



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

December 17, 2017

Hold Fast
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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December 19, 2017

Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:20).

When I'm out and about this time of year, in stores or restaurants, or just listening to popular radio, I'm struck by how little of the Christmas music has anything to do with Christ, or why he came into this world. Have you noticed that too?

I was just in Mars this weekend to do a wedding, and my son and daughter-in-law live in a satellite of Mars, so of course I can't help thinking about interplanetary perspectives these days. I found myself wondering, if a visitor from another planet came to learn about the customs of earthlings, and landed in Pittsburgh, what do you suppose that visitor would deduce about the meaning of Christmas, just by walking around the streets and stores, and listening to the music, and watching television commercials? Imagine for a moment that you're ET, and see what theories of Christmas you come up with.

So far, I've come up with the theory that what earthlings call Christmas is largely about snow; and, oddly enough, chestnuts, which no one actually eats; and sleigh bells, though nobody rides around in sleighs, except some guy in a red suit who is always laughing; and families getting together, which is a good thing; and above all, buying and selling and giving each other enormous amounts of stuff. In some places, there are also images of a little baby, with a few grownups and sometimes animals standing around, though it's not at all clear what the baby has to do with any of the other signs of the season.

It might be interesting to imagine what an alien anthropologist would make of Christmas, if all he – or she, or it – had to go on was the evidence of how people celebrate the holiday. I was thinking about that the other day, and it occurred to me that Jesus himself is a kind of extraterrestrial, insofar as he comes from heaven, and the kingdom of heaven is not an entirely earthly realm. And that, of course, leads to a far more interesting and important question: What does Jesus think of the way we celebrate Christmas?

As a matter of fact, if Jesus really is the Word of God, as John’s gospel says, then the Bible tells us quite a lot about what God would have us make of Christmas.

It starts with the prophets who, in retrospect, look for all the world as if they foretold his coming. Prophets in the Bible are not just people who predict the future, of course. They tell what it means, and why it matters, and what God is up to, and what God expects from us as a result.

So the prophet Isaiah says that when God’s anointed one comes (which is what the word “Messiah” means), he will bring good news to the oppressed, and bind up the brokenhearted; he will proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. “For I the Lord love justice,” God says through the prophet. The coming of the Messiah, then, is not only about healing broken hearts but also about restoring relationships among all people everywhere – especially those who are not doing so well.

The Old Testament prophets are clear about that, and so are the birth announcements God sends out about baby Jesus. Mary, when she learns that she’s about to become his mother, says, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” She’s amazed that God has

regarded anyone as lowly as herself – not quite seeing what a beautiful thing humility is in the sight of God. But Mary sees that her baby is coming to care for the poor and downtrodden of this world. “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly,” she says; “he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Mary’s Magnificat, as we call it now, not only echoes the ancient prophets but anticipates what Jesus himself will say when he grows up and sets out to transform the world. Jesus will stand up in a synagogue and read those words from Isaiah about the Spirit of the Lord being upon him, bringing good news to the poor, and release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind (physically and spiritually), and letting the oppressed go free. Then he will sit down again and declare, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Which is to say, Christ comes not only to save individual souls, but to redeem and reconcile whole peoples with justice and righteousness. Jesus says the same thing near the end of his ministry, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, when he tells us that the criteria for who gets into heaven and who does not have to do with how we treat the hungry, the naked, the sick, the prisoners, and the strangers, and by implication, anyone else who is suffering and neglected in this life.

For people who are poor and struggling, the real meaning of Christmas is good news indeed. It means they are not forgotten. Even if worldly people take no notice and pass them by, eager to enrich themselves while leaving others behind, God sees them, and God will lift them up. There’s a special place in the heart of God for those who are

hurting, and God will see that they have what they need. In fact, God will bring it to them, in the person of Jesus himself.

Now the way God works in this world, for the most part, is through human beings, driven by the Spirit of Christ. So if the poor are to be lifted up, we who claim to follow Jesus need to do much of the lifting. If the hungry are to be fed, we need to do some feeding, and better yet, create the conditions so that people can feed themselves. If the oppressed are to go free, we need to be among the active opponents of oppression.

The challenge, of course, is that being part of God's redemption takes effort, especially if we're among those who are already doing pretty well in the world. We have to take seriously the question Dr. Wallace left us last week: What will we do with the privileges we have?

It's not hard to see why, for comfortable people, Christmas slides so easily into sleigh bells and Santas and parties and presents, rather than the things Jesus came to do, and enlist his followers in doing too. It's so much easier to focus on *feeling* good than on *doing* good. And yet, the Bible clearly says, "Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good"

Hold fast. Don't just give in to what's easy. Do hard things. Do good, even when it's so much easier, and less expensive, to neglect the good, and acquiesce in the evils of this world, as long as they don't affect us directly.

John Wallace mentioned something in passing last week that he didn't dwell upon, but I've been thinking about it ever since. He asked, rhetorically, if we knew what the eighth wonder of the world was. The answer, he said, is

“compound interest.” You know how compound interest works. It’s when you invest your money, and over a long enough time even a modest rate of interest can turn your little investment into something so much greater.

If you’ve ever seen a graph of the way compound interest works, you’ll know that it’s a pretty good metaphor for other things besides money. The shape of the curve looks almost flat in the beginning, while the value of your investment grows only gradually. But the same rate of interest keeps compounding value, until eventually you come to what’s called the “knee” of the curve, where the slope turns sharply upward and the amount you have accumulates much more rapidly.

That’s not a bad image for Christians who want to follow Jesus, and hold fast to what is good. We keep doing our small part, and at first it’s hard to see much of an impact. We go along, day after day, year after year, just trying to be faithful, trying to be on the side of redemption and reconciliation, over and against the loud voices of division and the sleepy yawns of indifference. We may not see much change for a while. But sooner or later, everyone’s efforts begin to add up. A thousand little acts of kindness begin to create a culture of kindness. A hundred instances of standing up for justice start to make justice the norm, and doing right begins to take the place of apathy. Sooner or later we come to the knee of the moral curve, and next thing you know, God’s justice and righteousness start springing up all around us.

Isaiah, like Jesus himself, uses the image of seeds, but it’s the same idea. “As a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” The thing about

seeds is that you can't even see what they're doing when they germinate underground. Then little shoots spring up, and they're not much yet either, like interest compounding below the knee of the curve. But then they take off. Then small acts of sacrifice become patterns of generosity, and generosity catches on, so that people no longer look out only for themselves. They start to think more about others, until compassion becomes a habit of the heart, and it plays out not only in personal acts of charity but also in public policies of justice.

That's the sort of thing that happens when people pay attention to the real meaning of Christmas. It's good to have the family together around the table and share the gifts from under the tree. Those are good and joyous things. But it's better still, and far more faithful to Christ, if these little acts of love and kindness at home compound until they come to characterize the way we relate to everyone else, not just in our own little families, but in the whole family of God. When we want for others the same basic things we want for ourselves, and work to see that it happens – when we hold fast to what is good, in other words – then we'll truly celebrate the birth of Jesus in a way that will make him glad.



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