

Thursday, December 24, 2020

Christmas Eve

Luke 2.1-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/401583697718974>

(Sermon begins at about 27:50)

“Symbols of Christmas”

Symbols are important to us humans. They help shape and provide meaning in our lives. A couple of weeks ago, I ran across a video on the internet that left me in absolute disbelief. A video that illustrates the importance of symbols, how they can be misunderstood, and how incredibly important they can be. Particularly during challenging times. It was the story of a dispute between a couple in Raleigh, North Carolina, and their homeowners’ association. The couple placed a six-foot wooden cross on their lawn for Christmas. They had originally put up the cross for Easter. People in the neighborhood really liked it because they saw it as a symbol of hope. So, the couple decided to put it back up for Christmas. As the couple noted, for them, the cross stands for the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So why not put it up at Christmas?

They received a letter from the HOA board that included the statement “Unless biblical references can be provided noting the cross as a symbol of the Christmas season for the board to reconsider, the cross is not considered to be a Christmas decoration.”¹ What? They needed proof that the universally recognized symbol of Christ is connected to Christmas? Christmas, the holiday commemorating the birth of Christ? The cross, the symbol of Christ’s death and resurrection? How can you claim the two are not connected? You can’t have the death and resurrection without Jesus first having been born. So, yeah, while we don’t normally think of the cross as a Christmas decoration, there is no denying that the cross is a symbol of Christmas.

The couple was obviously taken aback by the HOA’s position. They polled their neighbors, and the vast majority thought the cross was appropriate as a Christmas decoration. In fact, some of them even offered to go out and get crosses to put in their yards as a sign of solidarity. The couple complied with the board’s request and actually provided the perfect biblical citation from the Gospel According to John: “‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me’” (Jn 18.37, NIV). The HOA board did not initially respond. Only after a media outlet reached out to them for comment did they back down and concede that the cross could be considered a symbol of Christmas.

This disagreement, this misunderstanding, is worth noting for two reasons. The first is that we tend to get so wrapped up in the festive nature of Christmas—the secular aspect of Christmas—and tend to gloss over, even forgot, that the child whose birth we celebrate this joyous night, grows up to be the one who is put to death on a cross. The death and subsequent resurrection being the means by which all humanity receives salvation—forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. As I said, you can’t have that happen without the Son of God first being born. Without the

events at the end of his life—without Christ’s death on a cross and his subsequent resurrection, this child would have just been another child, and his birth just another birth. While miraculous and spectacular in its own right, not something that would be celebrated 2,000 years later throughout the world.

So yeah, the cross and all it represents as related to the child whose birth we celebrate this night—it’s kind of important. Not that we need to dwell on that, but there it is. As a friend and colleague once said in a Christmas sermon, the birth of Jesus takes place in the shadow of the cross. Related to this is the reality that the early church did not initially even celebrate Christmas. Easter was the major feast day of the church. The Church focused on Christ’s death and Resurrection as the defining events in our religion, in our lives of faith. Everyone recognized that, of course Jesus was born. It’s right there in the gospels according to Matthew and Luke. But his birth was viewed as incidental to what was truly important. Celebration of the Nativity did not become commonplace until later. The first recorded Christmas celebration was not until 336—300 years after Christ’s death.²

I don’t know when it happened, but somewhere along the line, the celebration of Christmas overtook the celebration of Easter as the primary focus. Not within the Church. We still recognize that Easter is the primary celebration as far as we are concerned. But for many, even in the Church, Christmas has moved out front. Perhaps it’s because of secular influences, which have made Christmas into a far bigger event than Easter, with the addition of Santa Clause and so many other non-religious trappings. And, while the Resurrection is a pretty awesome event, celebration of the birth of a child, particularly the Savior of the world, is just more fun.

But even so, we cannot forget the real reason we celebrate this particular birth. Why this particular birth is so significant. The reason what we celebrate this night is so spectacular, more so than any other birth, is the fact that this child is God incarnate. God in the flesh. The Son of God. That is pretty amazing in itself. That God came in the flesh to be with us and to live among us. But even more amazing is what that child would accomplish. Not just through his life and his ministry. But even more so what he would accomplish through his death. The destruction of sin itself. The destruction of death itself. The promise of eternal life. None of this is possible without the birth we celebrate tonight. That being the case, what we really celebrate tonight is more than the birth of a child. We celebrate the birth of hope. Hope that sin does not have the last word. Hope that death does not have the last word. Hope that darkness does not have the last word. The hope for what the birth of this child represents for all humanity.

Which brings me to the second and primary reason I bring up this story of the cross. Because of the year that we are living through. This year of global pandemic which has pretty much zapped any semblance of joy from our lives. Even Christmas this year is, for many, less joyful and joy-filled than previous years. Some have suffered loss of family or friends. For others, stay-at-home orders and cautions against gatherings outside of one’s own household are precluding the usual Christmas gatherings and festivities. And even when able to gather—cautiously, of course—things are just not the same. There is the specter of spikes in “the numbers” with increased cases, hospitalizations, and deaths that cast a pall over even the most well-intentioned Christmas celebration. And overshadowing it all is the continued uncertainty of when, if ever, life will get back to normal.

Because of the times we are living through, we are in need of hope. Perhaps more so than ever before. At least in our lifetimes. That is why the couple in Raleigh put the cross on their lawn for Christmas. Because they recognized in it a symbol of hope. The hope that comes through the death and resurrection of our Savior. The hope that was only made possible by him first being born in a manger in Bethlehem. The birth of a child is always the promise and hope of a new future. The birth of this particular child, the Son of God, is the biggest and most audacious promise and hope of a new life. In this birth, we see God doubling down. We see God daring to become vulnerable by becoming a human baby. All because of his love for us. All because he wanted to provide us with a hope and a promise that would last not just for our lifetimes, but for all time.

While things may seem dark at the present time, while things may seem less joyful than we would want for this time of year, we need to hold on to that hope and that promise that God provided 2,000 years ago. It is a hope and a promise that have withstood the test of time. It is a hope and promise that has withstood the worst possible conditions: countless wars, countless plagues and pandemics. It is that hope and that promise that will see us through our current situation.

So, what are the symbols of Christmas for you? For me, Christmas is represented by the Nativity scene my parents got me from Bethlehem—reminding me of what happened in that humble manger 2,000 years ago. Christmas is represented by the ceramic Christmas tree my Grandmother made—reminding me of the love of family. Christmas is represented by the cheap, battered tinfoil star my parents bought to go on their first Christmas tree 60 years ago and which has sat atop our family Christmas tree every year since—reminding me of humble beginnings. And now, thanks to an unknown couple in North Carolina, Christmas is represented by the cross. While originally an instrument of torture, the one whose birth we celebrate this night transformed the cross into a symbol of salvation and new life. That it is a symbol of the eternal life promised to us all. That it is a symbol of God’s love for us. Which, even in the darkest of times, is the ultimate symbol of hope. And the ultimate reason we celebrate this night.

¹ “North Carolina HOA demands family remove cross from yard, explain connection with Christmas,” Microsoft News, December 12, 2020.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/north-carolina-hoa-demands-family-remove-cross-from-yard-explain-connection-with-christmas/vi-BB1bRTGY?ocid=msedgdp>

² “Christmas,” Wikipedia, December 18, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas>