

Christmas: Fact or Truth

Sermon given Christmas Eve 2007
Enslow Park Presbyterian Church

Before I begin, I wanted to say that I have envisioned my remarks this evening as a kind of audience, or congregation, participation kind of thing. Now, I do not mean that I am going to ask you to stand up and clap your hands or stomp your feet, or anything like that. But I am going to borrow on a lot of Christmas memories, some more distant growing up with my parents and siblings in Lexington, Kentucky, some more recent with my own family here in Huntington, West Virginia. And if you find yourself going to your own special places in Christmas memories, then that is good. That is the kind of participation I am talking about.

Let me start with a confession. Confession is not only good for the soul, but if you cannot confess here in church, where can you confess? I confess that I can get quite confused at Christmas time, and I find that it is because I let myself get caught up in what I might call the “facts” of Christmas. I admit that this starts mainly from being a scientist, more specifically a biologist. I have to say that I do not understand the biology of the virgin birth. Now, don’t worry. This is not going to be a ‘birds and bees’ lecture, so you do not need to cover your kids’ ears, although I do remember Rachel asking questions along those lines several years ago. Laura gave her the ‘Mom answer’ and she said, “Ohhh!” Then I gave her the ‘biology answer’ and she said, “Ughhh!” So, here is my question: where did the Y-chromosome come from? You have to have a Y-chromosome to have a baby boy. Where did the Holy Spirit get the Y-chromosome? I don’t know. Like I said, I am confused—I have questions, not answers. Here are some other questions. Why do the Gospels Mark and John not have the Christmas story in them? On the subject of Gospels, why does Matthew spend so much time listing the generations of men from Adam to Jesse and David and Solomon, eventually to Joseph, when we finally find that Joseph had nothing to do with it? Again, questions, not answers. And so, I get hung up on the facts. Well, this evening I want to shift my focus on the truth of Christmas, instead of getting caught on the facts.

Some of you might be wondering, “Wait a minute. Facts? Truth? Aren’t they the same thing?” Well, they might be in the dictionary, but in my mind they are quite different. Facts are things you can see, or measure, or record. Truth is the real meaning behind that which we experience in life. I have the misfortune to work in a building that has the most erroneous saying literally etched in stone—I am not sure if it is limestone or granite or marble, but these words are etched in it: “Science is Truth...” My friends, science is not truth. Science deals with the observable world, things that can be measured. When I am in my lab measuring the amount of nitrogen in soil or determining how high the plants grow, I am collecting new facts about the natural world. I experience truth in a very different way. When Ian or Rachel or Laura say “I love you” to me as we are going to bed at night, that is truth. Or when I am literally moved to tears by a particular passage of music, as just happened two weekends ago when I went to Lexington to see my mother sing in her final Handel’s *Messiah* after 35 years in the Lexington Singers, that is truth. And it cannot be measured. Science—truth? Not in my book, anyway. So, what I would like to do this evening is explore facets of what I call the undeniable truth of Christmas—the truth that lies behind all the symbols and images that we celebrate at this very special time of year.

The first truth of Christmas is the most difficult to discuss because it begins with the shadows of Christmas, sort of the dark side of Christmas. We have all experienced loss at some time in our lives, whether beloved friends or family members, and Christmas can sometimes be a source of sorrowful reminders of loss. I suggest that if we allow that to happen to us, then we are losing sight of the first truth of Christmas—the victory of light over darkness. But first, let me point out that Christmas has always been veiled in shadow, even going back to that first Christmas. Consider the symbolic nature of the gifts of the Magi: gold, representing Christ’s kingliness; frankincense, representing his deity, God in human form. Then there is myrrh. Myrrh is an actual preparation made from the resin of a species of plant. Now, I will not go into what the plant is, but it, as do a lot of plants, produces secondary compounds that are toxic to bacteria. So, it could have been used as a preservative. In this case, however, it is essentially an ancient form of embalming fluid, and it serves as a brutal reminder that this special baby will grow up to be murdered. The shadows have indeed been with us since the very first Christmas.

