

Sunday December 23rd, 2018

Advent IV

PRAYER: O Shepherd of Israel, from who comes forth one who shall feed your flock, we gather as those who dwell in the folds of your embrace and care. Your love envelops us like swaddling clothes wrapped around a babe in a manger. Your face shines like a star that led the Wisemen so many nights ago. We behold your radiance as we enter your sanctuary and praise your name for the Christ who brings us salvation. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: All that we bring God has bestowed upon us. Whatever good we do is a sign of God's grace. We present our glad offerings before God as praise for "the goodness that does crown our days."

PASTORAL PRAYER: Source of salvation, your name is holy. From you comes forth One who shall govern your people. As a shepherd calls the sheep, so will your servant call humanity to come and enter into sanctuary, where they may dwell secure. There they shall be nourished by the word of your covenant, and surrounded with hope that you abide in their midst. Their days shall be spent following the Shepherd's command; their nights will pass quickly as they rest secure in your love. We give thanks that we may be numbered among those whom through Christ you have chosen; we seek to be faithful to the call we receive.

We pray for courage to respond to Christ's will in spite of the risk. Make us persistent in our ministry as a shepherd in search of lost sheep. Where persons are lost or bewildered, help us to stand as shining rays of hope. To those who wander aimlessly or unsure of themselves, let us bring fresh esteem, clarity of mind, and renewed purpose. To those beguiled by false hopes and vain promises, our prayer is that your Spirit will impart wise counsel and true hope. For those who are pursued and attacked by ruthless forces, we pray for determination and strength to come to their aid.

Make us worthy in all that we do to bear the stamp of your approval and election. Secure in your love, may we be bold in facing the forces of evil. Nourished by your Word, may we extend to all Christ's gift of new life. Fill our days with moments that please you, and our nights with the peace of the reconciled.

BENEDICTION: The day is at hand; the Savior draws near! Let us touch, and let our touch be lingering, lest the unborn leap and go unnoticed, and lest the newborn tremble and go unloved. Amen.

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Luke 1:39-55

“Mary’s Song.”

Sometimes, advertisers depict the human condition so well that we cannot help but be taken in by their commercials. I don’t know if this particular commercial is still running, but one such accurate depiction of our shared human anxiety is portrayed by Expedia Travel. Perhaps you have seen the commercial of the young woman working at her desk and then glancing at her desk clock which reads 4:40pm and then glancing outside at the street which is already in darkness.

The realization that she will not get any sunshine on this short winter’s day causes her to break forth in a cry of despair. This of course leads to the point of the commercial which is that you can escape this dark cold winter by taking a trip down south with Expedia. For thousands of years, human beings in the Northern Hemisphere are quite aware of how the length of days changes through the year.

In fact, (December 21st) is the day we receive the shortest length of sunlight. It is called the winter solstice. For thousands of years, many cultures have recognized the significance of the solstice, and in a funny twist of circumstance, we discover that unlike in the Expedia commercial, in most cultures the solstice was a cause of great celebration. This may seem odd to us, celebrating the darkest day of the year, but our ancestors had a good reason for their joy.

Our ancestors realized at some point, that the solstice may be the darkest day of the year but from that day on it was only going to get brighter. It was as if they collectively said, “This is the worst things will ever get. From now on, things will only get better.” December 22nd will be brighter; so, will the 23rd and 24th and so on. Whether they were pagans or not, people have always held a great party to mark the end of darkness.

One such official declaration of a celebration occurred in 274 A.D. when the Roman emperor Aurelia declared that December 25th was going to be a special day. It was to be a holiday, a vacation; all to mark the birthday of the unconquered sun. And do you know how they celebrated it? Well they decorated evergreen trees, they exchanged gifts, they did a lot of feasting, they sang songs, and decorated their homes with greenery and lights and they were particularly kind to poor people.

Sound familiar? Do you realize that if someone from ancient Rome were to be put down in the middle of Simcoe tonight, he or she would feel completely at home? They might say to themselves, “This is holiday time! The people of Simcoe are worshipping the unconquered sun! Let’s eat! Let’s drink! Let’s be merry! Let’s have a grand old time! This would be the same person who would feel quite at home watching Christians being fed to lions. He or she would feel quite at home in this festival of lights.

Then of course there were the Germanic peoples, whom the Romans declared to be barbarians. These rough and tumble people kept migrating south and eventually sacked Rome.

