

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Ovel"
Dr. J. Dent

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

Christmas time is such a mixture of attitudes and events. Let me make a distinction between cultural Christmas and spiritual Christmas. Cultural Christmas has us listening to movies and stories that bring us back to our purpose in life, our fulfillment in giving more than receiving, or just in the silliness of the many myths, comedies and cartoons that fill the holiday season, definitely not the historical Christmas Season. Holiday trees and holiday cards and seasons greetings reveal a desperate attempt to separate the reason for the season from the season itself. We say such inclusivism is to honour those who do not agree with what the season is about, if it is about Jesus' birth, and worshipping Christ. Yet we seek to honour other cultures and religions in our midst by freely allowing and even encouraging the learning of the details of their cultural and religious customs. Our children lose the knowledge of our Judeo-Christian roots at Christmas and many of us feel we are on a runaway train toward some other belief, but don't know what it is. It is a strange and confusing time, in part because we are not sure as a culture whether we are Christian regardless of the huge majority saying that we are a country made up of a huge majority of Christians in the census and other surveys.

So when we go into cultural Christmas, we find the commercialism, the narcissism, the creature comforts without the inner comforts. We find confusion and a syrupy sentimentality. Now I love Dickens and *A Wonderful Life* and the like as much as the next person, but I know it is on the periphery of Christmas, not the center. It takes a retreat into Advent to find the themes of hope and peace, joy and love. Here we find something else at work, something else happening inside us. It is difficult to get to that place beyond the glitter, beyond the decorating.

The Christmas spirit is as elusive in culture as the perfect Christmas gift. We keep wondering if there is such a thing, because every year we are blitzed by print and radio and television media trumpeting whatever is the best deal and the most wanted possession of the season. Of course, it only takes two minutes to calm our minds, our hearts, our credit cards and whatever we are overusing to know that what we long for won't be found in

the mall, on the internet, or in any store. And it is in that moment of sanity, that we find spiritual Christmas.

It is in that moment that we know the wonder of Christmas is in the spirit of Christmas, which is the Spirit of Christ. We know in that moment that what we truly want is to be loved and to love, the greatest gift. Showing that love is what Christmas is all about. God finds a way to love us. He tried a garden and a flood, a fresh start and a law, an exodus and a kingdom that didn't last. Now he has tried the final way in sending his son. That way is Jesus.

I'm not sure where everyone is today in believing the story. God breaks into a fairly normal relationship. He sends an angel to a young woman to say she's going have a baby without the normal sexual encounter. She says yes to God. She receives a love that no one else has ever received. Her cousin is also having a baby past the time of her menopause, or at least later in life.

We don't really know how hard it was for her to say yes to God. It is possible she was facing an honour killing, in saying "yes" to God. This still happens today in many middle eastern cultures, where a woman found pregnant is killed for the "honour" of the family. We don't even know if the threat was from either Mary's parents or Joseph's. So we don't really know how much courage it took for Mary to say "yes" to God. We don't really know how anyone else says yes to God. But she was open to a wonder beyond what she thought possible. That is the key to keeping a spiritual Christmas. Be open to the wonder the Holy Spirit can bring to you and through you, beyond what you think possible.

There's that one little verse in Luke, chapter 1, verse 37. It may be the most powerful verse in the New Testament. It reads in our translation, "Nothing will be impossible with God." Another way to translate it is, "every word of God will come with the power to accomplish it." God himself found a way to move into our neighborhood and speak a love language to us that we can understand, if we want to. The miracle is that God can get through to each and every one of us. How he gets our attention is another matter. How is God trying to get your attention these days?

If it is difficult for men to understand that part in the gospel of Luke where Mary becomes pregnant, perhaps it is difficult for women to understand how Joseph felt when Mary told him that after being away three months, she

came back pregnant, but she had not been with another man. For Joseph, this was an impossible situation, so he decided to do the kindest thing he could, even in the midst of his whole range of feelings, rage probably being one of them. But then he too encountered a wonder. He too had an angelic visitation, which he accepts and does not deny.

Some of us wonder if we should have angelic visitations, direct, audible voices from God. Perhaps some of us have had such things in dreams and visitations, but we are taught today that such things cannot or do not happen, and if they do, please ignore them. I am glad Joseph did not take this point of view, but supported Mary even though he did not really understand what had happened to her, although the angel explained as simply as he could.

Many of us are afraid to risk being open to such wonder. If we are open to such experiences of God, what might happen? The elderly might bring miraculous events into ordinary life and a baby might transform the world. Yet here we are. Over two thousand years past the birth of our Lord, exactly in the two thousand year time frame from when our Lord walked the earth in his childhood and earthly ministry.

The wonder of meeting Jesus, the light of the world, the hope of the nations is here in our midst still. And the centre of what we hope to encounter at Christmas is here at his table, beckoning us to come. It is not the feast that most of us will celebrate in a few days. It is not one which worry any of us of overeating. It is truly a love feast. It is the love exchanged at this table which gives us reason to go on as a church, and as individual believers. It is the love exchanged our at Christmas tables that makes the season worthwhile.

So while the world continues to be confused about what this season is all about, as confused as that word "ovel," which is normally with an "a." We unscramble the letters once again and know that the key to the season is love.

Come and receive that love.

Let us pray.