

Saving Christmas

A Sermon delivered on 12/30/2018 at the First Presbyterian Church of Champaign
by Dave Whitford

Beyond any doubt, Christmas is my favorite time of the year. It is a time of waiting and wonderment, of family traditions, gatherings, gift giving, joy, reflections and rededication.

In a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal*, John Gordon suggested that on December 25th we celebrate two Christmases. The first focuses on the Christmas of the Nativity, the wise men and the star of Bethlehem, “Silent Night” and “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” The second Christmas is centered on parties, Santa Claus, evergreens, presents, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Jingle Bells.”

How did our modern Christmas celebrations get into such a state? As Christians, should we be concerned by the inconsistencies of these two Christmases? Personally, I think not, and this morning I would like to share some thoughts on why I am not overly concerned. I would like to focus on three issues (1) seasonal patterns in human behavior, (2) the triumph of good over evil and (3) the miracle of the birth of a child who would forever change the world.

Seasonal Patterns in Human Behavior

I don't know about you, but after we “fall back” from daylight savings time, I tend to lose some of the spring in my step. I am also sure that part of my lethargy, is due to the fact that November tends to be the cloudiest months of the year. My gloom period is very mild relative to individuals who have severe depression brought on by seasonal affective disorder. Humans are not nocturnal beings. Our brains and the components of the human sensory system are hardwired toward light not darkness. As the John Denver songs says, sunshine almost always makes us happy.

Most ancient cultures celebrated the winter solstice, when the sun reaches its lowest point and begins to climb once more in the sky, and the days lengthen. The ancient Roman solstice festival was called Saturnalia, which ran from December 17th to December 24th. During that week, little work was done, and the time was spent in parties, games, gift giving and decorating the houses with evergreens. Needless to say, it was a very popular holiday.

Early Christians did not celebrate the Nativity. Instead, the most important date on the Church calendar was Easter. Christ's death and resurrection on Easter morning ushered in the dawn of a new era with two extraordinary promises for those who believe: the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting.

In 325 of the common era, the Council of Nicea decided that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first full moon of spring so that the annual celebration of Easter would coincide with the celebration of Passover. That's why Easter and its associated days, such as Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, are "moveable feasts." The movement of a heavenly body in the night sky determines their dates each year.

By the fourth century the church had attracted hundreds of thousands of believers and was in constant search for additional converts. In 354 Pope Liberius decided to add the Nativity to the official church calendar. He also decided to celebrate it each year on Dec. 25. Some scholars have suggested that decision to place the birth of Christ on December 25th, was a brilliant marketing ploy. More than one cynic has suggested that by making Christmas fall immediately after the celebration of Saturnalia, Pope Liberius invited converts to still enjoy the fun and games of this ancient holiday and just call it Christmas.

Is this cynicism justified? Was Jesus born on in late December? No one knows for sure, but some evidence does not support this date. In Luke, we read about an angel of the Lord appearing to the shepherds in the field who were keeping watch over their flocks. In December, little or no

natural forage for grazing would have existed in the hills of Judea. The shepherds would not move their sheep into the fields until the spring when succulent vegetation began to emerge.

Professor Grant Mathews of the University of Notre Dame has recently developed corroborating evidence by utilizing National Atmospheric and Space Administration's celestial data base. Professor Mathews believes that the Star of Bethlehem was actually a planetary alignment that occurred in mid-April in 6 B.C. These NASA data reveal that on April 17th, Jupiter, Saturn and the moon were aligned in the constellation Aries. Moreover, Venus and Mars were also "strategically" positioned in neighboring constellations. These celestial "fireworks" would have illuminated the night sky with a brilliance seldom seen in ancient times. It was truly a light unto the world.

Should we be concerned that we celebrate the birth of Christ at a time that we know may not be consistent with what some believe to be the likely date of his birth? I don't think so. We have all heard the analogy that Christ is the light of the world. We know His teachings can and **have** changed our lives forever. The human race has a genetically-based predisposition toward light over darkness. I cannot imagine a more optimal time to celebrate Christ's birth than the season immediately following the dawn of a celestial new year when our days begin to shift from darkness to light.

The Triumph of Good over Evil

Strong evidence suggests that the three Magi who visited King Herod and the Christ child were Zoroastrian astrologers. These astrologers were considered to have an uncanny ability to interpret signs that appeared in the evening sky. The astrological pattern that precipitated their journey was a nativity alignment that signaled the birth of a leader who was destined to rule the world.

When the magi appeared in Herod's court and told their story, it seems clear that King Herod would have been shaken to his evil core. What kind of human being would have ordered the massacre of innocent children of Bethlehem in order to retain his throne?

Based upon the writings of the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, we know that Herod the Great was installed as the ruler of Judea by Roman decree. He was an individual with whom they could do business. Herod's ancestors were Arabs, who had lived in Edom, just south of the Dead Sea. After the Maccabean revolt, Herod's ancestors were forced to convert to Judaism at the point of a sword. However, to "real" Jews, Herod and his family were heathens. Because of this outsider status, Herod was paranoid and suspicious. At the same time, he was determined to leave a legacy that would serve as a tribute to his personal power.

