

WANT TO KEEP CHRIST IN CHRISTMAS?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Friday is the deadline for submitting my December article to *The Duplin Times*. Last Sunday I thought I had the perfect topic – until a little voice in my head said, “You’ve already written about that. Don’t you remember?” Hoping against hope that I hadn’t already written on this particular topic, I looked through my computer files for the months of December since 2017. Sure enough, there it was – the article that I sent on December 14, 2018. So, I’ve got to come up with another topic for this month’s “On Faith” article. However, part of what I wrote three years ago is appropriate for this second Sunday in Advent 2021, when we hear about John the Baptist in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Here’s the second half of my article from three years ago: “At this time of year, you might see the message in advertisements or on store signs, “Merry Xmas!” In reaction to that greeting, you’ll probably also see church signs and bumper stickers that say something like “No Xmas -- put Christ back in Christmas!” Many people, including some prominent Christian leaders, interpret “Xmas” as some kind of affront to the faith or a secular attack on Christmas. I beg to differ, primarily because of the history and meaning of “Xmas.” The twenty-second letter of the Greek alphabet is *chi*. An uppercase *chi* looks like our capital “X.” *Chi* is the first letter of Christ in Greek. For at least 1,000 years, Christians have used “X” as a substitute for Christ, and not just in the word Christmas (for example, the name Christopher would be Xopher, which means Christ-bearer). A common Christian symbol for Jesus Christ is the Chi-Rho, the first two letters of Christ in Greek. While style guides for writers often discourage the use of “Xmas,” the history of its use argues against some conspiracy against Christians in general and Christmas in particular. A Wikipedia article about “Xmas” shows an “Xmas” advertisement from a 1922 edition of the Ladies’ Home Journal, hardly a bastion of radical, secular humanism. My hunch is many people and businesses that use “Xmas” in their holiday advertising (1) don’t have an anti-Christmas motivation and (2) may not know the history of the use of *chi* as a faithful abbreviation for Christ. Perhaps advertising rates and space limitations determine their choice of “Xmas” more than any ideological motive. Instead of being offended when you see ‘Merry Xmas,’ why not welcome the greeting in the spirit of hope, love, joy, peace, and generosity? Merry Christmas!”

Well, we’re not quite to Christmas yet, but the underlying message of keeping Christ in Christmas is relevant to John’s message of repentance. He pulled no punches in his preaching. He got to the heart of the matter and countered any religious claims and presumptions right off the bat. Here’s how *The Message* describes it: When crowds

of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your *life* that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.” (Luke 3:7-9)

We could sympathize with the crowds if they were offended by John’s message or got defensive at his calling them snakes slithering down to the water. Instead, the crowds asked John, “What then should we do?” to which John replied, “Share your coats and food with those who don’t have any. Don’t take more than you’re supposed to. Don’t use your position of power and authority to manipulate other people.” In other words, once you come out of the waters of baptism, live as if it actually means something in your life. Someone has characterized John’s message as one of “social responsibility,” a call to live an ethical life. John’s message sounds a lot like what we’ve been hearing from the first Sunday in June – from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount; from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians; and from Jesus’s encounters with would-be followers on his journey to Jerusalem. We might sum up the whole message this way: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Interestingly, in Volume II of Luke’s two volume work, the Book of Acts, after Peter preached a convicting sermon about Jesus Christ on the Day of Pentecost, the crowds were cut to the heart and asked, “Brothers, what should we do?” – the very same question the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers on the banks of the Jordan River asked John. Peter echoed John’s wilderness cry: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:37-38) But Luke tells us they did even more than that: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, had all things in common, sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all who had need, spent much time together in the temple, broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praised God, and had the goodwill of all the people.” (Acts 2:42-46)

In other words, they bore fruits worthy of repentance. Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. My sermon title was inspired by a Facebook meme that some of you may have seen: “Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the unwanted, care for the ill, love your enemies, and do unto others as you would have done unto you.” Someone else posted another meme with a similar message. It is a Christmas To-Do List that will sound familiar: buy presents; wrap gifts; send gifts; shop for food; see the lights. However, the list has been tweaked with a red pencil. The new To-Do List sounds sort of like John’s answer to the crowds that asked, “What then should we do?” The revised list reads: be present; wrap someone in a hug; send peace; donate food; be the light.

