

Forgiven and Loved
December 23, 2007
Dr. Jerry Nelson
John 3:16

What do you make of it all - This emphasis on Christmas?

This hodge-podge of cliches, symbols and even conflicting ideas:

Santa Claus' and manger scenes.

"Jingle Bells Rock" and "O Holy Night".

Gift-giving and greed.

For two months we have been bombarded with Christmas commercials, store displays and the ubiquitous mail-order catalogs.

We barely got past Halloween, much less Thanksgiving, before we were assaulted with advertising.

This over-saturation of Christmas seems to leave us all rather numb to the real event behind it.

In fact the actual event gets lost in the many attempts at redefining it.

If you watched network television you'd get the impression that the Christmas celebration was based on Snowmen, Grinches, Santa Claus', or the winter solstice.

At worst you might think Christmas was all the gimmick of manufacturers and retailers to give us more reason to buy.

At best you might think it was our annual, and otherwise largely ignored, observance of the ideals of goodwill and generosity.

What do you make of it - this Christmas season?

Do you rush to fulfill its demands on us of planning, working, worrying and most of all buying?

Or do you refuse it by ignoring it, or complaining about it?

Are you captured by the real event behind Christmas or repulsed by the surface madness and commercialism of it.

Even for you who know well and can recall easily the difference between the commercial Christmas that is so “in our faces” and the real thing, what do you make of Christmas?

What do you make of words of miracles, of a virgin birth, and of prophecies made centuries earlier?

What difference does it make to you that a baby was born in a barn and visited both by ignorant shepherds and stately philosophers?

Are these simply quaint but delightfully inspirational myths that surround a larger myth?

Are they simply poetic expressions of the human yearning for peace on earth?

Or did God actually come to earth?

In a TIME magazine cover story, Reynolds Price of Duke University made the following observation:

“The memory of any stretch of years eventually resolves to a list of names and one of the useful ways of recalling the past two millennia is by listing the people who acquired great power. Muhammad, Catherine the Great, Marx, Gandhi, Hitler, Roosevelt, Stalin and Mao come quickly to mind. There’s no question that each of those figures changed the lives of millions and evoked responses ranging from worship to hatred.

It would require much exotic calculations, however to deny that the single most powerful figure – not merely in these two millennia but in all human history – (the single most powerful figure) has been Jesus of Nazareth. Not only is the (prevailing calendar) based on...the date of his birth, but a serious argument can be made that no one else’s life has proved remotely as powerful and enduring as that of Jesus. It’s an **astonishing conclusion** in light of the fact that Jesus was a man who lived a short life in a rural backwater of the Roman empire, who died in agony as a convicted criminal...” (p86 TIME December 6, 1999)

Price doesn’t here tell the rest of the story – the resurrection of Jesus, but he makes his point.

In old King James English, the Bible says, "God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in times past to the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son"

Hebrews 1:1)

God has come and he has spoken!

The world unwittingly smothers the real event in tinsel, toys and trite stories but at root Christmas is about a man who claimed to be God coming to earth.

Well, is he?

You know, you have already answered that question.

You have either relegated him to sentimental myth along with Santa Claus or you have believed him to be who he claimed to be.

Which is it?

If you have relegated him to sentimental myth then you are getting from our cultural Christmas all you should expect –

Stimulation of the economy, excuses for taking time off work, and inspirational human-interest stories.

If however you believe him to be God who came to earth, then the implications of that are truly staggering.

It is not my intention this morning to recount the evidences for the deity of Jesus but it is my intention to ask again, this Christmas Sunday, if **you** have experienced the implications of his coming.

It is probably the most well known verse in the Bible.

Though many have no idea what it's about, even the biblically illiterate have seen the sign at sporting events – "John 3:16".

Maybe you've never thought of that verse in the context of Christmas but the message of Christmas is what the verse is all about:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

That God would come to earth is a truly remarkable thing.