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These so-called barbarians and the Norsemen and the Scandinavians, also celebrated December 21st. They called it *Yuletide*. And one of the things they did to celebrate Yuletide was to get a great big log-a Yule log, ever done that? And burn it. You know why they did this? They burned it as an offering to their god of thunder and lightning. His name was Thor.

Those in our congregation who are Marvel Comic book fans might recognize that name Thor, as a character in comic books and recent movies. This character is based on the Norse legend of Thor the god of thunder. So, all this history surrounding the solstice has led to the inevitable charge against Christians.

Many skeptics charge that our Christmas celebrations, with the virgin birth, shepherds and angels etc. has the same mythology and folklore as the pagan cultures, and therefore, the skeptics argue there can be no truth to the biblical story. To be fair, their point is not without some merit. If we had gone into the Roman Empire, or been able to travel into the area of the ancient Germanic tribes at this time of year, we might draw a peculiar conclusion.

We might say, "I never knew they had even heard of Christmas, but they are celebrating Christmas. Look at the evergreen trees, they even have lights on them, they have prepared a great feast, and they even care for the poor. There sure is a lot of good will among men and woman. These so-called pagans, really understand Christmas. The problem with such a conclusion however, is that Christmas wasn't actually celebrated until sometime between 325 and 350 AD.

It seems like a natural thing for the early church to link the celebration of Jesus' birth to the century's old solstice celebrations. After all, Jesus represents the coming of light. This decision so long ago, has recently been challenged by those believing they are recapturing the true meaning of Christmas, by rejecting all the traditions we enjoy. The critics argue that if all our Christmas traditions, from trees to singing carols, can be traced back to pagans, then are we not simply being pagans celebrating the solstice?

I would argue that such an argument is missing the point. You see, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with evergreens. God made them after all. There is nothing wrong with lights because after all, God is light. There is nothing wrong with singing because God gave us voices. There is nothing wrong with gifts, because God gave us his only begotten son. There is nothing wrong with feasts because God gave us food.

Perhaps our heritage is to blame. Most people don't realize that Baptists have Puritan roots that go back to England. Puritans are the group Americans called Pilgrims, and the ones who came over on the Mayflower from England.

Some of those Baptist hang-ups that we get criticized for, come from those Puritanical roots. When the Puritans came to North America and settled in the Eastern States, they learned about the connection of Christmas celebrations to pagan cultures. They made the decision that these pagan traditions somehow polluted Christ's birthday.

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These Puritan roots may also explain why Thanksgiving is such a big deal in the States; even a larger holiday than Christmas. So, in their infinite wisdom, the Puritans banned everything connected to Christmas celebrations that might have pagan roots. No more evergreens, no more decorating, and surprisingly they even at one point banned mince meat pies. Actually, that is one law I could live with.

The Puritans of the time ran the church, and the country, and many a solstice passed without any mention of Christmas. It was a long time before Canada and America began to reintroduce some of those old traditions. I think it was new immigrants who brought these traditions back; particularly those immigrants coming from Europe and England.

With all this history in mind then, what do you think the average person would say if you asked them what Christmas is all about? They might question your sanity in such a question by stating, “Well, everyone knows what Christmas is all about.” I don’t know if such a conclusion is correct. If I were to ask you that very question what would you say? You might say, “Oh, Christmas-it’s a warm happy time. We get the old Yule log out even if it’s the kind made out of cake. We get out the old eggnog or Yule grog.

We gather the family for a feast and to exchange gifts.” I might ask another person and they might say, “Well, Christmas is when we really go all out and decorate our house. We bring in the evergreen tree, and hang the lights. Then we make cookies and purchase fruits and nuts. We want people to know that we are great at hospitality.” Another kind soul might say that Christmas is all about helping the less fortunate.

That it’s a time to give to charities and donate food hampers, and toys to local charities. Another person might say that it’s the time when Santa Clause pays a visit and puts a gift under our tree. Regardless of other answers, it’s a day for celebration and being happy. If that is all Christmas is to you, then how is that different than the pagan celebrations I already outlined. What makes our Christmas different than the Germanic Yuletide?

Well one of the great differences has to do with a fourteen-year-old virgin girl named Mary. We Protestants don’t give Mary her due, because we fear placing her too high on the list of our esteemed religious figures. But imagine a fourteen-year-old girl, not very experienced in the ways of the world, being told she is going to be the vessel through which the Son of God is to come to this earth.

