

## **The Real Meaning**

January 5, 2014

John 1:1-18

Now that things have hopefully slowed down a little from the hectic pace we let ourselves get into at Christmas time, I'd like for us to do a little reflecting and examine our real feelings about "the big day" of a week and a half ago.

A cartoon I once saw explained the feelings of a lot of Americans today. It showed two homes decorated for Christmas. One had lights everywhere. There was a plastic snowman in the yard, a Santa on the roof, and a flashing sign in the front yard that said, "Merry Xmas!" It would have made the fellow that used to live on Chapman St. with all the gaudy decorations proud.

The other home had only a simple manger scene in the yard. The couple from the first house was looking out their window at the manger scene in their neighbor's yard and said: "Some people have to put religion into everything."

One of the radio talk shows had a spoof on how we have overreacted to Christ being a part of Christmas and not wanting to offend anyone. So, combining the holidays of Ramadan, Hanukkah, Kwanza and Christmas, they wished everyone a happy RamaHanuKwanzMas to the tune of "Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas."

But is it possible to have a non-offensive Christmas? The whole point of Christmas is that God came down to get in our faces, and stake his claim to the world and our individual lives.

But so many are busy avoiding the real point of it all. The world celebrates Christmas without ever worshiping or meditating on the real meaning of this special season. Christmas is no longer a Christian holiday. We have it all planned. Every minute is so full.

The holiday comes and goes and many did all their shopping with no consideration for the reason behind the season. There were so many activities where Christ's name was never mentioned and the real meaning of the season was completely avoided.

In a culture which is increasingly secularized, there are many people who have no clue about what it all means. A friend of mine gave a Bible to someone who was going through a difficult time.

The person was in real need, and their life had been one disaster after the other, but in all that time there was never any concrete attempt to give their life to God and follow him.

As my friend gave a Bible to this person, and encouraged him to read it, he suggested that he might start by reading the Christmas story, since it was that time of year. The man looked at him with real surprise and said: "You mean the Christmas story is in the Bible?"

For those of us who know what the Christmas story is and have read and heard the Christmas story many times from Scripture, it seems incredible that someone would not know something that basic.

But there is a growing ignorance of spiritual things in our land as we attempt to separate our lives from the any contact with, or reference to, God.

Christmas in the eyes of the world is combing the stores in frustration. It is fighting someone for the latest action figure or fashion doll. It's getting trampled in a stampede at WalMart at 6:00 in the morning, or, this past year, even someone getting killed in the madness.

It is baking cookies, making candy, and roasting hams. It is searching the Christmas tree lots for just the right tree. It is listening to dogs barking to the tune of "Jingle Bells," or Brenda Lee singing "Jingle Bell Rock."

It is going to a party where once again you will sing The Twelve Days of Christmas. It is wondering how you can get what you want for everyone and still be able to buy groceries in January. It is rushing and running to get it all done.

The world has tried to take a Christian holy day and gut it of its real meaning while trying to keep the wonder and joy of it. It comes across as exceedingly hollow and shallow to those of us whose lives have been transformed by the reality of that story.

We heard again this past year the controversies surrounding Christmas. The Christ-child was asked to leave more and more places. But isn't that the reality of Christmas?

A child is born into the world and the world ignores him at best and turns its hostility on him at worst. At the time of the first Christmas he was unwelcome, and many wanted to destroy him and erase his name from the earth.

Not much has changed. Many now misinterpret our laws to mean that it is not legal to mention his name. His teachings are still regarded as dangerous. We are supposed to celebrate Christmas, but we are not supposed to remember why.

And we find that Christ is just as unwelcome in our world today as he was when he was born. He is just as unwelcome in the Inns of America as he was the Inn at Bethlehem. People are still offended by him. People still reject him. People still try to forget him and ignore his presence. It is easier to just pretend he never came and does not exist.

Christmas cards are decorated with birds, candles, snow, everything but Christ. Their message carefully avoids any mention of the One whom Christmas is all about.

Don't you want to ask the world the question: "What are you so afraid of?" There is not this kind of reaction to the story and life of any other religious leader in the world, why so much hostility toward Jesus?

The answer is because of the meaning of the Christ event. The world has always understood that Christ is dangerous. He is not just a religious leader among many. He is unique. He is Emmanuel.

He is a human being in whom is the essence of God. And to recognize that means that everything must be different.

It means that God is in search of us and that we have a responsibility toward him. It means that God has a claim upon our lives, and that determines how we are to think and live.

It means that we can no longer live just for ourselves. We are obligated to live for God. It means we have to recognize a higher authority and surrender to that authority.

That is why the world is afraid. This is why the scripture says, "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:10-11).

The world should be in awe of him, for in spite of all the attempts to destroy him, he is the ruler of heaven and earth. He has overcome the worst that the world could do, and in some way at some time will ultimately judge the world.

He is Lord of all. And that is what causes the world to take offense at him.

It is as the scripture says, when it refers to Christ as the cornerstone on which all life is built:

"Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,' and, 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the message. . . ." (1 Peter 2:7-8).

How much has been lost since that first Christmas day. The simplicity. The sacredness. The wonder of it all. The realization of God's wonderful gift. He came from being worshiped and adored by all the hosts of heaven to be spit on by the world. Later he would be hated and crucified by the world he came to save.

