



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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DECEMBER 24, 2017

CHRISTMAS EVE

EVERLASTING LOVINGKINDNESS: GOD'S JOURNEY TO US

God's Journey to Us: Immanuel
Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Now that laser projector lights have taken a firm hold on Christmas decorations, bathing our homes in color, snow, stars, and just about anything else we can think of, the latest fad in holiday celebrations is the upside down hanging Christmas tree. Some people argue that the tradition began as long ago as the 16th century, but I doubt Martin Luther hung his candle-lighted tree from the ceiling of his Wittenburg cottage. Still other people push the tradition back even further. Rumors are that an upside down tree was better adapted to small spaces and the resulting triangle form reminded good Christian folk of the Trinity.

From what I have read on the subject, upside down Christmas trees, like laser lights, blow up Santas, glowing icicles, and the scores of other decorations we put around our homes have more to do with retail sales and a strong end-of-the-year balance sheet than they do with celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Mind you, I am not being cynical. I love to decorate for Christmas. One of my favorite jobs is to set up our Dickens Village scene. Over the years we have collected quite a few of the replicated Victorian English village shops and houses along with assorted tradespeople and children at play. Apart from Scrooge's house, the three Spirits of Christmas, and Tiny Tim who silently shouts "God bless us everyone!", the village really isn't a Christmas decoration. (That's why I bargain to keep it up as long as possible every year!) Nevertheless, it is as essential part of our Christmas tradition as are the angels and creches that are to be found throughout the house.

I like the fact that we decorate for Christmas even when all of the decorations don't shout "Jesus is born." The holiday spirit is good for us and I suspect that not only do we need some light and levity in these too often dark days, we also know that if we look closely enough, we will find God present even in a shower of colorful light that makes our house glow and the neighbors rage.

Back to the upside down Christmas tree. I doubt we will ever have one. The Wrights are rather traditional in most things. Never say never, however. My brothers did try that hanging tomato plant thing a few years ago with good success! And we had some friends in Savannah who had a hanging Christmas tree for years before Target or Walmart ever got a hold of the idea. Their tree was not upside down. They began suspending it when their son was a toddler and kept getting into the ornaments. As far as I know, their tree still hangs—and he is in his early fifties!

The more I think about it, the upside down tree may well have its place in our Christmas celebration because it says something that laser lights and blow-up Santas do not: the coming of Jesus turns life upside down. The birth of Jesus changes things. The coming of the Messiah gives us a totally different perspective on life.

Throughout this season of Advent, we have been thinking about the coming of Christ as a journey, but not a journey that we take. Throughout the Bible, God continually comes to his people rather than waiting for us to come to him. Granted, our spiritual life is often like a journey on which we discover more and more about God and ourselves. The story the Bible tells, however, is about God making his way to us.

Thanks be to God that he does! If we look back only over the past twelve months, it has been quite a year! Who has had much time or energy to go looking for God? We have been up to our ears in natural disasters (another tropical storm hit the Phillippines over the weekend), terrorist threats and attacks, domestic violence and mass killings, political upheaval and governmental uncertainty, and a bold and unsettling rash of sexual harassment and abuse allegations that have touched on all areas of our public life. Health care, poverty, nuclear threat, trade policies, racism, government investigations, and a declining trust in our social, cultural, and governing norms all keep us occupied and worried. Who has time to go looking for Jesus?

Don't worry because God comes looking for us. God always has. The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God loves us enough to come looking for us, to journey anywhere at any time to find us hiding out like Adam and Eve in the gardens of our lives or stuck in the muck of the messes we have made. God makes his way to us to tell us that life can be different. Things can turn around. Life can be turned upside down and have new meaning just as a lighted tree can be flipped to offer a fresh perspective.

Tonight we celebrate one simple fact: out of God's everlasting lovingkindness—that steady, unflinching, enduring, compassionate grace—God has journeyed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. His name says it all: Immanuel—God is with us!

In her book, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, the late poet Ann Weems also says it well:

Our God is the One who comes to us
in a burning bush,
in an angel's song,
in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found
locked in the church,
not even in the sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be
with no constraints,
no predictability.

Our God lives where our God lives,
and the destruction has no power
and even death cannot stop
the living.

Our God will be born where God will be born,
but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.

When God is ready
God will come
even to a godforsaken place
like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch . . .
for you know not when
God comes.

Watch, that you might be found
whenever
wherever
God comes.¹

Tonight we rejoice that God has come looking for us once again. If your tree is not flipped, hopefully your heart and your life will be. Amen.

¹Ann Weems, "The Coming of God," *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), 13.

December 24, 2017

Christmas Eve

Pastoral Prayer

We have completed another year of following your Son through his life and ours, O God. We watched the baby become a young man. We felt the water rush down his back at his baptism and felt the pangs of hunger during his sojourn in the desert. We listened carefully to his teachings, marveled at his stories, were awed when he healed someone, and humbled when he spoke to us. We watched him love and laugh and grieve and worry just as we do. We stood by in horror as he was crucified and died and then rejoiced when he rose from the dead and offered us new life as well. We have come to understand that Jesus is just as human as we are and yet uniquely divine. We know that he loves us with a steadfast love.

Tonight we come to the manger once again to behold the Child sent from heaven. We know that you inhabit that smelly manger, O God, just as you dwell in the messy places that are often our lives.

Thank you, O God, for loving us enough to keep coming to find us. Thank you for loving us enough to never give up on us. Thank you for caring enough about our lives to never let go of us.

On this holy night, we pray that we might experience the birth of Jesus into our lives. We pray that the story will become our story and we will begin walking the journey of faith with you.

There is so much in our lives and in our world that need your love and grace, O God. We pray for an end to fighting and a cessation of violence. We pray for the openness of mind and heart to listen to one another, to learn from one another, and to give to each other. We pray for peace, the wholeness of body, mind, and spirit that only you can truly give us. We pray for hope to be renewed, for love to be abundant, for joy to permeate our lives, and for peace to dominate our world.

Loving God, thank you for coming to us. Please continue to listen to us and speak to our hearts. We pray in the name of the coming Christ and the ever-present Spirit through whom you are with us forever. Amen.