

“The Meaning of The Flames: Love”

Reverend Bill Gause

Overbrook Presbyterian Church

4th Sunday of Advent

December 22, 2019

First Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-5

¹Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Second Scripture Lesson: John 3:16

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.



Sermon: *The Meaning of The Flames: Love*

I saw a poll this week conducted by Yahoo News that asked what people love most about Christmas. The top two responses were “Spending time with family and friends” and “eating.”¹ Those are not bad choices, but I feel like they didn’t ask children, because ask any child what’s the best thing about Christmas and I’ll bet they’ll tell you “opening presents.” Making Christmas lists and writing letters to Santa Claus is a time-honored tradition. And when you’re a kid, few things are more exciting than ripping into beautifully wrapped boxes to discover whatever surprises might wait inside.

Christmas is a special time for children, but some people never outgrow that joy of receiving gifts at Christmas. American humorist David Sedaris is one of them. In an article he wrote for Esquire Magazine in 2002 about the variety of ways that people celebrate Christmas around the world, he made his position on gifts abundantly clear. “People who traditionally open gifts on Christmas Eve,” he writes, “seem a bit more pious and family oriented than those who wait until Christmas morning. They go to mass, open presents, eat a late meal, return to church the following morning, and devote the rest of the day to eating another big meal. Gifts are generally reserved for children, and the parents tend not to go overboard. It’s nothing I’d want for myself, but I suppose it’s fine for those who prefer food and family to things of real value.”²

A recent report from the National Retail Federation estimates that Americans will spend upwards of \$730 billion dollars on Christmas this year.³ So, while folks may say that friends and family and food are their favorites, there’s still a whole lotta gift-buying and gift-giving going on at Christmas.

There are so many things that we traditionally associate with Christmas in America: Christmas presents and trees and decorations. But also, being with family and friends, and being “home for Christmas,” and peace on earth; an emphasis on sharing and being kind and compassionate, especially to strangers; especially to those who are less financially stable. But it would be a fair question to ask “what does any of that particularly have to do with the birthday of Christ? Yes, the Magi brought gifts and the Angels spoke to the shepherds of peace on earth and goodwill to all, but so much of what we associate with Christmas seems to have no real root in the biblical story of the nativity. For that reason, the puritans actually banned Christmas in 17th century New England. They saw it as a distraction from spiritual discipline and as such, dishonored God. The Massachusetts Bay colony passed a law punishing anyone who celebrated Christmas with a fine of 5 shillings.⁴

The theme of the classic Christmas special, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* is Charlie Brown’s search for the true meaning of Christmas. It can’t be all about the presents and decorations and stuff, can it? Which again, is a fair question: Is Christmas really about all the eating and decorating and spending and buying? Is Christmas supposed to be the commercialized bacchanalia that it sometimes seems to have become? A poll from a few years ago conducted by the Pew Forum showed that while 93% of the population celebrates Christmas, 32% of those surveyed do not see Christmas as a religious holiday.

Which tells me there's an awful lot of people celebrating Christmas who either don't know or don't understand what it's all about.

Christmas is not supposed to be about "stuff." It's not about "more;" it's not about racking up credit card debt and throwing the perfect party; it's not even really about family and tradition and charity. That's right, I said it. Those are all practices that have grown up around the celebration of Christ's birth. Many of those traditions are inspired not by the Bible but by modern literature like Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."⁵ But things like charity and compassion and spending time with loved ones are things we should and must be doing *every day* and not just at Christmas. We always remember that in Dickens' A Christmas Carol, the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future inspire in Scrooge a change of heart. But we often forget that he makes this promise: "I will honor Christmas in my heart *and try to keep it all the year.*" So no, spending time with family and friends, sharing, being compassionate and charitable with others, especially those less financially stable; these are not just Christmas things; they are *life* things.

So, what is Christmas about, then? Christmas *is* the celebration of the birth of Christ Jesus, son of God, savior of the world, and our promised messiah. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God's acts in a dramatic and powerful way to reveal God's-self to the world and reconcile us to God and to one another. In him is life. And that is a tremendous, history changing, life-giving gift. So, Christmas is about God's love: self-giving, all-encompassing, grace-filled love. And that love does not render the traditions and trappings of our modern Christmas celebrations meaningless. To the contrary, as celebrations of God's love come down, presents and time with family and compassion and charity are fabulous. But they are secondary. Those things, fun and special as they may be, are not the purpose of this holy day. They are our response to it.

Have you ever heard about an office birthday party at work, for an employee you don't know, maybe even from another department and you think "Hey, I probably won't go; just stay here and get some work done?" But then you find out there's cake, so you go because, I mean, who doesn't like cake? And you stand there with your little plate and fork, maybe even singing the words to Happy Birthday, but you're just there for the cake. That doesn't really honor the person being celebrated, does it? Yes, cake is good. But the party is about the person. It's not just an opportunity for you to eat cake.