We read about the victory of light over darkness in both Old and New Testaments. Isaiah 9:2—The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has the light shined. John 1:4—In him (Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.

I would like to suggest that happiness and sadness are not opposites. Happiness and sadness are cut from the same cloth, knitted from the same yarn—they rest upon each other. They are two of the wonderfully complex set of emotions God gives us to experience our world. The opposite of happiness is not sadness; the opposite of happiness is despair and indifference. Happiness is emotion; the opposite of that is lack of emotion. We are called upon to be emotional people at Christmas. And if someone has touched your life in such a way that their passing causes you great sadness, then—difficult as it may seem—how they touched you is something to celebrate.

Let me use a personal example. Tomorrow will be the third Christmas I will have spent without my dad here on earth. Now, some of this has to do with my own personal theology, my view of how God works in the world. This varies quite a bit from person to person. Some think that God “took” their loved one, and from this much bitterness and anger and blame can arise. I have never looked at it that way. God did not take my dad; cancer did that just fine all by itself. But God gives me a clear and unambiguous choice this Christmas. He says, “Frank, you can focus on the three Christmases have not spent with your dad and allow that to bring you to your knees in despair. Or, you can focus on the 50 years of Christmases you did share with him, and celebrate all that this special man has meant to you and how much he is still with you in spirit.” Ian said it better than I ever could. He wrote an essay for school on “loss” and he wrote about the loss of his grandfather, who all the grandchildren called “Danda.” Ian said that the world, his world, Ian’s world, had not been the same since Danda died. However, he said that a part of Danda lived on in him. I cannot improve on that, and so I won’t even try, but that is the victory of light over darkness.

One last comment about this aspect of the truth of Christmas. I had my first image of sadness at Christmas when, many years ago, my mom said that the song “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” reminds her in part of how she used to cry when she first heard it as a teenager. You see, her brother—my Uncle Archie—was a corporal in a Special Forces unit that was part of the first wave to hit the Utah Beach during D-Day. He survived that, only to go on to an almost equally gruesome battle—the Battle of the Bulge. He survived that, too. In fact, I consider myself fortunate to have even known my uncle considering these experiences. Anyway, he kept a diary, a journal during these times. If his baby sister had known how reassuring his writing was, how comforted she would have been. Let me share part of one his entries. I will not read the entire entry, but he lamented the loss of friends, many of whom who were shot by Germans right next to him. He ends, though, in this way: “And tomorrow will become a long time ago, today will be cherished, the heart will feel its bruises and then heal—it always has.” The victory of light over darkness at Christmas. That is truth, and it cannot be measured.

The next image I would to share with you about Christmas is music. Now, some may wonder what music has to do with the Christmas story. There is no mention of it in scripture. My theory, though, is that the heavenly host must have been singing to be understood by the shepherds. Here is what we read in Luke (2:13): And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people.’ What do you call it when four people talk all at the same time? And the answer is not “the Gilliam family.” You have a mess, chaos. But when four people sing at the same time you have a quartet. So, something magical and mystical happens when you introduce the melodic line that confers greater clarity to the human ear. And so we sing at Christmas. I even counted the numbers of hymns in our hymnal. Those that extend from Advent to Epiphany, those that we would call carols, number almost 70, a number that far exceeds the sum total of all other hymns dedicated to all other special events of the church year, including Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. I consider myself a reasonably articulate kind of guy, but I cannot come close to expressing to you in words the emotions that I feel when listening to certain music.

I want to take this a step further and to do so I need to borrow the wisdom and insight of my brother, Bryan Gilliam, who is a world-renowned music scholar—he literally travels around the world giving talks about music. As part of his eulogy for our dad at his memorial service, Bryan equated music with the underpinnings of our faith. He did not use those exact words, but he began by reminding us that the Latin roots of the word ‘religion’ were ‘re’ and ‘ligare.’ *Ligare* means ‘to bind’ (other words with that root would be “ligament,”

