

November 27, 2016

“The Traditions of Christmas: Contemplation”

Luke 2:15-20

FCF: Celebration without reflection. Lost opportunity.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus.

(magnet) We should take the needed time for contemplation.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

The holiday season has its lists of “must see” movies. For many, the first of the “Home Alone” films is near the top. Macaulay Culkin starred as Kevin McCallister, a young boy who is mistakenly left behind when his family flies to Paris for their Christmas vacation. “How could his parents be that distracted?” Well, they lost their perspective and their priorities shifted.

That is a metaphor for our own Christmas celebrations - much activity around this birth but with little reflection on it. Which means that by late December part of our annual tradition includes a pang of regret for a lost opportunity. “One of these years, I’ll take advantage of the Advent season. I’ll do better next time.” Well, let me make a suggestion. How about this time?

SCRIPTURE READING: [Luke 2:15-20](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Christmas has been celebrated for many years and in many ways - some good, some bad. You may not know this but, until the 1800’s, it was mostly a pagan affair. In England and early America, Christ was hardly in Christmas. It was not for worship, prayer, and reflection. It was for bawdy songs, drinking rum, and street riots. It was so bad there were attempts to outlaw it.

That’s the context of a quote from an 18th c. preacher, George Whitefield ([READ quote](#)):

May we chant forth the wonders of redeeming love and the riches of free grace, amidst angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, without intermission, forever and ever! And as, my brethren, the time for keeping this festival is approaching, let us consider our duty in the true observation thereof, of the right way for the glory of God, and the good of immortal souls, to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ; an event which ought to be had in eternal remembrance.

Whitefield’s point was that it’s not that Christmas shouldn’t be observed but that we should consider how. That is, just because there’s a wrong way doesn’t mean there can’t be a right way.

Which brings me to our series, “The Traditions of Christmas”. We’re going to look at some customs and their origins - songs, decorations, and gifts. Those are well known and much done. But first, we’re going to look at a custom that is neglected but needed - contemplation. It’s a tradition with deep historical roots. And it needs to be reclaimed. For Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus. We should then take the needed time for contemplation.

To get at this, we’re going to consider the why, the what, and the how of contemplation.

I. THE WHY OF CONTEMPLATION

First, the *why*. That is, the rationale behind it ([READ Luke 2:17-19](#)). The shepherds went forth with a message. And there is a clear contrast in the responses of Mary and everyone else in Bethlehem. Hers is put forth as the one that is good and right. Which takes us to the *why*.

A) What the People Heard

1. News from angels

Consider for a moment what the people heard. The shepherds said that, in the fields just outside of town, they saw the glory of the Lord, the light of His presence. And angels, His messengers.

2. News of a King

And, according to the shepherds, those angels came heralding the news of a King, the Lord Himself, come as one of us for us. They had seen His angels. And they had even seen Him.

B) How the People Responded

1. Dismissive

That's what the people heard. How did they respond? They were dismissive of the messengers. Shepherds in those days were perceived as uneducated, unclean, and unreliable. Their testimony was received as doubtful. In a court of law they would be dismissed as unreliable witnesses.

2. Distracted

So they were dismissive of the messengers. And too distracted to hear the message (**READ Luke 2:18**). This is not a description of belief. This is vague non-commitment. And all too common.

Which is to say that we cannot afford to do what comes naturally or instinctively here.

Illustration:

Advent is not a time to do what is natural. Of course, even a surface level celebration will impel us to do unnatural things. We wear outlandish sweaters. We eat too much, spend too much, and hang out with strange people. Well, to go deeper than a surface level celebration, we'll need to do one more unnatural thing - to follow through intentionally with contemplation.

Application:

But how? The only way to say "yes" to this will be to say "no" to other things. Which will mean a few less errands and cutting back on a few more outings. It will mean finding ways to serve and care for the least of these. And making time (and helping others to make time) for a true celebration and anticipation, a heartfelt waiting and longing in observation of the season.

Don't hear me say what I'm not saying. I'm not saying "Cut out fun and frivolity." But first things first. It will mean intentionality, decisions and resolve with a greater good in view.

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II. THE WHAT OF CONTEMPLATION

The *why* is the rationale. Which brings us to the *what*. That is, the focus of our attention.

A) The Focus of Mary's Attention

1. Insight from Jerome

Consider the focus of Mary's attention (**READ Luke 2:19**). Listen to these words from Jerome, a scholar who spent the last 35 years of his life working from Bethlehem. This is from a sermon, likely preached in the late 4th or early 5th century at the Basilica of the Nativity (**READ quote**):

She looked at the child lying before her; she saw the child crying in the manger; she saw there the Son of God, her Son, her one and only Son; she looked at him, and in her musing, she compared what she had heard with what she had read and with what she herself perceived.

2. Summary

What is he saying? That Mary had heard the prophecies read. That she had heard the promise from the angel. And now she was seeing and holding the fulfillment of it all there in her arms.

