

Colossians 3: 12-17

“Jesus”

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During 2014 the clergy have been preaching on one word a week. Words that every Christian needs to know. And I get the last word! Usually we let Steve have the last word, just to keep him happy, but he gave this one up willingly, so I'll gladly take it.

During this year we've covered quite a bit. We started right after last Christmas, with the word “Epiphany.” We continued through the year.....etc etc. and finished up during the Advent weeks leading up to Christmas with names for Jesus:, Shepherd, Servant, Immanuel, Messiah.

I considered preaching on the word “Amen,” just to wrap things up nice and neat for the year. But Jesus got in the way. With Jesus, things don't get wrapped up nice and neat. Every Christmas we take the baby in the manger and swaddle him and sing silent night.....but Jesus doesn't stay there, where all is calm and all is bright. He outgrows those swaddling clothes, breaks through all our attempts to hold him tight and keep him contained, and is loose in the world. So the last word for 2014, a word every follower of Jesus needs to know, is Jesus.

Our Scripture is Colossians 3:12-17. It is part of a letter written to the early church. It sounds to me like Paul, the writer, was trying to wrap up his own sermon series, and was running out of time. He gives a lot of instructions to the followers of Jesus. Listen to God's word:

**<sup>12</sup> As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord<sup>[a]</sup> has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ<sup>[b]</sup> dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

It's been a festive couple of weeks here at the church. Lots of music, packed rooms of worship on Christmas Eve, candles, communion. My office looks like the backstage of the Christmas Pageant, which it sort of is. A cart full of costumes, halos, and shepherd staffs, and a manger are blocking access to my desk. We had youth playing the roles of Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, and an angel at four services on Christmas Eve. Real babies, new Presbyterians born in the last

few months (one born in the last 2 weeks) played the baby Jesus. All were exceptional, as you hope for from your baby Jesus's. The cast members as a whole were a pretty experienced bunch. We had a repeat angel, a Joseph from last year was a shepherd this year. There were four preacher's kids in the mix and over their years and various churches they have played every character possible at some point. One of the Marys had played baby Jesus herself her first Christmas. And one of this year's baby Jesus's real life parents met when the mom played Mary and the dad played a Wise Man in their church as youth. I am not making that up.

We're also still cleaning up costumes from our Kindergarten Nativity Pageant last week. They were part of our Christmas Festival, where the story was shared and our children and youth choirs and hand bell groups sang and played. That might have been my favorite part of Christmas this year. I wish you all could have heard the 3-5 year olds singing. I'm estimating 40 of them stood on risers and belted out a rendition of Go Tell it on the Mountain that rivaled any you've ever heard.

As I listened, I thought, "that's the gospel." That's what gospel means, good news. Go tell the good news. Go tell it on the mountain. Over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.

The knowledge that God came to us in Jesus, in a baby, is amazing. A real baby, the Word made flesh. The church word for it is Incarnation. God in person. It's almost unfathomable.

I watched my 14 year old daughter play Mary on Christmas Eve, and saw the wonder and the terror in her eyes holding a baby, a real baby, someone else's baby. I thought about the real Mary, who surely felt wonder and terror as well. The idea of a baby is fantastic and warm and cuddly until someone hands you the actual child and you have to figure out how to hold him and he's heavier than you thought and what if he starts to cry, or needs a diaper change, or you have to get up and your Mary costume is too long and you can't step up onto the platform because you are holding baby Jesus with both hands, so you have to get the angel to hold up your dress for you. And that's just in the first couple of minutes. What about as he grows? What then?

What about when the baby Jesus turns into a boy and starts asking questions like children do? And what about when he turns into a teenager and suddenly knows everything? And you know that just maybe this one teenager actually DOES know everything and that thought is as unbelievable as the thought you had when the angel told you so long ago that he would be the Son of God, and you would be his mother? And what will you do when he grows up and starts his ministry of teaching and healing and telling the world that he is the Messiah, the Son of God? And how will you hold him when they take him down off the cross after he has died, crucified as a criminal?

It's no wonder that Christmas Pageants are much more popular than Easter Pageants. Warm and cuddly babies and Christmas angels and shepherds are more entertaining than Roman soldiers and crucifixion scenes. I'd rather head to the toy store to buy a baby Jesus doll for the kindergarten pageant than hunt around town for fake blood for the scene where Jesus is nailed to the cross.

But you can't not tell that part of the story of Jesus, too. Because it's all there, right from the start. The manger and the cross.

The professor that taught my Greek class in seminary had young children. One of them was born at Christmastime. I've never forgotten her telling us about that Christmas time c-section. I don't know how they do it now, but back then, they strapped your arms down to prepare for the surgery. She said, "You can't strap a New Testament professor down like this..... without conjuring up certain images." There, in the shadow of the cross, she gave birth. Life and death, all in the same room.

Mary, too, gave birth, and the cross was just out of sight of the manger. The birth of the baby Jesus cannot be separated from his life and death and resurrection. And those of us who attend Christmas Pageants, and Christmas Eve services, and set up Nativity scenes in our homes....we must all deal with Jesus, the whole Jesus, the grown-up Jesus, the words he said, the things he did. He didn't stay a warm swaddled baby. None of us do. We all grow up, all children do, and become their own people and say and do amazing and terrifying and confounding things, and love gets complicated and precious, and terrible things happen, and beautiful things happen. And so it was for Jesus, only he was the Son of God. And the things he said and did were God's words and actions, love incarnate, in the flesh.

