

“Traditions, Politics and Christmas Cookies – How Do We Fit All That Into Merry Christmas?”

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve: December 24, 2010

Pastor Tom Williams

Christmas is a magical season. At least in my experience it's magical. The magic is often limited to my closet but it's still magic. The magic is that beginning around Thanksgiving all my clothes begin to shrink. I don't know if you've ever experienced the magic of Christmas but that's been my experience.

Christmas is a hard time to preach and it's not just because it is such a major holiday for the church or that it's one of the times of year people who don't normally attend worship services show up. It's hard because if we're honest with ourselves it's really at least three celebrations or three levels of celebration which happens in worshipping communities such as Covenant. Christmas is a multi-level holiday which I often picture as a three legged stool like a milk stool.

First we have the birth narratives and tonight we've read the one from Luke. So often we read the birth narrative in Luke and may want to find there a simple story of the birth of Jesus as told by a narrator. But if we're honest we need recognize with John Dominic Crossan, probably the leading Jesus scholar of today, that what we have in the story is not history remembered but faith confessed. Read with the eyes of a believer in Jesus as Christ but also as one who seeks to confront honestly and with intellectual curiosity this text and our faith, we find there a story written with a purpose in mind or perhaps purposes in mind. Acknowledging that this story was told and retold and retold and then written down only after Jesus crucifixion and resurrection, written looking back is how the scholars say it, we need read it and seek to discover in it, again, not history but faith. And if we do it that way we will find some surprising stuff.

This is a story which is very political in nature and which contains some very strong challenges to the powers that be of the first and second century of the Common Era. It is also a story which turns upside down expectations and social niceties. And it reinforces the idea that God's presence is available to all without regard.

The story is set in and/or around the beginning of what we call the Common Era. It seeks to place itself within a historical context as it recounts a census which may or may not have taken place. While there were census implemented by Rome, such were, of course in and of themselves very political acts for the purpose wasn't to count people but to seek to discover where the wealth of conquered nations might be and to assure the Roman rulers that they had correctly placed their occupying forces. The people of the conquered lands hated these census and they often resulted in acts of rebellions by the occupied. Luke's narrative seeks to use this as a means to meet two of the needs of the early church and its congregants most if not all of whom had been raised in a Jewish culture. The census is used to show that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem and thus that he's part of the royal lineage of the culture. Both of them would have been known as prophetic proclamations among the early believers and Luke thus seeks to assure the reader/hearer that they had been fulfilled in his birth place and lineage.

And notice two other things about the story. First Luke centers his story on women. Only in Luke is there a song by the mother of Jesus (Mary's Magnificat) and only in Luke is there

recognition of pregnancy as a time when a child grows in the womb and the moment of quickening or first movement. Luke celebrates the role of women and does so in such a way as to make at least one Biblical scholar speculate that Luke may have been written by a woman. Second Luke celebrates and reveals the birth to the powerless and the outcaste represented by shepherds. These are lowly working folk who are little respected and less appreciated by the culture. They spend their lives guarding and herding others property, the sheep, and were often suspected of being thieves and cheats as an occasional sheep went missing when sold by them to another group. Luke doesn't simply reveal the birth to them but empowers them as they come together as a group and make a consensual decision to go see the newborn. Luke turns on its head the expectations that the messiah's birth would be known by the rich and the powerful first and only revealed to the downtrodden and the despised by these upper crust types. Luke uses the story to challenge the notion of the day that it was Caesar Augustus who was the world's savior and the one who came to bring peace to the earth through his military conquests.

The word savior is used only three times in the New Testament with it being found twice in Luke and once in John's gospel. Cesar was the savior and it was Cesar who brought the good news, the euangelion to the world. Luke offers a direct challenge to this in this story. It is Jesus who is the good news to the world and it's Jesus who is messiah and it is his birth which is announced not to rulers and the rich but to the oppressed and the downtrodden. And it is they to whom God's presence, God's messiah is revealed through this event.

If we simply celebrate Christmas from a perspective of Biblical interpretation and critical thinking we end up with a radical challenge to the easy, the expected, and the settled. But we also celebrate on at least two other levels so let's try another take on the story. Let's think about the role of the story in another mode or manner. Let's read it as an allegory, a simple story of the birth of a child whom we believe to be Jesus Christ. This reading sees the story as a symbol of God's radical or foundational commitment to humanity, to this reality as the Christ is truly human, born of a woman and involved thus totally in the life of humanity. This is the perspective of the pageant which the kids of this congregation put on for our first worship service. It is the replaying of the story as pageant and the learning of the story as family worship for all. It is a time for celebration of family and of generations joining in the struggle to understand and celebrate God's commitment to us. It is the embracing of traditions and memories and again not history.

And we don't denigrate that effort by speaking of it this way or of examining it. We lift it up as a means of making the word flesh and enabling all to join in its celebration. It is a step in understanding and enjoying our celebrations of Christmas and discovering in that celebration meaning, hope, joy. We recognize that traditions and memories are imperfect but enable us to embrace and pass on truths which build community, actions which connect us to our communities. It is not the traditions which challenge the meaning of the celebration but rather it is the traditions which enable us to share understandings passed on from prior generations. The use of pageantry and ritual give meaning and understanding a place in our celebration for all. It is a means of breaking down the hierarchy and bias that we build. And it's a way of assuring that this celebration has a place for all at its table.

Lastly, our celebration is a societal one. Look around beginning about Halloween these days and suddenly this religious feast, this theological celebration has gone viral and gone cultural. There is simply no way anyone will ever convince me there is a war on Christmas or that it's possible to have a simple Christmas in the USA of mall-dom. I attempted to stay away from the stores and ducked the malls but it is still impossible not to know that these are the centers of the cultural Christmas celebration but it isn't just confined to those spaces. It creeps into all aspects of our lives including our religious celebrations. We have an economy dependent upon it and it's injected intravenously into us when we're born. The horrible part of it is that it affects so many of us negatively as we stress out over meeting its unwritten and unknowable standards of gifting and socializing. It causes not simply joy and anticipation but depression and exhaustion. But, and I admit my own hatred of it while embracing its presence in my own lives, we cannot escape it or we will burn down our trees, toss out our lights, and end our relationships! As much as I see the negative effect on people with so many overspending, so many overstressing on things, there is also the positive aspect of drawing people together to join for at least a few hours as a community. There is the outpouring of gifts to those less fortunate and support for charities – all founded in the cultural ideal of gifting. Now this is a celebration where moderation and acceptance of the imperfect nature of humanity needs to be injected along with the realism that the gift we need give each other is acceptance and love and not another sweater!

Three levels, three perspectives on this holiday and we live, I hope, and celebrate, I pray, and revel in, I ask, all three. Faith calls us not out of but into the world and Christmas has become, maybe always was a cultural as well as a religious celebration. In recognizing and affirming that, we recognize and affirm that we are complex beings and that we also embrace God's involvement, commitment to us as complex beings who live as multi-dimensional beings in this world. Our actions are never simple; never have only one intention or meaning for we live on many different levels at any one moment. So be complex. Participate in all these levels. Examine them. Know the traditions. Consider the political implications. Eat the Christmas cookies. Bu do so with energy and intelligence and with a willingness to respond to God's call and God's presence which calls us to think critically about all aspects of our lives, our traditions, our politics, and most importantly our faith.

And so let me close with a wish to all of you.

Merry Christmas from me and my family to you and yours. AMEN.

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