



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Reflections of Incarnation: Simeon and Anna
Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40

"Keep Christ in Christmas." For the past couple of months or so, the slogan has been plastered on cars, billboards, and across the internet. You've probably seen it on bumper stickers and yard signs as you drive through town, read it on your friends' social media posts, and heard your more vocal family members complaining about it during recent gatherings. You may have even shared the idea in one way or another yourself.

"Keep Christ in Christmas." I'm not here to pick on you if your car is sporting such a decal. The more sentimental side of me wants to speak up in agreement. After all, Christmas has become too commercialized, and we do, at times, lose sight of the true meaning of the season. But then there's that cynical voice which remembers quickly that many of those persuading the rest of us to "remember the reason for the season" would be happy to sell us a yard sign for the low, low price of only \$24.95!

The problem is not so much with the idea that we should keep Christ in Christmas, of course, as that, such as it is with many slogans and movements within the Christian community, it has become yet another line in the sand for many who claim the name of Christ. Whether a store clerk wishes you "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" has come to be seen as a personal affront instead of a friendly greeting, with some on both sides even claiming religious persecution if the greeting of their preference is not used. A Google search on the phrase "Keep Christ in Christmas" will reveal over 42 million websites, including the movement's very own Facebook page, multiple opportunities to purchase the above-mentioned merchandise, and hundreds of angry rants by Christ followers who are appalled by the attitude with which our culture approaches the sacred holiday.

While there certainly is a place for Christians to examine our own values and practices around the celebration of Christ's birth and to ask hard questions about whether we have lost our focus or been drawn in by holiday consumerism, hurling angry words and accusations at other believers, or at

the culture already skeptical of our motives and attitudes, seems ironic and counterproductive at best, or arrogant and vicious at its worst.

We know that, unfortunately, we as a human family have been plagued with such divisions over matters of faith for millennia. Rather than focusing our spiritual energy on seeking and praising God, we have squandered too much of our time and resources and energy on debating, defaming or even killing one another in the name of religion. Isaiah certainly knew of that kind of destruction as he wrote to a people humiliated not only by the defeat of their army and the overthrow of their government but especially by the destruction of their Temple by the Babylonians. Isaiah, however, delivers the good news that God's favor will return to his people, that he will restore their glory and vindicate them in the sight of their enemies.

But while the Temple would be rebuilt, the Israelites would continue to suffer under the rule of one oppressive empire after another. By the time of Jesus' birth, Jerusalem was still waiting for its sovereignty and its honor to be restored, as Rome had placed corrupt and oppressive governors throughout its territories. And if it weren't enough that the Hebrew people were being threatened by powerful outside forces, they were also deeply divided from within. Factions had emerged to cause disagreement over interpretations of the Law, over how and where they should worship, and over how they should respond to Roman rule. The people whose very identity was defined by God's promise to send a Messiah to redeem them were even so busy bickering about when their Savior would appear and what form his leadership might take that most of them didn't even notice when he arrived!

But in today's Gospel Lesson, we encounter some who did recognize Jesus as the Promised One, even from the very beginning. We meet Simeon who has found his way to the Temple, and Anna who has taken up residence there, both of them watching and waiting, fasting and praying, in hope that they might one day meet the Lord's Messiah.

When I read their story, I am left wondering how Simeon and Anna knew who this baby was. Since the ritual of purification and the dedication of the firstborn male were required by Law, there must have been dozens, maybe hundreds, of children brought to the Temple each day. What made this family and this baby different?

We are told that Simeon was led there by the Holy Spirit, and I suppose that is enough. Because if, as our faith teaches us, Jesus were fully human, then he was probably fussy and squirming and helpless as all newborn babies are, and his parents were certainly excited and nervous and sleep-deprived

as all young parents tend to be. So they would have appeared as any other young family in the Temple that day.

But Simeon and Anna recognized this child as the One for whom they had waited. They knew not because they had debated the details of the prophecies with the Saducees or argued interpretation of the Law with the Pharisees or strategized with the Zealots about how the Messiah would help to overthrow Roman authority. As good as their intentions may have seemed at the time, those who were taking sides and staking claims were still scheming and debating at the Temple gate when Mary and Joseph entered with their newborn son that day, and they missed his coming altogether. But because they had watched and waited, had fasted and prayed, the patience and faithfulness of Simeon and Anna allowed them to recognize the miracle of the Incarnation, of God's appearing in our frail human form, and they responded in worship and adoration.

I wonder how many of us, well-intentioned and devout as we may be, get so caught up in our own plans and debates, taking sides in the "War on Christmas," and staking our theological or political territory in matters of religion, worrying that someone might be conspiring to keep Christ out of Christmas, that the Christ child passes us by unnoticed. I wonder how often the Incarnation, God with us, happens right before our eyes, and we are so busy with our own agendas and schedules and concerns that we fail to notice when he is in our midst.

