

SERMON: “What Are You Getting for Christmas?” I
“...A World of Wonder and Joy”

November 29, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Holy God, eternal community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, illumine for us the hearing of your word written, as it points us in faith to the Word by which all things were made and through whom all things hold together, even Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; in whose name we pray. Amen.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: Genesis 1:1-5

NEW TESTAMENT LESSONS: John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:15-20

I know, it is a terribly trite sounding title that I have chosen for this year’s series of Advent sermons, **“What Are You Getting for Christmas?”** It sounds like something a fourth grader might ask a friend at school. But if you’ll bear with me over the coming weeks as we delve more deeply into the magnificent prologue to the Gospel of John, perhaps we can come to a fuller understanding of what it is that we, and all the world, really do “get for Christmas” in the birth of Jesus the Christ.

Over the years of my ministry I have often preached on the opening chapter of the Gospel of John on either the last Sunday in Advent or the first Sunday in the New Year, but I’ve never done a *series* of sermons on the prologue to John. The idea to do so came from the bulletin covers we chose to use this year. Each week the cover will feature a phrase from the opening of John’s gospel that will serve as the focus for our sermon that day and on Christmas Eve. Following John’s lead, we will explore how in the gift of God’s Word incarnate in Jesus Christ, we receive by faith a world of wonder and joy, Life abundant, Grace upon grace, Truth in a world of lies, and the Light that shines in every darkness. According to the Gospel of John, that is what we all get for Christmas.

John’s gospel is dramatically different from the other gospels, especially in terms of how it begins. **Matthew** opens his gospel by recounting the family tree of Jesus, and then telling of the angel’s assurance to Joseph that the child to be born to Mary was “conceived by the Holy Ghost.” **Mark** jumps right into the action, with the prophet’s call to “prepare the way of the Lord,” and the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. **Luke** begins his gospel with a lovely series of songs--we call them “the canticles of Luke,” all leading up to the song of the “multitude of the heavenly host” who on the night of Jesus’ birth, sing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among all with whom he is pleased!”

But John begins his gospel in a very different way. John sets the birth of Jesus in the context of all that God has intended from the beginning of creation. Before John the Baptist comes on the scene—before there were “shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night,”—before Wise Men from the East bring their gifts to the Christ Child, John draws back the curtain of creation and says... **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”**

Those are among the most profound words ever penned. We may never fully understand their meaning. But what we can understand is that here John is deliberately echoing the opening words of the Bible, **“In the beginning God created the heavens and earth...”** In deliberately using the language of Genesis 1 to open his Gospel, John is linking God’s saving work in Jesus Christ with God’s gift of creation itself. **“In the beginning was the Word...”** the *Word* by whom all creation was called into being. John insists that creation and Christ belong together. The salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ is not escape *from* the world, but the full redemption *of the world*. **“For in him,”** writes Paul to the Colossians, **“in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of the cross.”** (Col. 1:19)

On every page the NT stretches our minds and forces us to **think big** about the meaning of Jesus Christ. In linking the birth of Jesus to God’s purposes from the beginning of creation, John insists that the birth of Jesus is of staggering significance for the whole world. As my beloved teacher and mentor Dr. John Leith was fond of saying, “A person may choose not to believe the good news of Christmas. But no one can call it trivial. If it is true that in Jesus Christ the creator of the universe has entered our history as fully as is humanly possible, then it is the most important event in history.”

So, it may sound trite to ask, **“What are you getting for Christmas?”** but there is nothing trivial in affirming that what we get for Christmas is no less than the fullness of God’s own Self in Jesus Christ. In the birth of Jesus, the Creator of the universe has freely chosen to dwell with us and within us forever! If that is true, then it can make all the difference in the world in terms of how we understand God and how we live in the world God has made.

Speaking of John Leith, one of the things I used to get for Christmas every year was a letter that Dr. Leith would send to his former students. I would look forward to his letter every year. I still have many of them. Thanks to the efforts of Jim Goodloe and the Fund for Reformed Theology, Dr. Leith’s Christmas letters are being collecting for publication sometime next year. It will be a great gift to the whole church to have access to John Leith’s on-going witness to the wonder and joy of Christmas.

More than any theologian I’ve ever known, John Leith loved Christmas. He loved reading over and over the simple story of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Luke, and most of all he loved singing the carols of Christmas. Now, it must be said that Dr. Leith never cared much for Advent. He especially disliked having to wait to sing the Christmas carols he loved so much. Once he suggested sarcastically that if we in the church won’t sing Christmas carols in our sanctuaries during Advent, then at least our children can hear them when they go to the mall.

John Leith insisted that Christmas is always both **deeply theological** in its witness to the embodiment of the living God in Jesus, Son of Mary, and **warmly personal** in the way in which it affirms the wonder and joy of human life. The two always belong together—the **theological and the personal**—the good news of what the Creator of the heavens and

the earth has done for us in the gift of Jesus the Christ, and the joys of our life together in God's good creation.

As he neared the end of his life, Dr. Leith began to focus increasingly on the simple joys of Christmas...including Santa Claus, for whom he had always had a special fondness. In 1993 Dr. Leith wrote a letter that surprised many of his students, and disturbed a few. His letter that year revealed a more nostalgic, more sentimental side than many of us had seen before. John could be a real curmudgeon. He was one of the two most demanding and intimidating teachers I ever had. I think it is safe to say that I would not be here apart from John's influence.

