

The Wows and Woes of Christmas

Sermon text: Luke 2:22-35, Matthew 2:1-18, Galatians 2:20a

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A few years ago, when Lou Holtz was at the University of Arkansas, he was taking his team to play a bowl game in Tempe, Arizona. The game was to be played on Christmas day. He was asked how he felt about playing a game on Christmas, rather than being with his family. The coach answered candidly: "I would rather be in Tempe. After all, once you have been to church, had Christmas dinner, and opened the presents, there is nothing left". That was jarring, especially coming from a devout Catholic who gave the TV pep talk "Catholics come home".

I've thought about that and asked myself, "What do I do with Christmas Day after it is over? Do I dwell on it well beyond the 25th, or do I pack it away for another year and wait another 12 months to unbundle it? How often in my regular reading do I read and the full Christmas story, and ask myself "what do I take from it going into the new year moving ahead?"

I asked someone –not from this church- the other day that question? Do you often read the Christmas stories? And he said "not really". "Why"? And he answered, I have heard these stores from childhood and I don't think there is anything I don't know about them."

That might not be untypical. Most of us can say that we know a lot about these stories, so there is nothing else to think about that we haven't already thought. It's kind of like the eminent chemistry professor and his chauffeur who had driven the professor to dozens of speaking engagements. He'd heard the same canned speech scores of times. He said on the way to another engagement, "Professor, I believe I could give your speech myself; I've heard it so often." The professor said, "I'll bet you \$50 you can't." "You're on," said the chauffeur. He stopped the car and the two exchanged attire. They came to the banquet and the chauffeur dressed in a tuxedo, sat at the head of the table and was introduced. He stood up and gave the speech exactly as he had heard it so many times before. There was a standing ovation when he was finished. The emcee got up and said, "You know, we are so fortunate to have such a fine resource with us tonight, and since we have a little extra time, let's explore what he is saying with

some questions and answers.” The first question was asked and the chauffeur stood there dumbfounded, clearing his throat in nervousness. Finally with a flash of insight he said, “You know, that’s just about the dumbest question I have ever heard. In fact it is so dumb I’m even going to ask my chauffeur to answer that question.”

Most of us do know these familiar Christmas stories, they end, and what feelings they normally have stirred in us now and probably will the next year. If these stories mean the same thing to us next year with the same insights and takeaways, then once a year is probably enough.

But I don’t believe the scripture writers intended that the Christmas stories they wrote be a singular set of events rather than an unfolding process of insight and application to our lives. My Father, also a pastor, memorized the entire story, including the prophecies, and quoted it at least twice a month to us in family worship. At the end, he would often say, ‘don’t get locked in to the same version and interpretation’. There is always something new about these stories for me; they are alive and I learn new things all the time. I sometimes wished he would have offered a little more variety, but I never forgot his message: “Read them often. These stories are intended to instruct you in fresh new ways as you face different situations throughout the year”. And he was right; as I read them (perhaps not as often), these Christmas stories would change into a kaleidoscope of new insights and applications for my life.

My Father was correct. There is SO much to probe about these stories that can inform and change us throughout the year, If we don’t treat them as a singularly predictable events to reflect on once a year. To put these rich gems on hold until next Christmas robs believers of the nourishment and rootedness which God intended for them to produce in our lives.

And this includes all the stories – inspiring and sobering. If we focus only on a couple that are especially meaningful to us, we miss some powerful truths for our spiritual lives. All of the Christmas stories are very relevant to our following in the footsteps of Jesus. All are important to learn from, pay attention and respond to.

We started our reading with what some commentators call the “beautiful story”: Luke’s version. Oh we love it; it’s an inspiring, feel good story, even though hidden in the cracks of its plot, there are difficulties, such as Mary becoming pregnant under strange circumstances, and becoming possibly a subject of derision. A dangerous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the latter stages of her

pregnancy. No room for them in the inn, a manger for the delivery, as a couple, alone in the world. A few difficulties.

