

Sermon for January 8, 2017 – “Where’d Christmas Go?”

Epiphany of the Lord, Year A – Text(s): Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Westwood First Presbyterian Church – Pastor Jeff Colarossi

It’s a new year and today we celebrate Epiphany Sunday, the day we “officially” mark the end of the Christmas season. Today’s the day that we hear the final part of the Christmas story, that of the Three Wise Men. Today’s technically the last day to say “Merry Christmas” to people, although it may sound sort of weird to do so. Most of us probably stopped over a week ago. This time next week the Christmas decorations will be gone; I’m guessing the rest of us won’t be too far behind. Then again, maybe you’ve already taken down your decorations. Maybe you’ve already put Christmas away. I’m guessing most of you’ve already returned your Christmas presents for something that you really wanted, already used up those gift cards. Kids are already back to school. Most of us are already back to our old routines. No more holidays to disrupt our lives. So, life is more or less back to normal as if nothing’s really happened. The ripple in the pond has faded away, and thus endeth Christmas, 2016. Is it just me, or does it seem that Christmas seems to come and go far too quickly?

In any case, despite that and even though it’s a lot of work, I’m always glad to see Christmas come. Why, you ask? Well, for one thing, people generally seem happier. Most of us are a little kinder, a little more thoughtful, a little more generous, a little more considerate to others. Christmas, for the most part, is the time of year we see the human race a little closer to what God intended it to be. Not perfect, but just a bit more peaceful. Edgar Guest expresses this beautifully in a poem. He wrote:

Human beings are the finest towards the finish of the year;
We are almost like we should be when the Christmas season’s here.

Then we are thinking more of others than we did the month before,
And the laughter of the children is a joy worth waiting for.

We are less the selfish creatures than at any other time,
When the Christmas spirit rules us, we come close to the sublime.

We are ever in a struggle and we are often misunderstood,
There are days that the worst of us is the master of the good.

But at Christmastime, kindness rules us and we put ourselves aside,
Our petty hates are vanquished and our hearts are open wide.

O, I don’t know how to say it, but somehow it seems to be,
That at Christmas time – we are almost – what God meant us to be.

A beautiful poem to be sure, but where does Christmas go? What happens to peace on earth, good will towards others? For some, all that’s boxed up and stored away for another year, conveniently confined to one day a year, twelve days at most. It’s **merely** Christmas peace and **merely** Christmas generosity, intended only for the season, just like Christmas cards and carols.

So where does it go? What happens to the shepherds, the wise men, and Jesus? What happened to them after Christmas was over? Where did the shepherds of Bethlehem go? Luke tells us that, **“They returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”** They returned to their simple everyday tasks of caring for their sheep. They’d heard the angels singing. They’d gone to the manger and seen the baby Jesus. Back at the ranch, however, life went on. There were sheep to be tended, pastures to be cultivated, fences to be mended and wool to be sheared. There was lots of work to be done. Life’s like that for most of us. We return to our old steady routines, our appointed tasks. We go back to our everyday living.

Now, Luke could’ve just said, “They returned to their fields” and that would’ve been fine. But he doesn’t. They didn’t simply return to their fields. They did so, Luke tells us, “glorifying and praising God.” It’s probably an understatement to say that it changes everything. But, what does this mean? Specifically, what does it mean for us? What does it mean for us as we return to “normal” (whatever that may look like)? What does that mean to go back to our old routines and old jobs or, as some put, the “real world”, glorifying and praising God? For starters even if we’ve given any consideration at all to what Christmas is all about, it means that we go back a little more aware of God’s goodness, His generosity, and His grace. A little more thankful each and every day in the knowledge that God is with us in the ordinary tasks of daily living.

You see, when God chose to become a human being, He chose, of all things, to become a down-to-earth carpenter. The Greek word is tekton. A craftsman, a builder. Someone whose work involves getting their hands dirty. It stands to reason then that Jesus experienced the pain of hitting His thumb with a hammer, the frustrations of bending a nail, trying to make something level. At Christmas, we learn that God became fully human. As Paul put it in his letter to the Philippian’s, Jesus **“emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness... And found human in appearance, he humbled himself...”** In that way He was able to live as we do and experience everything regular people experience which would include the first century versions of all the dumb, boring, mundane, monotonous things we do every day. That was the plan. That’s how God works. That’s how God is with us...literally. What’s more, this is how God works to sanctify **all** of life, **all** aspects of human existence.

We, by extension, are called to do the same. What do I mean? I mean that we’re called to make this world a better place by doing the **ordinary** things of life graciously and peacefully. Ordinary things like doing dishes, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, taking out the trash, going to work or school. There’s a line in the movie, *Chariots of Fire*: “You can praise God by peeling a spud if you peel it to perfection. Don’t compromise. Compromise is a language of the devil.” Everything we do is, or can be, holy if we do it “glorifying and praising God.”

In a Christmas sermon, one pastor put it this way: “Christmas continues when we’re able to say: I raise my children for God. I am an engineer for God. I am a schoolteacher for God. I pound the typewriter for God. I do all of these things for God and God’s kingdom. Indeed, God is found in the ordinary things of life. So it is with all of us. We go back to our fields, whatever they are, wherever they are. We go back glorifying and praising God. Back, knowing that God loves us. Knowing that God’s been where we’ve been.

Knowing that God's with us in the ordinary routines of life. Knowing that it's through the common and ordinary routines of our petty lives that we carry out God's work in the world.

Which brings us to our next question: where did the magi go? Matthew tells us that, **“Being warned in a dream, they departed to their own country another way.”** And, I like to think that they did so little wiser. Wiser? Yes, wiser, because they knew they'd found God in an unlikely place. They found Him not in a palace, but an ordinary home. What's more, they returned lighter. You see, they'd come bearing heavy gifts, they returned without them; without their gold, without their frankincense, without their myrrh. They returned with an indescribable lightness of heart that every generous giver knows. In helping this poor family in need, they discovered God's secret. Giving of themselves as God had given of Himself to them.

Where did the shepherds go? Back to their fields. Back to their sheep. Where did the wise men go? Back their homelands. Back to their lives. All of them forever changed by their experience. One final question ~ Where did Jesus go? As we well know, the story did not end in Bethlehem. The child would grow and become strong filled with wisdom, the favor of God upon him. The story that began in a stable, would continue. It would continue as the now-grown man spread good news throughout the region, even in the most unexpected places. People flocked to hear Him. They would return to their homes glorifying and praising God forever changed by the experience. It would continue on a cross on a hill and in a borrowed tomb, found empty. It would continue as the man's closest friends, who themselves had been changed by their experience, brought the story of the good news to people in all parts of the world. Thriving in the most unexpected places changing people's lives forever. The story continues still with no ending in the foreseeable future. What's this tell us? It tells us that God isn't done, not by a longshot. It tells us that God is still speaking. That God is still very much active in the world still writing the Christmas story. In unexpected places, changing lives forever.

And the good news? We can all be part of it. But **will** we? Have we allowed it to change **us**? Earlier I asked the question: Where did Christmas go? Too often for too many, it goes boxed up and put away until next year. But for those who've prepared Him room, for those who've allowed Jesus to be born in their hearts, we return to our fields wherever they are, and we do so praising and glorifying God. Finding ourselves wiser, lighter, forever changed by our experience, a part of what God is already at work doing!

For us – to borrow from a song by Irving Berlin – Christmas has ended but the melody lingers on!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.