

December 27, 2015
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

“Christmastide...”

Luke 2:21-34
Rev. Dr. Tom Blair



Luke 2:21-34

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Among all the news headlines that have been written over the past couple of weeks; and there have been a lot we've all been reading, one has really caught my eye- from the Pew Research Center. About nine in ten Americans, and nearly all Christians, say they celebrate Christmas. This is no surprise, but what might be unexpected is that a big majority (81%) of non-Christians in the U.S. also celebrate Christmas. This includes 87% of people with no religion and percentages in the mid 70's for Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. Roughly a third of U.S. Jews – many with non-Jewish spouses – said that they had a Christmas tree in their homes during the most recent holiday season. While the celebration is regarded as much of a cultural holiday as a religious holiday, I think there is something telling going on, if not in the numbers themselves, then at least in the acknowledgment of the celebration.

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Here's a little story that somehow fits into all of this- an account that a friend of mine, Lynn Turnage, (a Pastor in North Carolina) has shared.

"A few days before Christmas a year ago I was standing in a grocery store check-out line when the customer in front of me asked the clerk if she had any Christmas stamps. The conversation went like so:

Customer: "Do you have Christmas stamps?"

Clerk: "No. We just have Liberty Bell and some lady holding a baby."

Customer: "Can I see them? ... That's Mary holding Jesus. I'll take those."

Clerk: "How did they get a picture of them?"

Customer looks back at me to hide laughing, so I chime in, "I bet it's someone's interpretation of what they may have looked like."

Clerk: "Maybe. 'Cause I don't think anyone took pictures back then."

The customer went on about her purchase and the customer behind me and I pretended to look at magazines in attempt to snuff our laughter.

As the clerk scanned my items she kept going back to "some lady holding a baby" and said she sold those stamps for weeks and never knew it was Mary and Jesus. I put on my best game face and attempted to converse with her. I even managed to say, with a straight face, "well, It could happen to anyone."

As I picked up my bags, I couldn't help but wish her "Merry Christmas" as I walked away. She responded, "Hey, you too!"

I love the authenticity of her words. Now I smile every time I receive a Christmas card with a “some lady holding a baby” stamp and am grateful that story is forever part of my memory.

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Something as universal as a mother holding an infant can surely be understood and embraced anywhere and everywhere. Just what it means, exactly, is what Christians acknowledge differently than others,... After thinking through all this a good deal, I’ve come to the conclusion that how we regard this blessed holiday should make us more inclusive, more accepting of others than we might otherwise think.

Somehow I’ve understood Christmas a little differently this year... It’s not just that I’ve noticed how many days out from the 25th Christmas songs on the radio are being played, and not just on the “Christmas Station” - which isn’t such a bad thing; we could all use more cheer than doom & gloom; and it’s not just the excellent quality of all of our worship services through Advent, either. It’s something more basic than that. It’s the realization that in spite of the fact that God is God and we are not, God has joined this human race, taken on flesh and blood, and lived among us.

What happens at Christmas, when you really pay attention, is that this celebration we put so much energy into declares that the God who created the heavens and the earth, the sky above and the earth beneath, and all the constellations and living creatures, including us; this mighty God knows us, loves us, and has experienced all that we have experienced, even including the experience of death itself. It is a love that we could not have expected. When love comes unexpected, unforeseen, it’s incarnation.

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A friend of mine from my Clergy Preaching study group has shared this story from a small Presbyterian church in Florida, about a woman she knew named Brenda. She was undergoing chemotherapy and she didn’t feel like going to church on Christmas Eve. Her hair had fallen out. Everywhere she went she wore a bandana. Every time she left her house she felt she was announcing to the world that she was not well. She didn’t want to go to church like that.

You know how church is, you’re supposed to be at your best, never let anybody see the broken pieces of your life, smile all the time, keep it wrapped up tight. This is in spite of the fact that we all know the body doesn’t always work right, things happen, our lives end up in little pieces, but we tell ourselves we can’t bring it to church, because everyone there is so perfect.

Brenda had some friends, rather pushy friends, who insisted, “It’s Christmas Eve and you are coming to church.” When she arrived she found ten, maybe fifteen women all wearing bandanas. Two of them, her closest friends, had shaved their heads to look like Brenda. It was a love that she could not have expected.

Love does that, finds a way of expressing itself even when you’re not looking for it and do not expect it.

Terry, another friend and pastor from the Jersey shore, tells a story he remembers about his in-laws a number of years ago. It’s something that happened at the time of the birth of his firstborn. Terry wrote this in a sermon he has shared...

A number of things happen when a new child comes into the world. You quit sleeping for a while. Your pantry includes food you would never eat. And you spend the next month saying, “You don’t have to do that!” At least that’s the way it was in our house.

When a baby is born, almost as if on the same train, the in-laws arrive. When my father-in-law visited, at least in those days, it was like having the guys from “This Old House” move in with you. He fixed everything. He just cruised the house with a screwdriver. At the end of the day he gave a report. “Well, fixed that shelf that was sagging, and you can open the window in the bathroom now. That leaky faucet was a breeze to fix... you probably could have done that, Terry.”

[He goes on] My mother-in-law wouldn’t sit down. She washed dishes, made curtains, cleaned the stove – right down to taking the knobs off and cleaning under there. “Let me hold the baby. Let me change the diaper. Let me do the wash.” She wouldn’t even sit down for dinner. She just did ‘touch and go’s’, grazing at the dinner table. She would sit for a minute, then say, “I’ll get that...” and she’s up again. The whole time I’m saying, “You don’t have to do that. No really we can dust the attic on your next visit. You don’t have to do that – you don’t have to do that.” I said it over and over again.

But I was wrong. They couldn’t help it. Even with a 12-step program, they couldn’t be broken of this. Love requires it. Loves does not always do the right thing; it does not always say the right thing, but it shows up.

Love shows up when no one else will. Love comes and brings flowers and sits by the bedside in the hospice, and sends email messages and writes cards, and calls friends and stays in touch. Love comes when the baby is born and fixes the window in the bathroom and bakes the meatloaf for dinner.

Love shows up because that’s what love does. It comes and stands by you and stands with you and won’t let you go through whatever it is you’re going through alone.

That’s what happened on that night in the birth of a savior. Love showed up, literally once... and for all, and took on human form and dwelt among us.

Across the sea in Bethlehem and here in this church in Baltimore today is remembered a historic and timeless truth that cannot be contradicted. That God showed up because we matter to God, God knows us through and through and loves us still and all.

Thousands of days ago, when the world was too preoccupied to notice, God showed up, because God couldn’t be anywhere else. That’s the way love is, when you are most in need of it, and often when you don’t even recognize it and least expect it, Love shows up.

Good news. Unto us has been born to us, and in the hearts of all who will trust that it is so, even those who do not recognize it at first, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Love showed up in human form, in Jesus.. and in and through us, God’s love will continue to arrive...

Amen.