Author Ken Gire has creatively expressed this awesome mystery of God becoming a human being:

“Joseph’s eyes dart around the stable.
Not a minute to lose. Quickly!
A feeding trough would have to make do for a crib.
Hay would serve as a mattress.
Blankets? Blankets? Ah, his robe. That would do.
A gripping contraction doubles Mary over and sends Joseph racing
for a bucket of water.

The birth would not be easy, either for the mother or the child.
For every royal privilege for this son ended at conception.

A scream from Mary knives through the calm of that silent night.
Sweat pours from Mary’s contorted face as Joseph, the most unlikely
midwife in Judea, rushes to her side.

The involuntary contractions are not enough and Mary has to push
with all her strength, almost as if God were reluctant to come into the
world.

Joseph places a garment beneath her, and with a final push and a
long sigh her labor is over – The Messiah has arrived.

Elongated head from the constricting journey, mucus in his ears and
nostrils, wet and slippery from the amniotic fluid, the Son of the Most
High God is still umbilically tied to a lowly Jewish girl.

The baby chokes, coughs and then cries.
Mary lays him on her chest and his helpless cries subside.
Deity nursing from a young maiden’s breast.
Could anything be more puzzling, more profound?

The baby finishes and sighs, the divine Word reduced to a few
unintelligible sounds.
Then for the first time, his eyes fix on his mother’s.
Deity straining to focus.
The light of the world, squinting.

Tears pool in her eyes. She touches his tiny hand.
And hands that once sculpted mountain ranges cling to her fingers.

And so with hardly a ripple of notice, God stepped into the cold lake of humanity.

Ken Gire (paraphrased from pgs 4-5 of Intimate Moments with the Savior1989)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

That brings me to the first implication of Christmas:

In our individual lives and in our world, something has to change or we will perish.

It takes a “Pollyanna” of the highest order, an obnoxiously optimistic person, to think the world is a better place than it was 100 or 500 years ago.

It may be no worse, but it is no better.

More people have died in war and man-made disaster during the last hundred years than any century before.

For all of our vaunted scientific achievements, the human race is still as fractured, unhappy, diseased, and depressed as at any other time in recorded human history – maybe even more so.

And the most painful realization about our human condition is the disappointment with ourselves.

There’s not a thinking man or woman alive who doesn’t struggle with guilt.

And that guilt is based on how far short we have fallen of even **our own** standards.

And that guilt is compounded when we truly believe in a God who is there – for our guilt grows, realizing how far short of **his** standard we have fallen and how grievously we have offended him.

Our selfishness toward others and our sin against a holy God make us guilty.

You can live and die with unresolved guilt or you can accept forgiveness.

In John 3:16 God said he gave, he sent, his son so that we might not perish.

To “perish” is to lose everything we long for.

It is to lose relationships, to lose love, to lose meaning, to lose life.

God declared that the wages of sin is death.

The Bible says that we will perish, will lose forever, as a result of our sins unless something is done.

And since we cannot make up for our sins (contrary to popular belief), God is the only one who can do something about our sin and the resulting guilt.

And that is what he did at Christmas – he gave his only Son.

The rest of the story is that that Son not only came but that Son paid the penalty for our sin by dying on the cross.

2 Corinthians 5:21 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

David Horn captures the juxtaposition of Christmas and the Cross with these words:

A two thousand-year-old child cries his heart out.

His ancient limbs writhing out from empty womb toward virgin tomb.

Clothed in long decayed and swaddled cloth made of robe –seamless
Stained by new birth’s blood.

Eternal humanity, born to die. (“Child” by David Horn in HIS magazine, p 16, Dec 78)

Only a perfect, sinless, God/man could pay for sin that was not his own.

He became a human being so that he could take our place.

He remained God so that his payment was sufficient to pay for the sins of all his people.

And what he offers is forgiveness!

He doesn’t offer excuses.

He doesn't offer a lower standard so we can try to convince ourselves we aren't actually guilty.
He offers forgiveness!

He says in essence, "I know you are guilty, I know you deserve to pay for what you did, but instead I paid for what you did, your guilt is removed, I forgive you.