But that is overshadowed by the beauty of the story. The light of Christ in the darkness. A love story set to angelic music. Beautiful stars that move; adoring shepherds and an overjoyed priest who had been waiting for years for the promised One. Mary magnifying the lord, Ah, a beautiful side of Christmas. We love this version. It continues to provide the meaning for newborn Christ we most desire. We want it to be the never ending core of our personal Christmas celebration.

But there is the other story. Matthew's version. A sadder, darker and harsher tale. One filled with depression, suspicion, hatred, betrayal, murder and pain in the hearts of many. A paranoid disturbed king that orders the slaughter of the baby boys of Bethlehem. Probably about 20 boys under the age of 2 -- given the size of that town then. 20 innocent baby boys. rounded up by Herod's soldiers and slaughtered on the spot.

It takes a miracle for Joseph and Mary to escape from danger. There are soldiers chasing the Christ child to kill him. Everywhere there is hatred and betrayal, murder and weeping in the homes. The doors are locked shut and families hide in the basements, mothers hold their dead babies in their arms, murdered by order of the king. Rachel weeping. So much pain in the hearts of many in this Christmas story. Except for the magi's start, this story doesn't seem like a call for celebration.

But this is as much a part of the Christmas story as that recorded in Luke. It's an important view of the pain that can surround the Christmas celebration. The weeping is a reflection of what many people feel around this time. For these folks, Christmas is such a difficult time. One of my close friends hates this time of year. His wife ran off with another man shortly before Christmas several years ago. He tells me, "When I see other families having a good time", I think only of the pain that tore through me when the divorce was filed on December 23.

A few nights ago, we participated in the Longest Night. It was meaningful, but painful to so many attending that had lost a spouse this year and were alone for the first time. I could go on and on about some of the tragic and sad events of friends and parishioners around the Holidays.

For many it is not a season to be jolly. Previous losses, continuing grieving pressure, thoughts of failure, mistakes made. Feelings of loneliness, and so on. Raising painful memories and many can't wait until it is over. For some people, Christmas is hard and depressing. With more melancholy than jolly.

They don't want to hear for the 100th time, "I'll Be Home for Christmas". We want to avoid this part of the Christmas story. We want to stay out of Matthew and move back to Luke.

But we know that we can't avoid all pain. Matthew's stories are also a part of the Christmas story too. We all know both the joys and woes of Christmas. And even those of us who are mostly happy at Christmas can probably relate to some of the Matthew story.

It is important to read both versions regularly often and ask "how do each of them speak to us...to where we are in our life and relationship to the Christ, speak to both our joys and woes? How can we allow God to work through us, in the midst of joyfulness and pain? God wants to make all of these stories an alive ongoing process in which we allow Him to change my life, my perspective, priorities, and my life circumstances. BUT how?

The answer is Luke 2:19. I love that verse, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19)

As we regularly read these Christmas stories, we are put in a position to make them fresh in your heart by treasuring and pondering them in a new way. Wasn't it CS Lewis who said, "We don't need to be told new ideas so much as to be refreshed by the old truths".

How do we "treasure" them? The word "treasure" has the idea of counting things up so that nothing of value is forgotten or lost.

The word "pondered" goes deeper than "questioning or wondering." It means to take the events of the Story, as you have laid them out in your memory and then to go beneath the surface to try to understand what it all means, why it happened the way it did, and what does it mean for me?

Pondering is not easy work, which is why many of us never get around to it. But what better time than now to ponder what God wants to teach you from these stories. How, over the last few months, God has used them to work in your life and the world around you. The process of pondering begins with reading the stories several times, then asking God to show you the things he wants you to learn from these stories

One thing that might help is to make a list of things that have happened in your life in 2013 that these stories may be speaking to. Events that happened to you personally or happened to others that had a major impact on you. Those things can be good or bad, victories or defeats.

As you look at these things through the lens of these stories, ask God to show you what patterns are at work. What is He teaching us through these stories? What lessons seem to come up again and again? What are these stories telling you about yourself? What are they telling you about God's nature and priorities? What insight from the story that might provide a clue to where he might be leading you in the months and year to come. Who should I pay attention to and love more?

