

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
First Sunday after Christmas Day
December 30, 2018

In Pursuit of Christmas

Luke 2:41-52; Colossians 3:12-17

Have you ever wondered why we always find it hard to believe
we've reached the end of another year,
why it always seems to have passed by in the blink of an eye?
We always ask it: where has the year gone?
Where has 2018 gone?

Why do we say that?
I mean, most of us can count to 365.
But 2018 has gone the way of all the years.
Time flies — when you're having fun, and even when you're not.

One place the year slowed down was at Tuesday morning breakfasts here at Fourth,
as we studied Ecclesiastes this fall —
most of us thought we'd never get through that dreary book,
and it dwells quite a lot — or rather *wallows in* — the passage of time.
But like all things, that also came to an end,
and we are looking forward to a more uplifting New Testament study in January.

We have carried on our many traditions here at Fourth in 2018:

We enjoyed another fascinating Pellett-Wearn series
and then celebrated Easter with amazing music, as always.
We nurtured our children in the family of faith through Crossway and VCS.
We graduated another crop of our Youth
and sent them off to college and their other endeavors.
We took mission trips out to California and just down the road to Clinton.
We had, yet again, a transition of Associate Pastors —
this time, Jackie, we hope we're settling in for a good while!
We've dealt with a lot of weather,
canceling our retreat due to a hurricane,
and rescheduling major Christmas events due to an ice storm.

Nevertheless, we've still enjoyed our usual gatherings for eating together
from picnics and BBQ's
to Wednesday Night Fellowship and food trucks.
And along the way,
we've welcomed several groups of new members into our congregation.

And then, on the first Sunday of December,
we lit the first candle in our Advent wreath
and began the journey toward Christmas.

Except the journey toward Christmas
might be better described as a sprint!

Why is it that getting ready for Christmas often feels
less like expectant, cheerful preparation
and more like hot pursuit?
Or worse, you wish it were hot pursuit,
but the red and white lights around you
are headlights and taillights
because you're stuck at an intersection on Woodruff Rd,
or these days, Augusta Rd, which can be almost as bad.

Perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves
about this seeming disconnect between our December state of mind
and the true Spirit of Christmas,
because, actually,
our stressed out attention to the matters of life,
that leave minds scattered and our bodies tense
may have more to do with the Spirit of Christmas
than at first it seems.

Christmas is about Incarnation - not De-carnation.

It is about God becoming flesh,
not about us leaving flesh
and entering some state of perfect, peaceful, spiritual equilibrium.
Incarnation means the Word became flesh and dwelt among us —
and much of that dwelling here on earth has to do with
taking care of the generations of family who need us.

Consider Mary and Joseph.
Out-of-wedlock pregnancy? Social ostracism?
A 70 mile trek on a donkey just to accommodate Roman bureaucracy?
It may seem obvious to *us*
how the gift of the Incarnation changed their lives for the better,
but was it obvious to them at the time?

The angels had done an admirable job of explaining it all to them.
When Mary receives her Christmas calling from the Angel Gabriel,
telling her of a new vocation God has given, to be the mother of Jesus,
she accepts willingly,
*Here am I, the servant of the Lord,
let it be with me according to your word.*

But angelic announcement or not,
there is no way she could be prepared for all that follows the manger.

This Bethlehem stable is only the first stop on a long journey with this child,
back and forth between Egypt and Palestine, in the early years,
protecting Jesus from those who sought to kill him.
Then watching him grow up for 12 years in Nazareth.
Those 12 years passed quickly — in about... six days! ...for us
Any parent who's raised a child,
knows it probably felt almost that fast for Mary and Joseph.

Mary and Joseph have taken their calling very seriously,
and have maintained a devout lifestyle...
...they've had their baby circumcised on the eighth day,
and named him Jesus, as commanded.
...they've carefully followed the law of Moses in Mary's subsequent purification
and in presenting Jesus in the Temple.
...and it has become their custom to make the journey to Jerusalem,
every year for Passover.
Probably a 5-day journey to get there, and 5 days back.

Luke says, when Jesus is 12 years old,
they went up to Jerusalem *as usual* for the festival.
As usual (*ethos* in the Greek) suggests a custom, or habit,
a pattern of behavior fixed by tradition.

Even though there is nothing else written about the young Jesus in the scriptures,
we at least know that he grew up with parents
who made it a habit of obeying the Law of Moses,
and who were devout in their participation in worship.
In short, Mary and Joseph are knocking themselves out
to be good Jewish parents for their child.

