

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Christmas +2-A; 5 January 2020
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 202001041506)

Christmas Celebrations

In nomine...

I. Beginning: Once upon a time...

Merry Christmas!

As a little child, I remember wishing that Christmas would never end. There were presents and yummy foods. Everybody was in a good mood and paying attention to me. We got to see grandparents and, bizarrely, we brought a living tree into the house to hang things on. Cheerful Christmas carols and other songs filled the air everywhere we went! There were endless cookies and fudge. For a young child, Christmas was heaven. I never wanted it to end! But in my experience, Christmas itself was only one day per year.

Last weekend, my family and I attended a “seventh night” service at a synagogue in Elmer: a celebration of the seventh and final night of Hannukah. A holiday that lasts seven full days: can you imagine?

It turns out, yes we can! Today is, in fact, the [11th] [12th and final] day of our big winter holiday, Christmas! I grew up never understanding that whole song about how “On the 12th day of Christmas my true love gave to me,” but now I do! Christmas in much of our culture and commerce is all about that day, but the Christmas that was handed down to us by the ancient church is actually a season, not a day!

What I’m saying is this: you have the church’s permission to leave your Christmas decorations up at *least* until tomorrow! What I’m saying is that Christmas doesn’t end on 26 December, or on the 27, 28, 29, or 30th. In fact, it doesn’t end until the 6th of January. And Christmas ends not by dumping us back in the dark, but with another holiday, another festival of light, another of the seven principle feasts of the church year. This new Feast and the season which follows is the Feast of Epiphany. But for today – it’s still Christmas!

Christmas is a lot of things to a lot of people. But in its essence, Christmas is the same as Epiphany, the same as Easter, the same as Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, All Saints, and Ascension. Christmas is one more telling of the fundamental story of the Bible: the story of God's love for you and me.

The point of telling us this story over and over, for showing it in so many different ways, is to invite us to adopt that story as true and relevant for our lives.

II. Middle: Tension: destabilizing

This is exactly where I run into trouble. From before we're even born, all of us are always learning all sorts of things. There's no question that our lives are shaped by the things we encounter, and many of those things we encounter are painful or destructive. So we develop blisters, calluses, and scabs. We become hardened and skeptical and maybe even cynical. In biblical language, our hearts have become hard and our necks stiff, unwilling to bend or bow. That is the human condition and it happens to all of us from the very beginning of our lives.

We celebrate the holidays of the church year, we tell each other story of the Gospel over and over and over, because that's what is needed to counter all the other stories going on in our lives. We live in an echo chamber of pain and negativity, conflict and competition. The story of the Gospel offers us an alternative – but it can be difficult to trust it enough to grasp onto it. So we gather as church, we pray to God, and we experiment with it in little ways, in small areas of our lives. To see if it's real, to see if it's trustworthy, to see if it is really different from all the other ways we have been let down and hurt and disappointed. We tell this different story as we seek the courage and the chutzpah to live a different story, a story that's not principally about pain and loss.

This is the message of all of our readings today. We hear in Jeremiah a ringing gladness and radiance that perfectly reflects the ideal of Christmas: God is caring for God's people and causing them to shine out over the earth with God's goodness. We hear in Ephesians Paul retelling yet again the story of God's love and then praying for his hearers:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart

enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe. (*Eph 1.17ff. NRSV*)

III. End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

The promises of Christmas, the light and life and sweetness of the holiday, are not meant as a teaser, but as a taste of the Kingdom of God into which we are invited to live every day of our lives! It is a Kingdom that has not yet come in its fullness: there is still room for sorrow and for pain, for turning away and for forgetting.

But the coming of God as a baby, living life as a human being and being murdered in one of the most painful ways imaginable, is intended as a reminder and a calling to you and me. It is God calling upon us not to forget, every day to remember that we are living in God's Kingdom. And when those other stories come around, Crucifixion stories, stories of darkness, death, and defeat, stories of sorrow, stumbling, and sterility, we are given as an antidote the stories of God, the stories of the church year: resurrection stories, stories of hope and healing, to draw us back to the ways of life.

Which stories play larger in your life? Which ones guide how you see the world and how you respond to it? Which stories make the most sense for you and serve as the lens through which you see and the model into which you fit all the data? Do you see principally through the hurt and pain you have experienced and which has scarred you? Or are you able to entrust those wounds to God and encounter the world through the promises of God?

When I was a child I wished that Christmas would never end. I wished that we could live in the season of Christmas joy, colorful lights, and good feelings all year long. The Good News is that Christmas is not a day, but a season. And Christmas is not just one season, but one of a whole multitude of seasons that all keep pointing us back to the source of goodness. The gift of God to us in every season, is to live year-round into the joy and confidence of the reign of God, knowing that God holds us in God's loving hands and that nothing, ever, can take that away.

Merry Christmas!

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