

Christmas Eve Candlelight 2022 *“What We Celebrate This Day”*

There is often confusion about what is “the true meaning of Christmas.”

Some people will tell you that it’s all about family: Getting together for meals and parties with family, intimate and extended. Experiencing the love of grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, as well as your own parents and siblings

Some will tell you the true meaning of Christmas is about giving to the poor. You make a sacrifice on behalf of someone who is less fortunate than you. Give food to the hungry, coats for kids, mittens and scarves, maybe even a toy or two. Or simply toss some coins in a bucket, or write out a check.

Some will say the true meaning of Christmas is looking for world peace. We should desire, even pray, that all global conflicts would cease and all the parties to conflict go home and dwell in blissful coexistence. We should pray especially this year for a specific war to end that will free up sons and daughters from the prospects of death and mayhem.

Some will say that the true meaning of Christmas is faith. They will talk about the faith of a child in the magic of Santa. Or, the faith to believe that one person’s life can make a difference (a la George Bailey in “It’s a Wonderful Life”). Some want to tell you to have faith that things can and will get better if we all work at it.

Some people will honestly admit that they just don’t know what is the true meaning of Christmas. I recently encountered a story that portrayed a dog’s view of Christmas, and it suggested to me that this may be how many people may view it as well, The various dogs in this story understood Christmas to mean many things: One said, *“Christmas is when people take trees into their homes. They decorate them and when Christmas Day arrives, they give each other presents.”* Another said, *“Christmas is having lots of food.”* A third thought, *“Christmas is when careless people cause fires,”* (that must have been the dalmatian).

Some people just throw up their hands, shake their heads and mutter a “*Bah, humbug!*” at the whole idea of Christmas.

So what is the true meaning of Christmas? Certainly I have no quarrel with according a value to families gathering and supporting one another (we plan for our family to do just that tomorrow). Clearly support for the poor is of value, not just at Christmas but throughout the year. Faith and peace are both laudable goals toward which to strive (although I would caution that faith needs to have the right object to be worth the effort). But these seem to only part of the meaning, not the central meaning.

If you do an online search, as I did, you will discover that site after site has the right accent on what is the true meaning of Christmas. Many of them simply point you to the Christmas Gospel, St. Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus (although one site seemed to think that those words came from Linus of the comic strip Peanuts). Without question the event in that stable in Bethlehem lies at the heart of what Christmas is all about — although I have to admit I have become more than a tad weary of the slogan (as I weary of all slogans): “*Jesus is the Reason for the Season.*” (It’s catchy, I admit; it just gets overworked and becomes banal.) But it is what lies behind that story that is the real meaning of this day.

So I invite you to think with me about what lies behind the Christmas story, and ponder what it is that we celebrate this day.

The first thing we celebrate is God’s Love. It saddens me to hear people speak of God as this vindictive, angry deity ready to “getcha” at the drop of a hat. Some time ago, I picked up a book from the library (just happened upon it on the shelf) with the inglorious title, *The Things You Do that Tick God Off*. What a hideous distortion of the Biblical record, made even worse by the blurb on the jacket cover that warned the potential reader that ticking God off is something you really don’t want to do, but presented the two authors have the Biblical know-how to help you get on God’s good side. As if God has to be convinced in some way to love you. The whole premise, made worse by the unmitigated gall to claim that this is Biblical, is that God is so easily peeved — at the

slightest provocation He can twinkle his nose and turn you into a toad [oops, I'm sorry, that's Samantha the witch . . . but these two radio personalities (that's how they're portrayed, although I'd never heard of them) are so far afield from the Bible that they may as well be writing a TV sitcom].

“God is love,” the Bible tells us. And then St. John goes on: ***“In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.”*** God is love . . . not, *“God could be love,”* or *“Here’s how to get God to love you.”* The Bible is not a how-to book filled with articles like the ones on the cover of some teen-throb magazine with titles like: *“How to get him to notice you.”* or *“Three witty things to say that will melt his heart.”* or *“The four things that will drive men crazy for you.”*

I got good news — God is already crazy for you! How crazy? Crazy enough to take on our humanity and then live in our brokenness, experience our hatefulness, our prejudice, our narrowmindedness, our lies, distortions, cruelty and oppression. Crazy enough to speak the truth, all the truth, which was sure to earn Him nothing but reviling, persecution, and death. Crazy enough to set aside His divine powers and face death as one of us. Crazy enough to let that sacrifice be the thing that frees us from the shackles of our own broken, narrow, judgmental, lying, distorted, cruel, and self-centered selves.

