus went into the synagogue in his home town - and read Isaiah’s proclamation of God’s message regarding the poor, the oppressed, those blind in sight and blind to any hope. Jesus said, “This is what I’m sent to do. These are the purposes I’m called for. I’m commissioned; I’m anointed for this message.” (Luke 4:16-21)

The message is consistent all through scripture, all through time. God’s dream for the world, God’s message of how life is to be lived so that it is abundant in meaning and purpose - the way of life that Jesus taught and lived every hour of every day - is a life of compassion, mercy, love, service, and healing. How has that worked out? “If God is all-loving and all-powerful, then why doesn’t God do something about evil? The answer to this question is simple: you are the “something” that God is sending to combat evil in this world.”² We heard another reading from Isaiah this morning. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of a messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” (Isaiah 52:7) We are to be that messenger. And Jesus showed us how to do it.

When we’re messengers of peace, bringers of relief in times of suffering, voices of compassion in a strident conversation, and examples of forgiveness when everyone cries for vengeance, then we are the hands and feet of Christ, the body of Christ in a real sense. We’re ambassadors for the kingdom where God rules. Jesus’ true followers are not just sitting together in religious meetings, passively waiting for his return. They’re actively rebuilding, restoring, and renewing ruined lives, dashed hopes, and broken souls (Isaiah 61:4). We’re told in Titus that Jesus “saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy.” (Titus 3:4-5) Just as we’ve received undeserved mercy, so are we called to give the same to others.

Keeping Christ in Christmas isn’t a matter of wishing people a Merry Christmas. It’s a matter of giving to those who need a glimpse of Christ’s love. The question we ask shouldn’t be, “What did you get for Christmas? but, what did you give Christ for Christmas? What did you share of Christ this Christmas? Where did others, looking at you, see Christ in Christmas?”

I honor and appreciate your presence here this morning. Across this town and across this nation people have been sending emails and complaining in shopping lines about how we need to keep Christ in Christmas. They get angry when someone wishes them a “Happy Holiday” instead of “Merry Christmas.” They rant about the commercialization of Christmas into a massive marketing machine designed to get us to sell our souls to MasterCard and VISA. They deplore the use of the abbreviation of Xmas because they don’t know that the Greek letter that is the first letter in Christos looks like the letter “X” - and early Christians used the letter as a sign of faith and identification in times when it was often dangerous to be identified as a follower of the Christos. The use of the letter X to represent Christ has a long and honorable history. But many of those who demand that we keep Christ in Christmas can be found engaged elsewhere rather than in worship of Christ this morning. I’m honored to be gathered together with you here and now.

But you and I mustn’t pat ourselves on the back too hard. Being here this morning isn’t the end of our journey, the pinnacle proof of our faith. It’s simply the point of departure to the next stage of our journey of a life lived in faith, trust, and service. We’re told that after the magi found and worshipped Jesus, they returned to their country by a different road. That’s an important symbol for our intersection with Christmas, as well. After we’ve found the manger, after we’ve met Jesus, after we’ve worshipped him this morning, we too, need to

change course, change direction as we head back home. Encountering Christ is a course correcting event. The biblical term for changing the course of our life is repentance. It's what we do when we commit to walk in a new direction, walking with Christ on the path he walked.

Through the ages and all through our lives, God was with us, God is with us. God will be with us. The Christian poet, Ann Weems, says it so well:

*What concerns me,
 what lies on my heart,
 is this:
That we in the church
 papered and programmed
 articulate and agenda-ed
 are telling the faith story
 all wrong,
are telling it as though it happened two thousand years ago
 or is going to happen
 as soon as the church budget is raised.
We seem to forget that Christ's name is Emmanuel,
 God with Us,
Not just when he sat among us
 but now
 when we cannot feel the nailprints in his hands. (Ann Weems, *We Seem to Forget*)*

I hope and pray that each of us has found Christ this Christmas, and has been challenged, comforted, and changed by the experience. Amen.

¹ Mike Slaughter, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday* (Nashville, Abingdon, 2011) location 318-322. Kindle Edition

² Mike Slaughter, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday* (Nashville, Abingdon, 2011) location 838-840. Kindle Edition