The church has argued for centuries about just how it is that Jesus is the Son of God. We've hashed out complicated theological doctrines about the nature of Jesus, fully God, fully human. There have been church trials and burnings at the stake and thousands of books written about the how. But the truth is that people don't follow Jesus because of their understanding about his human and divine nature and how that all happened. We see Jesus as God with us, and follow him because he showed God to us. In his teaching, his actions, his suffering, his rising.

And we followers of Jesus are invited to walk with him out of that stable with the manger and into the big wide world that gets messy and complicated, and is full of people who don't want to hear what God is up to in Jesus. The Herods of the world. And the Pharisees of the world who think they know just what God is up to as long as it looks a certain way and conforms to the rules. And Jesus most certainly didn't do that.

What do we do about Jesus? Those of us left to carry on in his name?

Because he left us work to do, to make disciples, to share the good news, to build the kingdom of God. And to do it together.

We followers of Jesus are asked to live together and love one another, and share what we have in his name, and do justice and clothe ourselves with all those things Paul mentioned in his letter: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love and the peace of Christ, and thankfulness. And as we read it out loud, all that starts to run together and begins to sound nice and doable and as warm and cozy as a baby in a manger until you try to actually do it, with real people like you and me and the stranger down the street or across the world, and you see just how radical this whole Jesus person was, and is. And how the things he said and did changed the world, and ask us to change too. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy.

If we owned up to what Jesus is asking of us we wouldn't blow out the Christmas Eve candles. We would turn them into signal flares. Because we are asked to follow baby Jesus out into the world and live a radical kind of life with love like he did.

Dr. Howard Thurman writes this:

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and the princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among brothers,

To make music in the heart.

It takes God incarnate to make that happen. It takes the followers of Jesus working together, all of us, doing our best to keep the story of Christmas alive and hang on through the story of Easter too so that it all becomes the story of Jesus, the Son of God, in us and through us.

I stood next to the risers while the little ones sang Go Tell it on the Mountain. Actually I stood there because one of the microphones fell over and someone had to hold it up, but it was the best place to watch. I could see the kids singing AND the parents and grandparents listening, and as I had that thought, “this is the gospel,” I also thought, “and it’s for all of us.”

Go Tell it on the Mountain. Jesus Christ is Born, He was born for the girl singing at the top of her lungs with no idea of the notes, but singing as loudly as she could anyway. He was born for the parents out there who sang along, and also for those who refuse to sing, never sing, not even on Sundays not even on Christmas.

He was born for the boy who wouldn’t stand up on the risers with all the other children, but sat through the whole song. And for his dad who was motioning him from the audience to stand up like all the other children. He was born and lived and died and rose again for the rowdy band of angels who were picking straw out of the manger, for every one of them....the shy ones and the silly ones and even the ones who will grow up and decide they don’t quite believe in him.

And here’s the thing too. Jesus came for others, not in that room. He came for the ones who have never been to a Christmas pageant, and wouldn’t know the story or the carols. He came for the man standing on the corner with the sign, Homeless, please help. He came for the woman whose diagnosis is grim, who might have seen her last Christmas. He came for the ones who aren’t speaking to their family members. He came for us all, no matter our bank account, our politics, our theology, our history, where we were born, what we’ve done, or who we love. He can’t be contained in a Christmas Pageant in Myers Park, or anywhere.

The writer and preacher Frederick Buechner tells a story of a Christmas pageant that looked like ours. There was a manger, Mary in a blue costume, some shepherds. The nativity story was read aloud....with carols sung at the appropriate places, and all went like clockwork until it came time for the arrival of the angels of the heavenly host. They were supposed to gather around the manger and sing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill....”

He says:

*"...that is just what they did except there were so many of them that there was a fair amount of crowding and jockeying for position, with the result that one particular angel, a girl about nine years old who was smaller than most of them, ended up so far out on the fringes of things that not even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will," they all sang on cue, and then in the momentary pause that followed, the small girl electrified the entire church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked, "Let Jesus show!"*

*There was a lot of the service still to go, but the minister said that one of the best things he ever did in his life was to end everything precisely there. "Let Jesus show!" the child cried out, and while the congregation was still sitting in stunned silence, he pronounced the benediction, and everybody filed out of the church with those unforgettable words ringing in their ears."*

We've gotten good at hiding Jesus, even in the church. We'll tell it on the mountain at Christmas. But then we'd like to leave him in the manger, soft and swaddled. Let Jesus show! Let his whole life show. The Jesus who ate with sinners and touched the unclean, and stopped for blind beggars. The Jesus who challenged the rich and upset the establishment. The Jesus who fed the hungry and listened to children. The Jesus who suffered, and loved until the end. And then fall in line behind him and be about the business of showing the world: his extraordinary love for you, for me, for all of us, the extraordinary love he asks of his followers, his love lived out loud in and for the world. Let Jesus show.

Amen.