B) The Focus of Our Attention

1. The reality of what we possess

Which brings us to what needs to be the focus of our own attention. But you say, "Wait. We don't have any of what Mary did." Ah, yes, we do. These very texts which are every bit as true.

2. The character of what we possess

That's the reality of what we possess. Now think of the character of what we possess. This is not a ragbag of religious bits and pieces. This is a tapestry in which all the complexities of the weave display a single pattern. It is a unified text. And inspired - a uniqueness here comparable to the person of Jesus Himself, fully human and fully divine. It is absolutely miraculous.

So, as for the *what* of our contemplation, it is the Scriptures - the focus of our attention.

Illustration:

One of the things in the news these days is the proliferation of fake news stories during the recent presidential campaign - not just satire and false stories but things made up and spread around social media. The goals and agendas may vary. But the result is the same - a public made even more misinformed and divided, compromising the integrity of the electoral process.

Application:

So what's the connection to the *what* of contemplation? We need to return to the sources. By that, I mean simply this. It's not enough to go for a walk in the crisp air to get in touch with your Creator. It's not enough to watch holiday specials or hum carols. It's not enough to read Advent devotionals if they fail to take us to what must be first and the focus of our attention - the Scriptures, the true and living God's revelation of Himself by His inerrant and infallible Word. We have the very riches before us that Mary had. And we need to lay hold of them over all else.

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III. THE HOW OF CONTEMPLATION

So that's the *why* and the *what* of Advent contemplation. So what about the *how*?

A) Implicit with the Context

Partly, there are some implicit things just in the larger context (**READ Luke 2:8-20**).

1. The nature of God

What do we learn of the nature of God through this historical record? He is infinite - governing and intervening in His creation as easily as when He spoke it into being. He is infinite. But He is also personal. He is not just a mystical idea or force. God can be known. Such is His nature.

2. The revelation of God

In fact, we learn things not just of the nature of God but the revelation of God. He wants us to know about Him. And to know Him. For both the sake of His glory and our deepest good, He wants us to know Him, to find our life and meaning in Him, to have communion with Him.

B) Explicit with the Text

All that is implicit here. But there are explicit things here as well (**READ Luke 2:19**).

1. The need to treasure

To “treasure up all these things” is to savor and relish them. It is to preserve, protect, and keep them safe. This is not so much a technique or discipline but an attitude and posture of the heart.

2. The need to ponder

And that is what Mary is doing as she ponders, as she works them over in her mind, considering and conversing in her thoughts. To “ponder these things in her heart” implies “an extended period of sustained reflection” and “a laboring to make sense and plumb the depths” of it all.

What we see is that to the degree to which we grasp what we have here, we will then give ourselves to this contemplation. Which will then cause us to grasp what we have all the more.

Illustration:

Think with me of what we do when we have a present put before us. Just to be playful and to relish the moment, we’ll try to figure out what’s inside without actually opening it. We ask ourselves who gave it to us. We call to mind what was on our gift list. We try and guess the weight, the size, the shape. We gently move it about. Why? All to discover what’s inside.

Application:

It’s something like that here with this treasure worth our pondering - whatever genre, whatever book, whatever passage. We should be studying, thinking, observing. Taking the time to sit with it. Making the effort to paraphrase the text, putting it into our own words. Letting the layers of meaning and the levels of implications work their way out and into our thoughts.

But not stopping there. We need to ask, “How would my life be different if I truly and deeply believed this? How would it change my thinking, my feeling, my priorities? What would it do to the image I hold of myself? To my relationships with others? And with the Lord?”

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CONCLUSION:

(**READ Matthew 2:19**) What is she contemplating? The Immanuel promise spoken 800 years before its fulfilling (**READ Isaiah 7:14**). The miracle of miracles. God with us - not just a great king but the Creator King over all. God with us - not by our striving towards Him but His coming to us. God with us - not just with the perfect and powerful but the wavering and weak. This is what Mary was keeping and holding. This is what she was working out in her thoughts.

This is what has inspired the lyrics of the carols that pull upon and shape our hearts. I mentioned earlier the Christ-less Christmas celebrations of the past. There were at least a couple

of things that kept the fire alive. Anglican and Catholic churches stubbornly holding on to their Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services. Coupled with that, the composition and preservation of carols that made their way over from the continent. With lyrics such as this ([READ quote](#)):

O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Mary would gladly have sung of these inexhaustible riches, of these unfathomable depths and these unscalable heights beyond the reach of the greatest explorers. Mary would join in our singing, in our inexpressible wonder beyond the philosophers' and the theologians' ability to express or explain. We are contemplating things here that are so far beyond our comprehension.

Ah, my friends, do you see? To say such a time of contemplation would be well spent would have to be the understatement of recorded history. This is to ground us in reality. This is to fuel our greatest hope. This is to put us in touch with the God who is there. Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus. We should then take the needed time for contemplation.

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