Christmas is about a dramatic and history-changing and life-giving moment in human history. We can't lose track of that fact. When we do; when we make it all about stuff rather than about God's love, we're getting it all backwards. We're just showing up for the cake.

One of the great classic Christmas movies is "A Christmas Story."⁶ It's based on Jean Sheppard's collection of short stories "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash."⁷ It's the story of a little boy whose single greatest wish is to receive a "Red Ranger, Two-Hundred Shot, Range Model, Air Rifle" for Christmas. Everyone tells him "You'll shoot your eye out, Kid;" his mother, his schoolteacher, even the department store Santa. But in a sweet ending, his father surprises him with one on Christmas morning.

One of my pastor friends told me once it's the worst Christmas movie ever, because as she put it, it's just about a kid wanting a toy. She said it's about the worst of what Christmas has become. And she's not wrong. But I see something else there, because while yes, it depicts a Christmas morning characterized by what the narrator calls "unbridled avarice," it is also about a parent's love for his child. In granting his son's Christmas wish, "the Old Man" does something that may not have exhibited the best judgment, but which was an expression of deep and abiding love for his son. And to me, that sounds an awful lot like God. God shed the power and privilege of divinity to enter the world as one of us; as a tiny, vulnerable child. God embraced our weakness and our finitude to bear unconditional love into this broken, hurting world so desperate and hungry for it. Some could even argue that was an exhibition of divine poor judgment.

You see, when you cut through all the sales and decorations and television specials, Christmas is about God's deep and abiding love for you and me; love that is not predicated on our loving God back. Love that is characterized by vulnerability; that takes risks and makes sacrifices. God doesn't come into the world as a powerful conqueror, not in the traditional sense, anyway. God could have chosen to come as Caesar or Pharaoh or Alexander the Great, but God didn't. Instead God

chose to enter the world as an infant, perhaps the least powerful thing there is. They're small, and their muscles don't all quite work yet and they can't even hold their own heads up by themselves. They can't feed themselves or take care of themselves and are totally dependent on adults for the first several years of their lives. All of the things God is: infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, an infant is exactly the opposite.

But God was not completely powerless. Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner writes that:

*"Like any child, Jesus has one power only and that is the power to love and [to] be loved which is of all powers, the most powerful because [love] alone can conquer the human heart; at the same time, it is the most powerless, because [love] can do nothing except by consent."*⁸

The great power of Christ is to be the living embodiment of God's love that has no limits, and which cannot be earned. Yet as deep and wide as is God's love for you and me, God never compels us to accept that love or to be affected by it. Which is a great risk. But it is also bold stroke of genius. You see power compels and the exercise of that power can chafe those subject to it. But love; love can sway us. Love can strike a chord within us that changes us. Love can inspire devotion. Love can move us to care and to act. When we know that we are cared about and cared for, we are inspired to care as well; to work for the betterment of other people. In the knowledge that we are loved, we find peace, fulfillment, self-worth. And if we can see and experience what God sees in us, that can inspire us to see others as God does, too. That is the genius of God's great gift. And when that gift inspires compassion and charity and love shared freely with others, the genius of God's gift is on full display. And that's what Christmas should be.

So, enjoy your Christmas cookies. Hang your lights and decorate your tree. Enjoy time with family and have fun picking out that perfect gift for your favorite people. But do those things in honor of the God who loves you and cherishes you so much, that She gave up everything to get your attention; to guide you on the right path; to save you from the worst of what the world has to offer. Enjoy your cake. Just don't forget why we're throwing the party.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Manning, Ellen. "Poll reveals the thing Brits love most about Christmas." Poll reveals the thing Brits love most about Christmas, 19 Dec. 2018, news.yahoo.com/poll-reveals-thing-brits-love-christmas-093516308.html.

² Sedaris, David. "Six to Eight Black Men." *Esquire*, 1 Dec. 2002, pp. 96–100, classic.esquire.com/article/2002/12/1/six-to-eight-black-men.

³ "NRF Forecasts." NRF, 19 Nov. 2019, nrf.com/insights/economy/nrf-forecasts.

⁴ "How the Puritans Banned Christmas." New England Today, 19 Dec. 2019, newengland.com/today/living/new-england-history/how-the-puritans-banned-christmas.

⁵ "Christmas - Wikipedia." 19 Dec. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas#Modern_history.

⁶ Shepherd, Jean. *A Christmas Story*. Performance by Peter Billingsley, et al., MGM/UA Entertainment Co., 1983.

⁷ Shepherd, Jean. *In God We Trust All Others Pay Cash*. Doubleday, 1972.

⁸ Buechner, Frederick. *The Faces of Jesus: A Life Story*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2005. 19. Print.