which is connective tissue that binds bone to bone at a joint; also, if you are “obligated” to do something, you are bound to it). So, *religare* means to bind together. Bryan said, and I agree with him entirely, was that music has the power, more than any other art form, to bind people together. So, when we sing our carols tonight, we are not only offering up our joy and glory to God, binding us to him, but we are also binding ourselves together. Powerful stuff, indeed! And it gets better. Not only are we binding ourselves together in the here and now, we are also binding ourselves to those who have gone on before us. Laura is particularly fond of Christmas music from the Renaissance. And we are about to sing *Es Ist Ein Ros' Entsprungen*, written by Michael Praetorius, a Renaissance composer. Of course, we will sing it in English as *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*. But German or English, when we sing this, we bind ourselves to those who first sang this carol. The binding power of music at Christmas—that is truth, and it cannot be measured.

The final image I would like to share regards the very image of the crèche. What do you see when you look at it? I see a family. Of course, the most obvious family is the Holy Family, with Mother Mary, Father Joseph, and the Baby Jesus appropriately at the center. But I would like to take a broader perspective and say that what I see is God's family. First of all, you don't have to have a baby to have a family—all you have to have is love. When Rachel was born, a lot of well-meaning folks would come up and say, “So, now you are a family,” or “So, now you have a family.” I would always politely say, “thank you,” but what I always thought was that Laura and I became a family the moment we pledged our undying love to each other, ‘til death do us part. Indeed, I see in the crèche a portrait of God's family with all of its diversity—an uneducated, hard-working shepherd; well-educated, wealthy, powerful Magi; devout Jews. To describe God's family, I like to use the imagery of a pearl necklace. Each of us is a pearl—of varying size, shape, color—and we are all connected by the single infinite strand of God's love.

So, Christmas is indeed a family affair, no matter what kind of family you are talking about. This is where our traditions come from. You know, I once thought that Laura and I were creating the Christmas traditions and memories for Rachel and Ian, but I was wrong. Rachel and Ian are creating their own traditions, along with Christmas memories that will stay with them their whole lives. And Christmas is something we celebrate every year. As much as we *want* to celebrate Christmas, I think that, more than want to, we *need* to celebrate Christmas, as something that feeds and sustains our faith. Just as we need to eat everyday to feed our bodies, we need Christmas to feed our faith.

Let me close by making one more point about the importance of family at Christmas. To do so I will be reinterpreting the end of what might be the favorite Christmas movie for the Gilliam family—*It's a Wonderful Life*. For those of you who may not have seen this movie, I need to issue a spoiler alert, because I will follow a brief synopsis with literally the end of the movie. So here is the story in brief: George Bailey is an incredibly nice guy, constantly subjugating his own wants and needs for those of family and friends and his home town of Bedford Falls. He grows up to be the head of the Bailey Building and Loan when he finds himself owing \$8,000. In desperation he finds a life insurance policy worth \$15,000, but having only \$500 in equity. He seeks the aid of Mr. Potter, the meanest, richest, most powerful man in town. When Mr. Potter hears of George's predicament and sees the insurance policy, he utters the classic line, “Well, George. You're worth more dead than alive,” inspiring George Bailey to seek the bottom of the icy Bedford River as solution to his problem. That is when Clarence the angel appears and decides that the best way to convince George to want to live is to show him what a wonderful life he had helping people and doing so by showing George what Bedford Falls would be like without him ever having been born. Bedford Falls is indeed a horrid place without all of the essential contributions George Bailey made, and we are led to believe that this image of what a good guy he has been—what a wonderful life he has had—convinces him to live again. I suggest something else, because George never really gets Clarence's point, certainly not the way we do in watching. That does not really happen until the very end when George sees his wife, Mary, coming out of the library. Because he has not been born, she does not recognize him, and George is horrified at this. What makes George want to live again is not a sudden awareness of what a good guy he has been. No, what brings George Bailey to his knees at the end is the realization that he is cut off from his family. It is as if he is saying: God, give me my \$8,000 debt, give me my jail time, give me my police record and the embarrassment among my friends, but *just give me my family*. Because if I have my family, I can put up with all that other stuff. The connecting power of God's love at Christmas. That is truth, and it cannot be measured. Amen.