

Therefore...

Menno Mennonite Church
December 26, 2021
Advent 5/Christmas 1

Purpose: To connect the grace of Christmas and Immanuel with the life of Christ with us.

Message: We take on the characteristics of Christ because Christmas has been.

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17 [I will read]; Luke 2:41-52 [will recruit someone to read]

Synopsis: We put a lot of stock into Christmas. There is all the preparation, anticipation, and just out right work that goes into putting together the celebration. We layer on the appeals to our better angels, digging deeper to share what we have with those who have less. All of this is good and right.

But like the infamous chicken and the egg, there is a danger involved in the finer emotions of the season, especially now that the season is, basically, over. It is tempting to consider that we do what we do because it is, firstly, Christmas; that the cause that we undertake is because of the season of the year. We must remember that this is coincidental. We do what we do in love because God has done all things in love, birthing for us hope, love and peace in the form of Christ. This is something which we clothe ourselves with regardless the season, bearing witness to the kingdom of our full and final birth.

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Imagine being wrapped up in God's Love (GC Devotional 12/22)

For each of the four births Abbie and I experienced together, including our stillborn daughter Belle, everything else faded into the background for a precious and brief time. During those hours and days, it was unquestionably clear what mattered most. We had a vital role to play, but we were mostly witnesses to wonder.

It's been a hard year. It sounds like we are headed toward a difficult start to the next year.

My prayer is that we can all have some precious time this Christmas to be witnesses to wonder and to dwell in the clarity of what matters most. That might happen at a rowdy gathering of biological family or family-of-choice. It might happen in the quiet darkness of your own living room with the Christmas tree lights on. A favorite nativity scene may be what draws you in.

If this is a season defined mostly by absence, may you be met with Presence.

If this is a season of too much, may there be simple graces.

If the gap between the world as it is and the world as you long it to be seems especially large, may Mary's song, Jesus' birth, and the flames of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love be sources of wonder that transcend despair.

A blessed Christmas to you all

Colossians 3:12-17

Put on then,
as God's chosen ones,
holy and beloved,
compassionate hearts, kindness,
humility, meekness, and patience,
¹³ bearing with one another
and, if one has a complaint against another,
forgiving each other;
as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

¹⁴ And above all these put on love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
to which indeed you were called in one body.

And be thankful.

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,
singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed,
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him.

We all have our Christmas rituals. When the tree goes up, and when it goes down. The menu, the policy and procedures for gift opening, timing and all. Apparently, waiting until Christmas morning AFTER breakfast is some what wholly unreasonable, but we made it through all the same. We all have our lists, our procedures, our notions that, somehow make the season what it is either by way of nostalgia or simply routine. We even have our various wardrobes. The Christmas sweater, the legendary element of the holiday, has taken on a mythic status all its own. Once the incidental judgement of the sweaters of the season, now there is a whole genre of the intentionally tacky and tactless out there to be had straight away to jump right into the notion and sentiment of the season. I am guessing the none of this is any of our particular styles, and much joy if it is. We see it all the same, and know it ourselves, perhaps with the Tree pin, the tinkle of bell around the house, or the little touches that we put on for just a time as this.

We all have our ways of expressing the joy of the season, no matter the style or the class. It is always fascinating to see the way that the season brings out the joy in everyone just that much more (reindeer antlers for the car—who knew) and the effort that people put into the season because that is what it is—the season of love and joy that makes the place light, our spirits brighter and our way that much more richer. But all of that will be packed away soon enough. Our decorations will be packed away as we take on a new year with its own sincerity and seriousness. We clothe ourselves and our houses to express the inner state of the Spirit—that of Joy to the world, and on earth, peace to all. As that goes away, we will don again the work-a-day ordinariness to of the way things are, the ordinary moments of the world. Our dress declares that which we are about, and having had our fun, it is time to get back to it soon enough.

We are almost as quick to pack away our Christmas stories as we are our Christmas Sweaters and the decorations to go with them. Our readings this week in the lectionary have already jumped from Mary away in the manger pondering all things in her heart to the pre-teen Jesus going about the rituals of ordinary piety, yet being shown as anything but ordinary. We can almost see him rolling his eyes at his earthly parents as he explains where he has been and what he must be doing. It seems that the angels have sung, the shepherds have adored, and now we are on to the next part of the story without much of backward glance. The one of advent has arrived and converted the cosmic hope of God's Salvation into one growing in stature and learning. Spare some oblique references elsewhere to the visitation of the scholars of the East

and a flight to Egypt, things are pretty well taken care of, and we can put this one to bed at least until it is time again to dust it off and hang the holy once more.