He is still unwelcome in many places in our land. Many hearts still offer him no room. To many he is just as much a stranger as he was then. His welcome is no better. He is still looked on with suspicion and hostility by the world.

The problem is that it is so easy to get sidetracked into thinking of Christmas as something else.

The merchants measure the success of Christmas by their margin of profit and how it compares to other years.

Mothers measure it by how much of the family was able to be together. Fathers think about its cost, and whether they spent more or less than last year.

The police think in terms of how much crime there was in comparison with other seasons past. The highway patrol measures it by the number of accidents and fatalities on the highway.

The mailman is thinking in terms of how many people decided to send letters and cards this year. The kids measure it by how many days they get out of school and whether or not they got the gifts they wanted.

How do you measure Christmas? Is it just a welcome break in the monotony of the world? A holiday hiatus? Is it just a lot of work? Or is it him? He is the reason for the season. Are we wanting more of him? Are we wanting God's gift more than anything else? Have we centered our lives around him, and given ourselves to him. Do we take time for him, worship him, and remember the sacrifice he made in order to come to us?

The Gospel of John gives us the true meaning of Christmas. It says: "Now this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). That we might know God and Jesus the Christ whom he has sent into the world...

What would it have been like if Jesus never came? What would the story of our lives be? Where would the meaning of life be, let alone Christmas?

What could possibly give us a reason for living and make sense of this thing we call life? Without his coming what would be the meaning, the purpose of life?

But because he came we can experience a purpose for our lives and know that our lives can become one with the purpose of God for the world. There is a purpose.

Two women walked by a department store and saw in the window a creche with shepherds, angels, Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. "How about that?" said one of the ladies. "The church is trying to horn in on Christmas too." Lady, you don't understand.

You will not find Christmas in the merchandise of a department store. All you have to do is look into the manger. It is all there. Nothing is missing. There are no false promises.

Well, we might put up with a baby Jesus, but we do not want him to grow up. We like the baby, but we do not care so much for the titles that come with him: "The Christ," "Immanuel," "Mighty God," "Everlasting Father," "King," and "Lord." If he is in the manger he is containable, even manageable, but he was not meant for the manger, he was meant for the throne.

Perhaps that is why the government does not want him on their premises! We can handle a baby, but not a King. Especially one who is called King of kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:6).

The first time he came in obscurity, vulnerability and humility. But he has come and continues to come again, this time in power, strength, majesty and glory. He always comes in a way the world does not expect.

Christ was not safe from us when he first came, and in a very real sense he is not safe from us now. In spite of his love for the world, that love is not reciprocated. The world is busy trying to establish its independence from God.

However, God's heart is still open to us, even if it makes him vulnerable. If Christmas is really true then there is a reason for joy. There is hope for the world and the people in it. If it is not true then there is no reason to celebrate anything.

But God cared enough about the world to provide us with a redeemer and bring it back to himself. That Christ succeeded in that task is evident by our presence here today.

We are here to give gratitude to God for his unspeakable gift of Jesus Christ. He is Emmanuel. God is with us. We can be forgiven. We can know him and have a relationship with him. We can be a part of the Kingdom of this great king.

The trivial matters of this world no longer plague us because we have entered a new dimension of life. The Light has come! It has illumined our hearts. Jesus Christ has pointed us to God and opened the door to his Kingdom. God is approachable. He can live in us.

We know now that God desires to give us forgiveness and peace. His love for us is no longer in question. He has lavishly displayed it in a new born child that came to give us new birth.

What else can matter now? What other gift do we need? What else does God need to say? He has said it all in Christ. But the unbelieving world has failed to hear what God is saying.

How accurately the old spiritual puts it: "Sweet little Jesus boy. They made you be born you in a manger. Sweet little holy child. We didn't know who you was. Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lord, to take our sins away. Our eyes was blind. We couldn't see. We didn't know who you was."

Do you remember the story of Harold? Harold was a youngster who wanted to be in the annual Christmas play which was always a big production in his town. But Harold was not the top student in his class and seemed to have a lot of problems.

The directors of the children's play did not want to hurt Harold's feelings, but they were worried about whether he could handle a part. They finally decided to give him the part of the Inn Keeper. All he had to say was, "I'm sorry, there is no room in the Inn."

Well, the night of the big play came and the church was packed. At the precise moment Mary and Joseph came and knocked on the Inn door. The whole village of Bethlehem shook as Harold tried to open the cardboard door to the Inn which was stuck.

At last he got the door open, and the pitiful young couple was standing there looking all too real to Harold, but with a little coaching he blurted out the words: "I'm sorry, all the rooms are full, and there's no room for you here."

The couple turned sorrowfully away and began to walk off stage when all of a sudden the door of the Inn swung open again, and Harold ran up to the couple and said in a loud voice so that everyone could hear, "Wait a minute. Come back. You can have my room." It was a great addition to the play, even though it was not in the script.

The world was not interested enough to provide a room for the Savior, but you don't have to follow the script either. You can give Him room — your room. The room of your heart.

Give Him room to live in you. Jesus says to us, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). That's the real meaning.