Following a devastating earthquake in 31 BC, Herod began the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, the most sacred place in the Jewish world. This restoration significantly expanded King Solomon's original site. The project also included a market place, amphitheater, palace and headquarters for the Sanhedrin. Today this site is known as the Temple Mount. It's one of the most famous landmarks in Israel.

Herod's construction projects did not stop with the Temple and Temple Mount. His engineers built numerous palaces and aqueducts, throughout Judea. They constructed a deep-water port at Caesarea that earned Herod the reputation as one of the great builders of the ancient world.

Unfortunately, his engineering achievements were overshadowed by murder and madness. He was a piece of work. Herod had at least ten wives fathered fifteen children, perhaps several more. He had his second wife, Mariamne, put to death along with her mother, Alexandra. Herod had Mariamne's brother, Kostobar, installed as the High Priest of the Jews. However, within a year, in a fit of jealous rage, he ordered that Kostobar be drowned.

Shortly before his death, Herod became suspicious of Mariamme's sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. He feared they were plotting to have him murdered so they could claim his crown. Herod ordered them tried for treason and put to death. A similar fate met Herod's first son, Antipater.

These acts of ruthless cruelty were overshadowed by a final evil scheme. Herod had to endure a long and painful illness that eventually caused his death. In this downward spiral, he became concerned that the Jewish people would not mourn his passing. Herod concocted a scheme to prevent this from happening. He first invited to his palace-stronghold in Jericho many prominent Jewish elders from the far reaches of his realm. Once they arrived, he imprisoned them. On his deathbed, Herod gave orders that the elders were to be put to death on the day he died. This would ensure that the entire Jewish community would be in mourning, albeit not for Herod. Fortunately, this monstrous plan was never carried out; his successors immediately released the elders after his death.

Given Herod's well-deserved reputation for ruthlessness, it is not surprising that the three magi did not return to Herod's court after visiting the Christ child.

Some biblical scholars have suggested that the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus into Egypt as well as the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem were embellishments that would fulfill Old Testament prophecies. The historical record of that era is silent on this issue, but it is not silent on Herod's death wish to destroy the innocent Jewish elders of his realm; their slaughter did not take place.

This morning's gospel lesson tells us that Herod's desire to kill the Christ child was not carried out. Evil did not circumvent goodness, and the light and hope of the world was not snuffed out by an evil tyrant. Christmas was saved.

The Miracle of the Birth of a Child

A few years ago, Champaign-Urbana's newspaper, *The News Gazette*, published letters from elementary school children that focused on a specific issue or topic. On the Thursday before Christmas, the paper published approximately 40 letters that identified each child's "favorite holiday tradition."

With only one or two exceptions, each letter contained the word family. Here is a breakdown on some of the most popular traditions: There were 9 letters that identified family gatherings, 8 highlighted exchanging gifts, 6 focused on attending Christmas Eve services at church, 6 on decorating the family's Christmas tree and 4 letters voted for going to grandma's as their favorite.

The focus on family by these by these young folks is hardly surprising. Families serve as the core unit of modern culture. They provide a loving and nurturing environment for all members, regardless of their age.

Our day-to-day lives have a repetitive pattern, that can lull us into complacency. However, there are times when we encounter mountain top events and experiences. There are also periods when we descend into deep valleys of despair and pain. The death of a spouse, parent or loved one, severe injury or illness, divorce, the loss of a job are all examples of events that can plunge us into the depths of dark depression and loneliness. Graduation, promotions, falling in love, and marriage are exhilarating events that we have all experienced directly or indirectly. However, as I reflect upon my life, no experience has generated my joy and excitement than the birth of our sons and grandchildren. The miracle of the birth of a child is extraordinary. Almost every parent has experienced similar reactions: unconditional love, sacrifice and forfeiture of parental wants for the good the child.

Reverend Sam Wells of the Duke University Chapel has noted that the spiritual message of Christmas is that through the birth of Christ, God became incarnate. Literally the Son of God took on human flesh.

Christmas is all about our Heavenly Father going to extraordinary lengths to be present **and** in a loving relationship us each of us.

We all have heard the criticism that our “Jingle Bells” Christmas celebrations are too materialistic. However, when the Christ Child was born, God became material.

As we look forward to the coming year, consider some of the ways that we can expand “Godly materialism” and retain the Christmas spirit for the next twelve months. Here are some possibilities:

Show kindness to a stranger,
Make a new friend,
Share a meal,
Consider Tithing,
Comfort someone who is hurting,
Forgive the people who may have caused you pain,
Apologize and ask for forgiveness,

Volunteer to be a Liturgist or an Amateur Preacher
Smile,
Laugh,
Join a small group,
Invite a friend to come to church with you,
Join a Bible Study,
Pray,
Follow the Golden Rule and
Keep Christ as the center of your life.

Remember the gift of the Christ Child... For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. That is a promise upon which you can bet your life.

Merry Christmas everyone and Happy New Year!