What's more we are tempted to do the same with our more important Christmas attire: the compassion, kindness, patience, empathy, forgiveness and the rest that are marks of Christmas. Many times we are moved to act beyond our ordinary ways and means simply because it is Christmas. And that is good to be sure. Why shouldn't we take on those qualities of the season to be part of the celebration all around us, and to extend the cheer of the time. It is the appropriate attire for the season, not unlike mittens when it is cold, and sunscreen when it is time to be working in the fields. We put on these attributes especially and consciously because they are appropriate and fashionable for what is going on around us.

All of which is not bad for a start // but that cannot be all that there is. If we don and doff these things as seasonal accessories, we miss the point of the whole exercise. We are not asked to wear the clothing of love and compassion in preparation for Christmas, or in display of our throaty participation in the holiday. Rather, we take on these interior designs exactly BECAUSE Christmas HAS come already, that love has already been encountered, that we have been embraced by God with us, by Immanuel, and as a result, we are a new people, a new body living the way of Christ. Because Christmas has come, and the one who would show us the way of God is with us, not just in a manger two thousand years ago, but in the here and now, we are a people embraced by the very hand of the creating God no matter what we might encounter along the way. It is because of Christmas, this ultimate embodiment of the glorious actions of God, that we are invited to respond by clothing ourselves with the very nature of God, not just as a celebratory decoration worn for a season, but as a foundational principal of life altered by the encountered way of love in Christ Jesus.

Christmas is about taking seriously the revelation of a new way of being and moving in the world, and to be reminded again that God with us is not some theological ideal of long ago and far away but is present to us and through us at all times. In a way, it is a re-baptizing of our lives and our world to recognize that which is beyond us, and yet comes to lead us forward in the day to day whether in the special moments of soft lighting and deep memories, or the ordinary sharpness of just the way things are.

In seminary, there is a classic question without, really, a right answer. The question asks where we place our emphasis on the saving work of Christ: in the crucifixion or the resurrection.

This isn't to say one is better than or operates independently of the other, but there is a bit of question of orientation out of which a number of theological ideas bloom and grow. It's a little bit like the theological question of the chicken and egg: a serious question to be sure, but one that is not always of the most relevance.

Over the years, I have come to add a third point to this question—that of the incarnation. As crucial as the saving work of dying on the cross is, and how indispensable the ultimate and full vindication of the resurrection, creating all things new has to be, I think we sometimes miss some of the true heavy lifting of the nativity. For it is here that we celebrate the simple fact that God came in human flesh. That YHWH God of covenant faithfulness, a covenant known more in its brokenness than its success, comes to be with God people. Not just God's people Israel, but God's people—all people of God's good creation. That God comes and rests incarnate, knowing full well the rest of the story that was going to be, knowing the rejection, misunderstanding, isolation, conflict and all the rest, cannot be underestimated in its significance. Because it tells us so much about the nature of God in itself. God does not remain satisfied to merely stand by and count so many failures as on a tally board, or to wait until humanity gets its act together to come and be with the reality of the world. God comes and inaugurates the story of salvation and the reality of the kingdom while, as the creeds would have it, we were still lost; while we were still sinners. Christmas is the beginning of it all where God enters in yet again to the world as it is, and begins to create the world as it, ultimately, will be. You cannot proceed onward from the nativity without the fundamental wonder known in contemplating the notion of God with us, and the implications that come out from this. As I have walked through the years, this moment of taking on flesh has increased in importance for me when considering the story of God and God's people.

We wear what we wear for a whole lot of reasons. We find what is right and appropriate for the task at hand and the conditions of the day. We also consider what we are trying to say and to whom we are trying to say it, representing a statement of our confidence and competence. In the same way, we clothe ourselves spiritually for the task that we have inherited ourselves from the one we follow: making manifest the presence of the Kingdom in this place and in this time. These are not garments to be shrugged of or placed however sacredly away until next required. These are the vocational requirements of being the little Christs we are called to be. It is a putting on of Christ that we undertake in baptism, declaring our allegiance publicly for all to see and

take note of. The love made known in God with us, is made known, in time, with us and to us as God continues coming into the world as it is for what it is. That is what we celebrate in these days, and that is what we must live everyday no matter the décor. We can imagine the embrace of the robes of God, clothing us beyond our will or our intent, but with the fundamental grace of a God who comes to be worn in the world and known to the world. We can imagine the warmth of the embrace even as we know the sometimes daunting demands of living to that call.

Sisters and Brothers, may we clothe ourselves with the compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the light has come, and we and the world are changed. Thanks be to God. Amen.