

“Christianity, 21”

3. What does Christmas tell us?

Text: Isaiah 9: 2, 6-7; John 1: 1-14

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

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As Mary and Joseph begin the long trek from the vine-clad hills of Nazareth to the sheep-dotted fields of Bethlehem, a sacred calling of the Christmas sort, we also continue on our own journey today. Theirs was a pilgrimage mandated by Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome, who had called for a census. Ours, still underway, was begun this past September as we set out to explore and discover a new spirit of Christian faith for the twenty-first century.

I want us to take another step as we linger with the greatest story ever told, the timeless birth narrative of a child in a manger, an event universally referred to as the mystery of the incarnation. Or, to lose the larger language and put it in plain English: I want us to wonder about the essence of Christmas this morning! What does Christmas have to tell and teach, and how in the world can the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem empower a living faith for us today?

Let's start this simply. One thing Christmas tells us is that God does not ever give up on the world! It's true: no matter how resistant or dull or defiant humankind seems to be God does not and will not leave either us or planet earth alone! And God is tenacious as can be about this: unfaltering, persistent, unwavering!

Dare to imagine this with me. Christmas reveals a God who is a very clever regifter! You know what I mean! Regifting is taking a present that we have received and giving it away to another person. Usually it's a gift that we don't like or can't use . . . a grapevine reindeer sculpture . . . or a pair of pink golfing socks . . . or a gizmo for deicing our windshield when we move to Florida! Though to be fair, a more kindly version of re-gifting can happen as we give again lovely and thoughtful gifts that we simply want another person to have.

But the regifting of God is far more profound and entirely different. It has to do with the primal spark of life that God sends our way over and over again – most often because we continue to miss it, or we need a reminder, or we don't get it, or we simply need another chance. It's driven by pure and holy love and God is insistently unyielding about it. God's regifting, giving again, is about the very heart of the universe trying to get through to us. And God chooses the most vulnerable and lovable of all human circumstances, the wonder of birth and the blessing of a baby, to startle our attention and to try once again.

The assurance of this comes clear as day as the book of Hebrews gives us this summary: “in many and various ways God spoke to our forebears by prophet, but in these latter days he has spoken to us by a Son.” And that Son, this treasure we name Jesus, is the most amazing regifting venture of all time!

But that's only the start of it. Because Christmas also tells us is that God wants to be in living relationship with every beating human heart. To use today's cyber-language, this Holy Regifter envisions the day when the larger God-story of the universe will be embedded in the deep tissue of our lives so that by mystery of love and spirit, we will finally be One.

I've learned my way into Facebook these recent months. In the Facebook world there is a phrase that appears once you have connected with another person. It will say, “Geordie Campbell and so-and-so are now friends.” Oddly, my sister and I connected and I received the confirmation that “Geordie Campbell and Penny Campbell Richard are now friends.” Mind you, she has been my sister for 58 years, but only now, finally, are we friends!

Well, in a parallel way and with equally confounding language, God wants to be on intimate terms with the human family! So by miracle of spirit and deep love God comes closer to us so that we might also come closer to God. The poetry of Saint John echoes the promise so steadily down the hallways of time: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.”

I suspect that this is where lots of people get lost at Christmas because that’s a pretty heady thought! But it is also the unique claim of Christianity – entirely different than any other philosophy or faith system: the belief that the Prime Mover of the Cosmos initiates an avenue of active living relationship with every human life.

Of course, the best way to be in relationship is to be close and available and present. And so Jesus is born: born to know earth and to live life; born to understand humanity in every way; born to teach and to heal and to find and to save.

Here’s where it comes closest yet! Christmas is God’s way of inviting each one of us – and I mean this quiet personally – to make the choice to open our hearts and make some room for the radical and urgent story of Jesus in our lives. Christmas is God’s way of saying: “Please, let me in!” and then, with a wink, “Oh, yes, and by the way, I am already here!”

One of you sent me a You-Tube holiday greeting. It features a man – mid-life, balding, blue jeans, brown tee-shirt – who finds a stethoscope along a city street. Curious, he picks it up and puts the ear-pieces in place. He finds that it is alive with music and that each thing he holds the scope to a different song comes back. It seems that everything has a song and a story!

He holds it to the cookie in his hand and it sings back a 60’s tune, “Sugar-pie-honey-bunch!” Then he holds it to a lamp-post and it intones, “Lean on me when you’re not strong.” He holds it to a stone along the curb and it sings, “I am a rock, I am an island.” He puts it to a traffic-light control at a crosswalk and it sings “Stop, in the name of love!” And then to a fire hydrant, “Who let the dogs out?” Then he pauses and hesitates wondering if he wants to hear what might come back if he puts it to his chest. He holds it close and hears in full splendor the hallelujah chorus! It ends with some words on the screen quoting the Apostle Paul: “The mystery is that Christ lives in you . . . and he is your best hope in sharing in God’s glory!”

And that’s just exactly right! God is present and well and near and alive and beats in my heart and your heart! God’s mystery and grace are the primal sounds of life pulsing at the very soul of the universe and in the cells of our bodies. And God wants in – into my heart and yours – for the healing and repair and salvation of the world.

So this is Christmas, and though this December Mystery is more than my words can adequately express Christmas tells us at least this much. God, the Founder and Inventor and Creator does not give up but keeps on giving, trying to get through! This Holy Friend wants to be in relationship with the human family. The only hitch is that you and I have to make the room, and open the door, and welcome the Presence in!

This is the great affirmation at the heart of our faith, and in no small part, the meaning of incarnation – in the Living Spirit of Jesus! Amen.

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