What we celebrate today is a God who came to our forebears in the Garden of Eden—the ones who broke covenant with Him, who disrespected His will, who shamefully thought they could do better than He — this is the God who came to them and did not say, *“That’s it! Death was threatened, death is shall be!”* No. Instead He said, *“This is not over,”* and instantaneously put into action a plan to bring us back to wholeness with Him. We celebrate a love that will not let go of us . . . will not give us over to our self-destructive ways . . . will not stop loving us.

The second thing we celebrate today is God's Glory. The song we hear the angels sing is "***Glory to God in the highest . . .***" That's because glory belongs to God in the highest. Let's understand that sentence: It could mean that glory belongs to God and where it belongs is in the highest places, i.e. heaven. It could mean that glory belongs to God because He is in the highest places, i.e. heaven. "*What's the difference?*" you may ask. The difference is that the sounding out of glory, the recognition of glory, the praise of glory does not belong just in the heavenly realms, that is, among the angels. That glory is here . . . among us

Why do you suppose the angels sang *that* song? Because it had just climbed to number one in the celestial Top Ten? No, there a message in it for us: the glory that is in the highest is now proclaimed to us here on earth. Because that glory now resides here: "***. . . the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.***" The angels are announcing more than a birth, more than the arrival of the long-expected Messiah: they are trumpeting the arrival on earth of God!

But how have we beheld his glory? To Moses God had said, "***. . . you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.***" That was not a threat; it was a statement of fact — to behold God in full glory would kill us; we couldn't take it all in. So, Luther says, God comes to us wearing masks — *larvae Dei*: He speaks from a burning bush; He shows Himself as a pillar of cloud and fire; He is a still, small voice speaking to Elijah on a mountain; He comes in visions, dreams. The single greatest mask God has ever worn is the Incarnation.

And yet, John insists, we have seen His glory. Somehow, from behind this mask we call the Child of Bethlehem, and would later come to know as Jesus of Nazareth, glimpses of the glory of God shine through. And I'm not here speaking of the Transfiguration (although that is an important event of the glory's manifestation). I'm speaking of the countless ways by which Jesus engaged individuals and connected them to the divine: the touch of his hand; a word spoken that restored, forgave,

encouraged; tears that were shed over a city lost, and friend entombed; the sweep of His eyes over a crowd whom He saw as sheep without a shepherd; the washing of feet. The glory of God is not to be seen so much in the glorious, but in the mundane — where divine love and human need intersect.

Today we celebrate a glory that is revealed in acts of service, large and small, done in Christ Himself and now carried on by His disciples, the ***“acts greater than these”*** in which we are privileged to participate.

The third thing we celebrate today is threefold: God’s Peace, Hope, and Joy. I have brought these three together for two reasons: 1) I’d like to get home at some point before midnight (as I’m sure would you), but more importantly; 2) these three go together.

The song of the angels announces: ***“... on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!”*** Since we now know that this group (*“with whom he is pleased”*) is rather inclusive, we can take a closer look at what is offered to those *“with whom he is pleased”*

Peace is offered. Now we generally refer to this as “peace on earth” and carry with it the expectation that somehow (we don’t have a clue how!), somehow war, conflict, genocide, bombing, terrorism, civil strife, ethnic cleansing, hate crimes, and other forms of human-to-human violence will be ended. But the word εἰρήνη (eirayne), is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Shalom, which means at its root “wholeness.” The angels’ song is not wishing for something like global disarmament (as good an idea as that may be); it is announcing something far more profound — the wholeness that can be found only when one is found in God. And because that wholeness is now ours because of God’s gift to us in Christ, that provides vitality to our hope.

Hope is not wishing; hope is expecting. Hope is longing for that which you know is coming, but which you have not yet experienced, or if you have had a taste that has only stoked in you a greater desire for more. Hope is an assurance that what you long for is as certain to arrive as

tomorrow's sunrise, and yet seems so far in the future that you would do just about anything to hasten its arrival.

Today we celebrate its arrival. The peace for which prophets long had hoped came in the Child born in Bethlehem; He is the source of all joy. We know nothing of joy until we know what His birth means for us. It means an end to all sin. It means new life for us and all creation. It means that God's love is made known in a way we could never have imagined. It means we can live without fear, in freedom, doing what God desires, and no longer slaves to impulses of our flesh.

I could go on and on (like you don't know that). Sometimes we get so caught up in the images of Christmas that we miss its meaning. Babies are cute, and a delight to have around. Shepherds are interesting, if only because we don't know any personally. Magi make us sit up and take notice. A young woman and young man swept up in events that they cannot control, and that will change their lives irreversibly makes for compelling drama.

But it is what lies behind those images that should capture our praise: The love of God. The glory of God. The power of God. The wonder of God. The mystery of God made flesh. For these we give praise and celebrate this night. This is truly the meaning of Christmas.

Amen.