Then we can begin to understand what the deeper value of our experience with our Lord's birth is. What Christmas is doing to change our perspective? Our attitudes? How can Christmas not be another item in the calendar, but a new life, perspective and attitude resulting from these encounters with the Christ stories? If we do this throughout the year, we won't go home from Christmas services with our same thoughts and ways. Even those who have said, "Bah Humbug. I survived another Christmas".

We'll start to see new truths, and lives changed and transformed so that others will be able to recognize that something significant has happened. We will have a greater understanding of and interest in servant, and how we take the birth message and live it out. When we are tempted to feel depressed and out of control, the adoring parent and shepherds will call us to open our hearts to the living Jesus. When we feel left behind and alone to cope with life, the host of angels will tell us that we are not alone and we can, in Him, be overcomers. We will learn to put our trust in the God who delivered the Baby safely to Egypt. Rather than dreading Christmas each year, the stories will increase our understanding of what Christmas is and how it is changing you. Instead of saying "I can't wait until the season is over so I can go back to business as usual", I will begin to see the light of the Christ child working through me. This is what can happen when the Story continues all year long

Christmas as a celebration eventually ends for all of us. We know that. We will take down the tree, use or return gifts, go back to school. But the real question is, will we be changed by Christmas? Or will it be business as usually in 2014. For the shepherds and magi life would never be the same. Yes, the work was the same but they were different. They went back with new zeal, new joy, and new love for God in their hearts.

People sometimes wish they could keep the Christmas spirit all year long. They speak of it as if the "magic" of comes only once a year, but it depends on what "magic" they are talking about. If you mean the tree and gifts and food that indeed comes only once a year. But the greater truth of Christmas is that our hearts can be warmed all year long. Would you like Christmas to last all year long? .

Then don't park this glorious day for a year. Let the stories speak to us every day of the year, and learn from them every day and circumstance of our life. For those who are charmed by the story, let the Christ child teach you how to empathize with those who have another experience and learn from it. Allow the already bright light of that event to change you each day. Make the Christmas story not just a sentimental memory, but one that continues to speak to your heart and inform you as you walk with Him.

To those for Christmas surfaces a troublesome time in their lives ask the Lord to separate your version from that which is real, that in the midst of disappointments and letdowns, learn from Him to embrace the power in this story of fending off what discourages and depresses you, to get a new perspective on life, new relationships, new insights. Ask for His armor to shield and empower you. Recapture that feeling that everyday day of the year, we claim the unadulterated story of God with us, in us, as our starting point and guide each day.

Look beyond both the joys and sorrows of your day and see God at work victoriously in our lives throughout each day of the year. We can get to the place where we will be able to say "Merry Christmas" often and sincerely.

Most of us get a kick out of the The "...who saved Christmas" movies. The MAN Who Saved Christmas," "The DOG Who Saved Christmas," and its sequel, "The DOG who saved Christmas VACATION," "The LITTLE GIRL who saved Christmas," "The TOY who saved Christmas," (that's the Veggie Tales version), "The GOBLIN who saved Christmas," (Okayyyy??), and even, "The MUSLIM CABBIE" who saved Christmas for a well-meaning couple.

But know that the way to save Christmas is for its stories to be continually on our heart, in our thoughts, our actions – and not confined to the end of the year. The wonder of Christmas is God coming and here right now. It's us saying "merry Christmas" all year around, based on what God is continually doing in our lives. I know people would think you're either crazy or a Presbyterian minister if you went around all year saying, "Merry Christmas!" At Festivals: "Merry Christmas!" At the beach in summer, "Merry Christmas!" At the end of the Bucs football season, yes, you would be odd, but you'd be right. If the stories live on and teach us, Christmas can be any old day. And in fact, it is. The gift of God's presence coming again... and again... and again.

As the Poet said:

*“But the star is before you. Follow it still.
The wonder of Christmas, of God coming here,
Cannot be confined to the end of the year,
For the gift of the presence comes again...and again”.*