But today, their pursuit takes on a frantic nature.
Have you ever lost your child in a crowd, out in public?
If so you probably still get butterflies just thinking about it.
All the worst things go through your mind.

We can imagine the agony of these devout parents,
who've been trying to do everything right,
and this is what they have to show for it:
they have lost Jesus, not just for a few minutes,
but for an entire day's journey.

When they go back to Jerusalem it takes them 3 days of searching to find him.
Can you imagine!?
When at last they do find him,
the frustration of Mary's question reveals the intensity of their stress:
Child, why have you treated us like this?
You father and I have been worried sick looking all over for you.

I'm guessing they grounded him and took away his cell phone for a while.

How could the peace announced by the angels have turned into this?

Just like Mary and Joseph,
we would all like to stay in those glorious moments,
in the peaceful bliss of a newborn sleeping in his mother's arm,
warmed by her loving gaze, and the adoration of visitors.

But as we know, and Mary must suspect,
life with Jesus will require more than this.
She has said "Yes" to the Angel Gabriel, once.

But it seems it will be “yes” and “yes” and “yes, again” to God,
as Mary pursues her Christmas calling time and time and time again—
sometimes hot pursuit,
and often anxious, confusing, troubling.

Even when Jesus explains that he was only pursuing his own calling,
being about his Father’s business,
Luke tells us that *they did not understand what he said to them*.

So when our translation tells us that Mary *treasured* all these things in her heart,
that may sound a bit more positive than was intended.

It is more accurate to say that she *kept* all these things in her heart;
she mulled them over, pondered them,
and probably did a good deal of motherly fretting about them.

This journey with Jesus, this living out of her Christmas calling,
this great mystery of the Incarnation,
would often require of Mary to be patient and persistent
and to keep trusting with all her heart
that God would be faithful to God’s promise.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church,
Mary is called the *theotokos*,
which means “the God bearer”

Mary, the mother of Jesus, bears God into the world.
So, in one sense, she is not like us.
And yet we cannot hear Mary’s story without thinking of our own.

God calls us into the unknown future,
into challenges that seem far beyond our means.

God calls us to love Jesus,
to follow him wherever he leads us;
to love those Jesus loves
which can require more energy and stamina
than we ever thought we had.

We, like Mary, are called on a journey
in which we discover the meaning of the Incarnation
for our lives, and our world.
The journey takes our whole lives,
that takes our whole heart, and mind, and strength.

Like Mary, we say yes once to God. Then we must say it again. And again.
And just when we think we’ve got things figured out,
God’s plan takes a new turn,
and we must say yet another, trusting “yes.”
Here am I...let it be with me according to your word.

Each time, as we continue on,
we, also, become...
...God-bearers in the world.

The Incarnation means that, too.
In a real sense,
Christ is born in our hearts,
so that we then make him present to those we meet.

Think of it as new Christmas clothes. That's how Paul describes it.

Did any of you receive new clothes, or new shoes, a new coat,
or a smart watch, or jewelry for Christmas?
If so, do you plan on packing these things away without wearing them?
Maybe pull them out next Christmas?
Paul says we all got new clothes for Christmas,
and we ought to begin wearing them, right away:
*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves
with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience...and the like.
...Above all clothe yourselves with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

By wearing these new clothes, we show who we are:
We are the Christmas people;
the people who have received the astounding gift of the Incarnation,
the breathtaking reality of God-with-us.
I guess you could say we are Christ-wearers.

If ever there was a gift that should not be simply packed away
and brought out once a year, it is the Incarnation
The Incarnation remains with us, through every day of the coming year,
be it a peaceful day, or a hectic day,
a day filled with pleasure or with pain.

The gift of God-With-Us
can transform our lives into something new, every day.
Our new Christmas clothing can be worn into work on Monday morning,
and on the first day back to school, and every day after that -
as you're stuck in traffic, standing in line at the checkout,
sitting at the kitchen table paying bills;
you can even wear them to bed,
even when all you have on is a hospital gown.

So please,
do not try to pack the Incarnation away with your other Christmas ornaments;
truth is, you wouldn't be able to even if you tried.

Far from being left behind in the Christmas season,
the Incarnation goes ahead of us
and calls us forward into the rest of our lives.

Christmas gives us a new holy pursuit to direct all our pursuits:
we are God-bearers for the world,
Christ-wearers for the world.

Let it be through you and through me...
that God keeps giving the gift of Christmas...
...to the world.