

## Christmas is Over, Christmas is Just Beginning

by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

December 26, 2021

Good morning! GOOD MORNING! The Sunday after Christmas is one that many of us don't look forward to. Growing up we always hoped Christmas Eve would fall on a Saturday evening or a Sunday so we could get out of going to church twice. What kind of child wants to go to church two times in one week!? Or worse, what kind of parent makes their kid go twice a week?! We aren't Baptists, my husband says.

Here we are the day after Christmas and maybe we are filled with feelings of relief. Relief that the holiday rush is over. Relief that things turned out reasonably well. Relief that we don't have to go through all of this again for another year. Christmas is over, in a few days we can take down the ornaments, recycle the holiday cards, and get our houses back to normal.

Or maybe we are feeling relief that the pressure of putting on a big holiday event for others has come to an end. We can say goodbye to other peoples' expectations for another season. We can say goodbye to our own expectations as well. Maybe we are feeling relief that the season of endless sweets has come to an end. We slowly and sluggishly turn our eye to a new year of resolutions, of diets, of more exercise. But like Toad in the beloved children's books Frog and Toad, we Soon, we think, "Willpower!" as we eat just one more cookie.

Every year, Christmas comes a bit earlier. The retail world says Christmas begins the day after Halloween, or even sooner if you wander down the wrong aisle of your local craft store. Some radio stations begin playing Christmas music on November 1. It seems like, during the pandemic, lights went up last Christmas and might

have not come down at all. Stores advertise Black Friday deals for weeks on end, instead of a single day. We have even exported Black Friday deals to Canada who don't celebrate American Thanksgiving the day before.

What kind of effect does this have on us? The *holiday season* lasts longer and longer. It seems to go on and on, but never arrive. We enjoy ourselves at the start. We indulge ourselves with holiday foods and snacks beginning in November. I know that some of you are just as guilty as I am about ordering that peppermint hot chocolate in November. But what effect does all of this holiday cheer going on for so long have on us?

With such a long season, our anticipation dulls. With such a stretch for holiday treats, we don't really savor them when we get to Christmas eve or Christmas day. Think about the holiday season in the same way we use to watch TV. Do you remember, before streaming platforms and TiVo, waiting for your favorite show to air each week? Can you remember that anticipation? It is hard to remember with endless programming at our fingertips. It's hard to not give in to binge watching more episodes than we mean to. It can seem almost impossible to make any choice at all with so many choices available to us at every moment of every day.

And so too with the holiday season. Sometime in the middle of December we are entirely done. Done with ever hearing that one Christmas song ever again! *No more!* we think. *Enough!* our spirits say. With such a long run up to Christmas, no wonder we are feeling relief when the day is finally over with. We have been "celebrating" since the beginning of November. We are all celebrated out. We are done with it. We are exhausted. Maybe even a little cranky. With good reason too. We have done an awful lot of celebrating and no anticipating whatsoever.

In the church year, what we Lutherans call Advent, we are called to wait, to anticipate the coming of Christ. Not to celebrate it two months before it arrives. Can you imagine celebrating your birthday for two months before it gets here? How special would the day of your birth seem after your fifth birthday cake in two months? Who wants to sing HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU if you have been doing it for 60 days in a row?

In the secular world, everything moves on. The ads for exercise machines and gym memberships appear in the mail and on our phones. On with the new year, the new you, the advertisers proclaim. We are done with this story. Let's go find a new story in 2022.

But for us Christians, for us as followers of Jesus, Christmas has only just arrived. We are still telling the story of the child born in a manger. Of the three wise people following a star and arriving to find their predicted king in the most unlikely of places. Those wise people are still arriving. Still anticipating seeing the promised king. Still hoping.

In a similar way, we at Christ Lutheran Church, or worshipping online from our homes, are gathering each Sunday to hear how the holy family—Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus—flee for their lives from Herod and become refugees in Egypt. If Advent is the beginning of the church year, then Christmas is where things start to get interesting: choirs of angels, the arrival of glamorous strangers from distant places, fleeing for our lives under the cover of darkness. This is our gospel at Christmas time. Stick around, the stories say, there is much more to tell, even on December 26!

And telling these stories of Jesus is how early Christians made sense of their lives. They retold the stories of Christ's suffering and persecution, which helped them endure their own suffering and persecution. They retold to one another how Jesus cured the sick,

calmed storms, and cast out demons to help them find the courage to call upon God for help in their own needs.

The gospel, the good news, is also the living word of God. It is a powerful word. It is a transformative word. It is the same word that our Creator spoke into the darkness and void at the very beginning when God said, "LET THERE BE..." and the whole of creation began to take form and dance in response to that word.

For us today, remembering the words and deeds of Jesus helps us make sense of our own lives as well. Each one of us, each of our lives, is a story. But it is also part of one great story, a love story recounted in the Bible. Our own story is part of the love story between God and God's people. It is the story of God's ageless love affair with creation.

When I am facing hard decisions, unsettling news, or awful tragedy, it helps if I can remember I am part of the ongoing story of God's faithful love, even if I don't understand quite how it fits right now. But I am willing to believe that my whole life does make sense, because I am part of that larger story of Love, being shown to us again and again. Retold and recounted year after year.

The story of our lives is part of the love story of God calling Abraham into the desert. Part of the love story of Yahweh freeing the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. Our story is part of the same story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary announcing the troubling good news. The very same story of a dark and chilly manger where Christ was born and laid in the straw. And we are also part of the story that continues to a cold and empty tomb on Easter morning. But God's story of love doesn't end there either.

God's story doesn't end when we leave church on Sunday. This story goes on, even today, even right here. To you and me hearing about Mary and Joseph's worry over losing their twelve-year-old child. To

you and me hearing about the astonishment of the scribes and teachers at the temple, of Jesus' wisdom and understanding. To us hearing and reciting today's ancient psalm of praise.

We are part of a great story of care and forgiveness, of mercy and compassion, of miracles and long, lonely nights. We are part of a love story that lays itself with us in the tomb, when everything seems lost. And then, raises us up to new life when all we could see was death. God's good news continues out into the world, the Word of God accompanies us from our baptism all the way until we travel home to God.

Hearing this story reminds us that we have a God of Love who is speaking to us even now, even today. We are reminded that we are living out God's story of Love, that Christmas is still happening even on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December.

How did Christ come to me today as he came into the world so long ago? Who is Christ for us in this hour? Scripture beckons us to reflect this week, as we put away ornaments, take down trees, and say goodbye to another holiday season, how is Christ coming to us?

Without the wrapping paper, without carols being sung, even without the nativity on display in our homes, how is Christ coming to you now? Where is Jesus arriving long after the last undesirable gift has been returned to the store? Jesus is still coming into the world and into our lives. How is your own story caught up in the story of God's ongoing and faithful Love?