Right before I wrote this sermon, I saw another Facebook meme posted by a friend that reads: “The appropriate greeting is not ‘Merry Christmas’ but ‘Penitent Advent You Miserable Sinner.’” That made me chuckle, but maybe in a sort of uneasy way. There were some very interesting comments in response to that meme: “If Advent is a time of repentance, making penance, and preparation, some of y’all better hope Jesus comes back later rather than sooner. . . I said this to a friend of mine at a store today who was working behind the counter, and immediately got a congrats and high-five from the guy behind me in line . . . I once heard an Advent sermon that began, ‘Merry Christmas, you brood of vipers!’”

Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Then do something! In a sermon called “Live Prepared,” Dr. John Westerhoff says, “There was a time when to repent implied expressing deep sorrow and regret for our sins. . . Advent became much like Lent, a second penitential season. But in our day theologians have rightfully turned Advent into a contemplative season in which we are invited to contemplate future possibilities and how we might live faithfully between the times, between Christ’s first and second comings, between the already and not yet of God’s new creation.” He concludes, “Living prepared is more than our getting ready for God to do something. Rather, it is to reflect upon what we ask God to do in our prayers so that we might make sure that we are cooperating with God to make those prayers possible. Remember, by nature we humans are wholly dependent on God, but also remember that God has chosen to be dependent on us. We can do nothing without God’s help and God will do nothing without ours.”¹

At the end of Wednesday morning’s Bible study, I posed a rhetorical question to folks to think about in preparation for worship, for going through this Advent season, and for living in this in-between time, between the now and the not yet. Let me share it with you, also. Imagine that John the Baptist was our preacher this morning. You have heard his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and his many other exhortations of good news. As you shake John’s hand in the vestibule after worship, you ask him, “What then should I do?” What would John say to you?

Norman Cousins was the editor of *The Saturday Review* from 1940-1971. One of his editorials was about an interesting conversation he had with a Hindu priest in India. I read this to the Wednesday morning Bible Study group. When I finished, someone said, “Those are harsh words.” Yes, they are. But, then, so were John the Baptist’s words in the wilderness. Nevertheless, Luke includes John’s desert preaching with his many other exhortations and calls them “good news.” Here is Norman Cousins’s story:

“He talked at length with a Hindu priest named Satis Prasad. The man said he wanted to come to our country to work as a missionary among the Americans. Cousins assumed that he meant that he wanted to convert Americans to the Hindu religion. But when asked, Satis Prasad said, ‘Oh no, I would like to convert them to the Christian religion. Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It needs not membership, but believers. Not people who talk about their faith but live their faith. The people of your country may claim they believe in Christianity; but from what I read at this distance, Christianity is more a custom than anything else. I would ask that you either accept the teachings of Jesus in your everyday life and in your affairs as a nation, or stop invoking

His name as sanction for everything you do. I want to help save Christianity for the Christian.”²

Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Well, Advent is a good time to start getting ready to do just that. What should we do? Love God. Love neighbor. Follow Jesus. Be awake. Be alert. Be faithful. Be ready. Share with those in need. . . and you can add to that list whatever you imagine John the Baptist might tell you when you shake his hand in the vestibule. If we use this Advent season “to contemplate future possibilities and how we might live faithfully between the times, between Christ’s first and second comings,” then we will be that much more ready to do the work of Christmas each and every day of our lives.

The “Work of Christmas” – that’s the title of a poem by Howard Thurman, an American author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader. His poem is a good answer to the question, “What should we do?” and is a good guide to keeping Christ in Christmas.

The Work of Christmas

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.*

Let us pray: God, in this Advent season suspended between hope and fulfillment, let us never forget what you have done. May we be overwhelmed by your mercy. May we be honest about the darkness within us and welcome your light that shines in the darkness. In what we say we believe and how we live each day, may we make straight the path for the Lord, that together we may see God’s glory revealed. Amen.

NOTES

¹The Rev. Dr. John H. Westerhoff, III, “Live Prepared,” December 9, 2012 at www.day1.org.

²The Rev. Dr. Robert T. Baggott, “Getting There,” December 16, 2012 at www.day1.org. Dr. Baggott cites B. Clayton Bell in *Preaching*, May-June, 1986.