In his Christmas letter of 1993, Dr. Leith, who was the sworn enemy of the trite and trivial in every aspect of the life of the church, put in a good word for the festive side of Christmas. He recalled some of his favorite Christmas memories. "I can remember at least 70 Christmases," he wrote. "My earliest memories include my mother hanging a picture of Jesus and a picture of Santa Claus in our home, decorating the Christmas tree and hanging the stockings, and the Christmas play at the church." "In good times and bad," Leith went on, "Christmas has meant wonder, awe, joy, and human happiness. Singing the Christmas carols has without exception been a powerful means of grace. I am glad, as many of you have heard me say, that the Santa Claus festivity, as well as the tree, the log, the lights, the Christmas gifts and cards were added to the remembrance of Christ's birth. They have certainly been a means of human grace and also of divine grace. They are the joy of creation, sacraments of its goodness."

John ended his letter by saying, "I think that Christmas this year will be a wonderful break from the front pages of the newspapers and the affairs of the organized church. It will bring a new awareness of the wonder of human life, of loved ones, and of friends. Above all, Christmas celebrates the love of God who became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Apart from this there would be no joy in creation and no hope for our broken lives. And no Santa Claus."

Now, John Leith knew as well as any the ways by which our culture tends to ignore the theological claim of Christmas. And he knew better than almost any how much our Reformed and Puritan forbearers had resisted, and at times, rejected the celebration of Christmas in the church. He would remind his students how in the old Southern Presbyterian Church some presbyteries protested even the mentioning of Christmas in our Sunday School literature until as late as 1908, as hard as that is to imagine these days.

But for all of his emphasis on the theological meaning of Christmas, John Leith would never let us forget that the deep mystery of God's coming to us in Jesus Christ does not make us value and appreciate any less the wonder and simple joys of our life together in God's good creation. Just the opposite! Because we know that this fragile and fleeting life we live is not all there is, we can relish the joys of this life all the more, especially at Christmas.

Shortly after a heart-attack, which he said wonderfully “concentrates the mind,” Leith wrote that “Christmas in a remarkable way unites the personal and the material. God who is the true Person, became embodied in a human life, in a body of flesh and blood. Hence I do not take too seriously all the rhetoric about the commercialization of Christmas. We like to eat good food; we like to share gifts, and have joyous reunions with friends. Let us offer our prayers and thanksgiving to the Creator who gave to us not only our persons but our bodies and this wonderful world in which we live.”

What are you getting for Christmas? You are getting a gift that is profoundly theological and warmly personal. In the birth of Jesus Christ we receive the Gift beyond all other gifts. It is through him and for him that all things were created, and in him all the wonder and joys of life in creation are ours to share. “In the birth of Jesus,” Leith writes, “creation became the habitation of the Creator Himself. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Joy and human exuberance are as much a part of the Christian life as soberness and sorrow. At Christmas time we greet each other in a friendly way; we send Christmas cards; we give gifts to those who are near and dear to us; we are compassionate and help those who are in need. All this is the wonder of Christmas.”

Let us say again--the One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas is the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” He is the Word, the self-expression of God, addressing us in person. He is the *Logos*, the Wisdom of God, made accessible to our minds. In Jesus, Son of Mary, all of God that is open to human comprehension meets us face to face. Everything that God has to say to us that is necessary for our salvation finds expression in him. Everything that God promises us finds its Yes in him. Everything that we need to know about who God is and what God is like is focused in Jesus the Christ. In him the Creator of the universe comes to be with us and for us forever. **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”**

But as profound as that is, there’s more. John goes on. **“All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made.”** John insists, in concert with all the New Testament, that through God’s love in Jesus Christ everything that is was called into being. All the universe bears the stamp of his love. There is nothing in all creation--not a plant or flower on earth, not an earthworm or beetle under the earth, not a galaxy in the farthest reaches of space--that has come into being apart from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

I am sure that I will never understand more than a tiny fraction of what that means. But at the very least it means that this world in which we live did not just happen. It was called into being out of the same divine love that we see in the face of the Jesus Christ. His love is at the heart of all reality. For **“All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.”**

That means, at least in part, that Christianity is committed to a high view of the **goodness of creation**. The world in which we live, with all its beauty and brutality, all its tragedy and terror, is the good creation of a loving God. Creation itself is to be valued and cherished. The world is shot through with grace. Life is good!

Sometimes that is hard to say. Sometimes, it is *very* hard to say. But the good news of Christmas assures us that, despite all the suffering and heart-break that may come our way, God is with us, all the way, and this world in which we live is the good gift of a loving and gracious heavenly Father. That conviction can enable us to live with a greater sense of wonder and joy all our days.

So perhaps it is providential that Thanksgiving and the beginning of Advent come so close together on the calendar. How else but with thanksgiving can we receive the Gift beyond all other gifts—the gift of the God’s own Self in Jesus the Christ? The Word by whom all things were created out of infinite Love.

What are you getting for Christmas? Begin with this... a world of wonder and joy, created in Christ and hallowed by Christ, which he gives us to share together. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Allen C. McSween
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Greenville, SC

Special thanks to Dr. Jim Goodloe and the Fund for Reformed Theology for making available a full set of John Leith’s letters.