

“How Does Christmas Really Work?”

Sermon for Sunday, December 26th, 2010

(Due to the predicted snowstorm and subsequent closing of church today, I'm posting my sermon online.)

Anyone who attended any our Christmas Eve services the other night saw that they were all very well attended. As a pastor, it's always gratifying to see a full, standing-room only church. Many, including myself, were deeply moved by the re-telling of the Christmas story in lessons and carols. The 5pm service had our largest crowd, primarily due to the children. At this service, we featured the children dressed in costume, portraying the nativity characters during the telling of the story, complete with angels and baby Jesus.

Today, I want us to think about how Christmas works...or doesn't. Maybe you've never really thought about it “working” or not, but I think you'll find that sometimes it does...and sometimes it doesn't.

Christmas. People have asked me many different kinds of questions about things related to Christmas as a holiday. For example, someone asked me once, “Why do we exchange gifts at Christmas?” Another asked, “Was Jesus really born on December 25th?” Or “What does mistletoe have to do with Christmas?” And, “What's the '12 Days of Christmas' all about anyway?”

I found a great web-site recently you might like to check out. It's called www.howstufworks.com.

If you search for “How does Christmas work?” you'll find pages and pages about Christmas as a religious holiday and it's cultural modifications and adaptations over the years. You'll be amazed at some of it's history!

All these things help us “put on Christmas,” but the real question is, What affect does Christmas have on us the rest of the year? Does Christmas “work” from January to November?

The truth of the matter is, Christmas almost didn't happen If you read both gospel accounts (Matthew and Luke), you'll find slightly different accounts of the same event. Typically, on Christmas Eve, we hear bits and pieces from both gospels, but a closer look at Matthew's reveals some rather disturbing things that makes one think, “Wow! How did Christmas even happen at all?”

Indeed. Think about it: Joseph took his VERY pregnant wife to Bethlehem--a distance of 120 miles, on the back of a donkey! He made no pre-arrangements for a place to stay when they got there. The stable or cave was a far cry from the clean, sterile birthing rooms we have today in the hospital. The Magi ran into a roadblock called Herod, who eventually, out of jealousy, greed, and anger, had every child in Bethlehem under the age of 2 slaughtered in an attempt to do away with any competition for his throne. (aka, the Slaughter of the Innocents.”)

Christmas almost didn't work, and sometimes, it doesn't work for us now. What do we do at Christmas? Shopping, cooking, cleaning, decorating, card-writing, attend parties. Nothing wrong with these things, in and of themselves, but these things aren't what Christmas is about...they're the holidays and the cultural things we do.

If we're going to find Jesus at Christmas, like the Magi, we're going to have to also take a detour around these things. The Magi made Christmas work by evading the expectations of Herod. We too can evade some of the trappings and stress and anxiety of Christmas by eliminating some of the expectations put upon us at Christmastime. How? Well, by not obsessing about making sure the decorations are just right, or that we have enough food prepared, or that we need to attend every social gathering of the season. Maybe we simply need to scale back our expectations or downsize our Christmas activities a little, so that we can really enjoy Christmas.

So how DOES Christmas really work? Well, let me suggest a couple of things today that might help us in the future.

First, let's try remembering that **Christmas, now as it was then, is risky business.** Remember, Joseph was told in a dream to take a pregnant Mary as his wife, and then to take her to Bethlehem, and then to Egypt to avoid being found by Herod. You see, Christmas is about the "hopes and fears of all the years." Christmas moves us to dream and hope things that might be very costly to us—costly in terms of time, energy, commitment, and yes, perhaps even financial. Christmas works by asking us to live out our faith in action; by being "do-ers of the word and not mere hearers only;" by getting rid of the false gods of materialism, ambition, and self-importance. Instead, we're called to "put on" Christ as the promise and priority of our lives. In other words, when we honor the Christ of Christmas, and not the culture of Christmas, Christmas really does work!

Secondly, Christmas really works we we allow it to lead us into a "foreign land." Joseph was told to take his wife and child to a foreign land, Egypt, for safety. This was unfamiliar territory for them, but necessary to save their necks. I find it fascinating that our Savior and the holy family were actually refugees, reminding us of the many refugees in the world today, fleeing their homes to escape persecution and the ravages of war and starvation. In the same way, God sometimes leads us into unfamiliar territory in ministry, and the uncertainty of uncharted waters.

Christmas works when we allow Christ to lead us into a foreign land, like Joesph. For example, the United Methodist Church is emphasizing these days how to "Re-Think Church." This means re-thinking how we do ministry and missions; how we reach people for Christ; how we can turn around the loss of membership in our denomination; and how we can help transform our churches, our communities, and ultimately, our world.

This "foreign land" could mean coming up with new and exciting ministries that meet the needs of the people in our community, or being more intentional about evangelism and how we share the Good News of the gospel. It could mean entering into a long term, covenantal relationship with a foreign missionary through the General Board of Global Missions.

For some of us, this “foreign land” might be something as simple as visiting a nursing home once in a while, or the home of a neighbor, or someone in the hospital who needs a word of encouragement and prayer. It could mean giving our time as a volunteer somewhere in the community. It might also mean changing our attitude toward someone or something, or having a more forgiving or generous spirit. For some of us, many of these things will be costly, unfamiliar, and downright uncomfortable.

The message here is clear: We are called to be the hands of Jesus to others. And when we do, Christmas really does work! And Christmas, the REAL Christmas, happens!

**I'd love to hear your comments, feedback, and responses to this message. Please feel free to email or Facebook me.

God bless,

Pastor Fred