This incredible event, prophesied to this young woman, was overwhelming. “How can this be?” How can this young virgin girl have a son who will be the Savior? How can Mary bear the one Isaiah said was the Prince of Peace? There is a very special verse found at Luke 1:37, which reads “For nothing is impossible with God.” This is the lynch pin on which the Christmas story rests. (Jack Hayford, *The Heart of Christmas*)

It is rare that a translation doesn’t do a bible verse justice but this is one such case. I would have loved to have a Greek scholar come and unpack a very special word in this verse. The Greek word translated as “thing” in the word “nothing” is the word *rama*.

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Literally it should be translated “Word” but not just any word, because it refers to God’s Word. The Amplified bible translates this verse this way.

“For with God nothing is ever impossible and no word from God shall be without power or impossible to fulfill.” The Oxford translation reads, “For no word of God is without power.” With any word of God there is always power released to see it fulfilled. As with Mary, the Holy Spirit will assume the role of fulfilling the Word. This gives a whole new meaning to John’s Christmas story where he writes, “The Word became flesh”.

Christmas is different from the Pagan celebrations because we celebrate not the return of the Sun, but the coming of the SON. Christmas is a celebration not of the power of photons to push away the darkness, but of the “Word” coming in power to bring us hope. It is these truths that inspire Mary’s beautiful song, “The Magnificat”.

A song that speaks of Jesus’ true nature, and how he will be mighty, holy, and maybe most comforting to us perhaps, he will be merciful. The pagan celebration offers none of this hope, and our Christmas celebrations take on a greater meaning when we tie the hope of Christ to them. Imagine if you will that we could bring Mary here this morning. We could ask her to comment on our Christmas celebrations.

I wonder what she would say. Maybe she would meet one of us who has just returned from buying all the ingredients for our feast. “Mary, Mary, it’s time to eat the Christmas feast. You should see the turkey, the stuffing, the pies and cookies. Mary, come and celebrate with us.” But Mary might respond, “Your feast sounds wonderful, but you’ve missed the point. Christmas isn’t dinner. Christmas is God in the flesh.”

Another person might say to Mary, “Oh, Mary you should see our home. We’ve got the biggest and fullest tree you’ve ever seen. We have decorated it so beautifully. Underneath, it is jammed with gifts. Mary, come and see how we celebrate as a family.” Mary would reply, “Christmas is not a Christmas tree, it’s not decorations, it’s not food. Christmas is when I gave birth to the Son of God, and if there is no place for him around your tree, you are simply repeating what the Romans did 2,000 years ago.

Finally, another person might approach Mary and say, “Mary, you know what we are going to do tonight? We are going to sing. We’ve got this group together, and after we have a couple of drinks to loosen up our voices, we are going out onto the streets to sing for people. What a time we will have. Won’t you come and join us Mary?”

In frustration perhaps, she would reply, “When are you going to get this straight? Christmas isn’t caroling. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not against the tree or caroling or the dinner, but I’ll tell you what I am against. I am against the fact that millions of people are celebrating the birth of my son, and they have never given him a place in their lives. Their celebrations are empty of any real meaning and certainly devoid of hope.”

The meaning of this season and the Virgin Birth are intimately intertwined. It all has to do with Emmanuel or God with us.

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Christmas is about how, in a moment of time, God became flesh and dwelt among us. That Jesus suffered as we do, and that he died and rose again. The composite picture of Jesus in the bible proves this through his miracles, his sinlessness, his teaching, and of course through his death and resurrection.

Mary believed that God's Word came with power; a power that could accomplish anything, even making it possible for a 14-year-old virgin girl to conceive, and bear the Son of God. But Christmas is also about surrendering to the power of God's word as Mary did, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true."

Christmas is about celebrating that indeed everything that was said came true. The power of the Word was manifest in a baby born in a manger. You see, the pagan solstice celebrations were devoid of any power.

Ancient mankind had no control over the cycle of the seasons or the path of the sun. The days lengthened and shortened without any interference, or influence, from those burning Yule logs, or heaven forbid, eating mince pies. There was no power in their celebration. But when Christ becomes the focus of our tree trimming, and feasting, and caroling, there is a power to accomplish anything and everything God wants for us.

And so, as Mary so beautifully reports, Christmas celebrates that with Christ's coming: the proud and haughty ones are scattered, princes are removed from thrones, the lowly are exalted, the hungry are satisfied and the rich are sent away empty handed and most wonderful of all we are offered mercy. That is power; power enough to ward off the real darkness that threatens us.

And just like Mary, isn't it something to sing about?