And God will now treat you, and call on others to treat you, as if you had never sinned against him or them.

If Jesus is not God, if Christmas is myth, then all of this is pointless. But if he is who he claims to be in the Bible, if Christmas is about God coming to earth, then I must be forgiven for my sin or I will perish.

And God said forgiveness comes **not** through proudly thinking we can earn it, but only through accepting it as a free gift based on what Jesus did in coming and dying for us.

Have you accepted his forgiveness?

Christmas, God coming to earth, has another awesome implication:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Not only is forgiveness granted through Jesus but also through Jesus we are loved.

When God forgives us it is not as though he sends a pardon through the mail or stamps a heavenly document somewhere with "paid in full" – he comes to us individually and commits to a relationship with us.

Too often we think of "eternal life" as simply living forever.

But unless something radically changed simply living forever would be more like hell than heaven.

When the Bible speaks of “eternal life” it means far more than just how long we will exist.

Jesus said it this way, “This is eternal life, that they (you and I) may **know** the only true God and Jesus Christ whom God sent.”

To have “eternal life” is to know God, to know his presence, to bask in his glory, to experience his love, to live in his acceptance and generosity.

Of all the ways that the Bible pictures “perishing” the most terrifying is aloneness – forever alone.

And the most satisfying picture of life is to truly belong – to be fully known, wholly accepted and completely loved.

The following story is rather poignant but don’t miss the point!

Thirteen years ago, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics.

They were free to base their teachings on biblical principles.

They were invited to teach in prisons, businesses, fire and police departments **and** in a large orphanage.

About 100 boy and girls, who had been abandoned, lived in that state-run institution.

In their own words the Americans told what happened.

It was nearing the holiday season, time for the orphans to hear for their first time the story of Christmas.

We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem.

Finding no room at the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and even the orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened.

Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word.

Completing the story, we gave each child three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger.

Each child was also given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins we had brought with us.

No colored paper was available in the city.

Following instructions, the children tore the yellow paper and carefully laid their “straw” in the manger.

Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn out nightgown were used for the baby’s blanket.

And a doll-like “baby” was cut from tan felt we had brought from the States.

The orphans were busy assembling their mangers as we walked among them to see if any needed help.

All went as usual until I got to one table where little Misha sat.

He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project.

As I looked at the little boy’s manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at the completed manger, the child began to repeat the Christmas story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately – until he came to the part where Mary placed the baby Jesus in the manger.

At that point Misha began to ad-lib.

He made up his own ending to the story as he said, “And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked if I had a place to stay.

I told him I have no momma or papa, so I don’t have any place to stay.

Then Jesus told me I could stay with him.

I told him I didn’t have any gift for him but maybe if I could keep him warm that would be my gift.

Jesus told me I didn’t need a gift but that if I kept him warm that would be the best gift ever.

So I got in the manger and then **Jesus looked at me and told me I could stay with him for always.**

As little Misha finished his story his eyes were filled with tears.
He had finally found someone who would never leave him but
would stay with him for always.

Loved! Belonging!

Have you accepted Jesus' love?

Two implications of Christmas:

Forgiven and loved!

It is what Christmas is all about.

Though the world too often obscures the real meaning of Christmas,
there is no mystery as to why we **celebrate**.

God has come to **us!**

I quoted it for you just four years ago, but Author John Shea has
captured so well that event and more particularly **what should be
our response to it all**, when he writes,

“She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them with slow solemnity
convinced every word was revelation.

She said they were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way from home without getting lost.

The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby
was inside the lady.

They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
but the Three Rich Men found them because a star lighted the roof.

Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep but not feed them.

Then the baby was borned.

And do you know who he was?

Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars.

The baby was God!

And she jumped in the air

whirled round, dove into the sofa
and buried her head under the cushion.
Which is the only proper response
to the Good News of the Incarnation.”

(John Shea in the Hour of the Unexpected in CT 12/6/99 p48)