It was a Thursday in late October, and I, like many of you, had been listening to reports about the partial solar eclipse that was expected that afternoon. Since many of the other astronomic events of this year had happened far too early in the morning for this night owl, I was excited about the prospect of witnessing this one. All day I had planned to leave the office, make a quick stop at the store and then find a clear place to watch for it (but not stare at it directly, of course) as I headed west toward Nashville around 6:00 p.m. But as the end of the day so often goes, things got hectic, and I rushed out of the office with a million things on my mind. The store was crowded, I couldn't find everything I needed, and the checkout lines were long and moving slowly. Then just as I was heading out the door, I realized it was 6:05, and I was about to miss it! I rushed out to my car and looked around frantically, just in time to catch a glimpse of the sun with a little crescent missing from the edge disappearing behind the trees. After all the anticipation, I became so caught up in my own thoughts and plans and frustrations that I almost missed something spectacular!

And isn't Christmas too often that way, too? After all of the preparation and excited anticipation, how often do we become so distracted that we only catch a glimpse of the miracle for which we have been waiting, if we slow down to enough to notice it at all!

The whole story of Christmas, however, is the story of how, whether we are paying attention or not, God appears. In this Holy Child of Bethlehem, God is present. The message of Christmas is that God is with us in the messy, earthy, complicated unpleasantness of human flesh and cannot, will not, be kept out. God shows up—not with the pageantry of royalty in a parade or the bravado of a conquering warrior, but with the whimper of a baby; not among the rich and famous but among the marginalized and outcast; not to the certain who are demanding that their opinions be heard but to the humble who are listening for his voice.

God came to dwell among us when Mary and Joseph were turned away from the inn and sent to a smelly, dirty borrowed stable. The identity of Emmanuel was revealed not just when Jesus was purified with holy water in the Temple but when he was dipped into the muddy waters of the Jordan River. The Word truly became flesh when Jesus was driven from preaching in his hometown synagogue out into the streets to minister to those who were sick and hungry, unclean and rejected. And the Incarnation was fully realized not with a coronation but with a crucifixion.

The Incarnation of Christ may be evident in the pews of the cathedral or the elements of Communion, sometimes in spite of us, but it can be seen just as clearly in the corridors of a hospital or the serving line of a soup kitchen. God may dwell among us in the halls of the academy, but we are just as likely to see signs of God's nearness in the desks of an inner city classroom. We may hear the word of God proclaimed from a pulpit or sung by angelic choirs, but we can also hear it in the laughter of children or the sobs of a grieving widow. We may sense God's presence in the flicker of Advent candles or the beauty of some majestic place, but we are just as likely to find it the prayers of a prison chaplain or the hand that reaches out to console an abused woman or the swing of a hammer that repairs a deteriorating home or the lessons taught in an Ethiopian schoolhouse.

The lesson we learn from Simeon and Anna is that, if we are paying attention, we may discover the Lord's Messiah in the Temple, but we cannot keep him there, for in order for God's word and work to be realized fully, the good news that God is with us must be shared. The story of Jesus teaches us that he doesn't need us to protect and defend him in order to keep Christ in Christmas.

Because, you see, Christ is here, and he comes to us in the mess and chaos and conflict and limitations of human flesh. Because of us, and often in spite of us, Christ is here. Whether we debate or deny or even ignore his presence, Christ has come to dwell among us, and we are called to proclaim the wondrous, life-altering, transforming news. Whether we welcome him or not, whether we include him in our celebrations, whether we witness the miracle of the Incarnation or miss it amid the trappings of the season, we cannot keep Christ out. The good news of Christmas and every day of our lives is that by God's persistent, abundant, surprising grace, Christ is here, and if we will watch and wait, we, too, can witness the redemption he brings. Thanks be to God! Amen.

O God, who came to us in human flesh so that we might know your salvation, we praise you for this greatest of gifts and for the opportunity we have to rejoice in this good news once again. We give you thanks that in the midst of our celebrations, and sometimes in spite of them, you reveal yourself among us in new and challenging ways, in ways that stir within us and move us from our familiar places, that we might respond to your call as we come to know you as our Creator, our Lord, our Friend. We praise you for the grace we have known and the mercies you continue to show to us each day. We thank you for the abundance of your gifts to us: for opportunities to work and to worship, to serve and to play; for relationships that fill our lives with meaning and joy; for material possessions which make our lives more comfortable; for sights and sounds of beauty which remind us that you are a God who delights in beauty and desires to share all that is good and lovely with us because of your great love for us. For these and all good gifts which come from your hand, Generous God, we offer our thanks and praise.

Almighty God, receive also our prayers on behalf of the world you love and for which you sent your Son. In this time of celebration, we are aware that there are those who suffer illness and grief. In this time when family and friends surround us, we are aware that there are those who are consumed by loneliness and despair. In this season when we hear the angels proclaim peace on earth, we are aware of the violence and hatred that plague so many nations and that threaten our own. In this time of abundance and extravagance, we remember those in our world and in our community who are struggling to survive from day to day. Teach us to respond to these and every need we encounter with compassionate and generous hearts. Help us to love one another, those in need, and all your children with your gracious and abundant love.

We pray, too, Gracious God, for the coming new year. Guide our nation and its leaders to work for justice and peace in our world. Guide our congregation that we might live as a beacon of hope and light in this community and beyond. Guide us in our relationships that we might love and encourage one another for the living of our days. Grant us your mercy as we seek to do your will more fully and to love you more completely. In the name of the One who comes as the Light of the World and the Hope for all our tomorrows, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.