



“What Words Would You Use?”

Scripture – John 1:1-14

Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, December 31, 2017

Simply mention Christmas and my mind erupts with a plethora of images. I picture a decorated Christmas tree with presents tucked underneath it and I also see grandchildren ripping through beautifully wrapped presents in less than three seconds flat. Then, the room is filled with squeals of “Just what I wanted! How did you know?” (Well, you only mentioned your wish fifty times!)

When I think about Christmas, I picture in my mind hundreds of candles glowing in our darkened sanctuary, their small flames piercing the darkness. When you think about Christmas, what scenes emerge in your mind?

What about listening to Handel’s Messiah or singing your favorite Christmas hymns? In my mind, I see miniature shepherds in bathrobes and beautiful little angels with homemade halos a bit off-kilter gathered around the Christ child wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. Some of us may envision a silhouette of three lone figures sitting atop camels following a star. I see more than 100 Christmas boxes lining Community Hall stuffed with food and presents for people we will never meet.

For us, the point of Christmas is the birth of Jesus, and the implications of that birth for our world. But for millions, there is no sacred connection. For them, Christmas is a secular holiday focused entirely on parties, Santa Claus, expensive gifts, and songs about flying reindeer.

If someone who knows Christmas merely as a secular celebration, asked you, a Christian, to share a word or two that captures something of the spirit of Christmas, what word would you say?

Hope: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” And: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh.”

Peace: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” And when the angels appeared to the shepherds, they proclaimed: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will toward all.”

Joy: “Those who go out weeping...shall come home with shouts of joy.” (Psalm 126)

And Handel’s Messiah based on the prophet Zechariah: “Rejoice! Rejoice greatly!”

Do not be afraid: “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” “Mary, do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God.” “Shepherds, ‘Do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.’”

God with us: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.”

Salvation: Mary will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Light overcoming darkness: The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Faith: The Christmas story deepens our faith in a loving God who seeks the best for the world.

Love: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”

Out of gratitude for God’s gift of Jesus and for God’s gifts of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, and for God’s promise to be with us and for the light shining in the darkness, we express our gratitude to God by loving our neighbor. When Jesus becomes an adult, his core message is: “Love God with your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

In his book *Who Cares?*, David Schwartz describes an incident where a woman was on the edge of a bridge over the Susquehanna River and preparing to jump. On the road behind her, cars were zooming past, people heading home. One man, however, spotted her from his nearby office window. As he realized what was about to happen, he grabbed his phone and dialed 9-1-1. As the call was going through, we wondered: Could the police or a crisis intervention team reach her in time?

As the person on the end of the line answered, and the man in the office was describing what was happening, he saw a city bus crossing the bridge beginning to slow down in the right lane. As the bus neared the woman, the door opened, and in one continuous motion, the driver stopped, leaned out of the open door, grabbed the woman’s arm and pulled her into the bus.

As the man in the office processed what happened, he thought to himself: “That bus driver did not try to flag down a police officer or dial 9-1-1. He simply grabbed the woman and saved her.” And he thought to himself: “I stood in my office and called the authorities to take care of it. Why didn’t I just dash across the street and do what the bus driver did?”

In a world that has become more impersonal, we have come to rely on systems and institutions to perform deeds which used to happen spontaneously, informally, and personally. Have we lost the art of personally caring for each other?¹

Sharing God’s love is usually very specific – one human being reaching out to another who needs help; who needs someone who cares; who needs love.

We stand at the end of one year and the beginning of the next. I pray that each of us will be alert to the opportunities that arise to share God’s love. And when we do, we will leap into action.

NOTES

1. Charles E. Moore, “Next Door,” *Called to Community*, (Walden, New York: Plough Publishing House, 2016), p. 292.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, as we prepare to take our first steps into a new year, we pause to remember the past 12 months. We are grateful for special moments we savored with loved ones. We give thanks for birthdays and anniversaries we celebrated and holidays we enjoyed. We are grateful for fears we overcame and mountains we conquered. We breathe a sigh of relief over tests we passed and misfortunes we dodged. We also recall struggles we faced and people we lost; new people we met and friendships we formed. We are mindful of fresh insights we gained and opportunities we embraced.

Loving God, as we look back on 2017, we also ask forgiveness for the times we fell short. Forgive us for the times we encountered a need but turned away; for the times we lost our temper and spoke unkind words; for the times we refused to compromise and insisted on getting our own way; for the times we judged too harshly and failed to see the whole person; for the times we gossiped and spewed venom that spread, for the times we witnessed injustice but were too fearful to speak, for the times we clung to what was familiar when you urged us to take a risk.

Everlasting Lord, in the coming year, we pray that we will do a better job of responding in a Christ-like fashion. Grant us the willpower to respond with compassion to the needs we will encounter, with strength to hold our tongue rather than speaking hateful words, and with determination to slam on our mental brakes before rushing to criticize. Make us discontent with problems we can work to improve, and inspire in us the courage to fight for a just cause.

Mighty God, the past year witnessed too much violence, discrimination, addiction, greed, mean-spiritedness, dishonesty, and self-centeredness. Surely one of the foremost ways we can combat such evil is to encourage people to develop a spiritual life that strives to recognize each person as your precious child and our own brother or sister.

God of past, present and future, in the coming year we will encounter both hazards and opportunities. We will face temptations and discover roads to new adventures. We pray that we will follow the way of Jesus – the way of love and peace, so that we may experience the joy and hope of the life of faith. (Followed by the Lord's Prayer).