

**“The True Meaning of Christmas:
The Three ‘R’s of the Incarnation”**

John 1:1-18

First Presbyterian Church of Greenlawn

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John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.

The True Meaning of Christmas (The Three ‘R’s of the Incarnation)

The day we have so long awaited has finally arrived. In a very real sense, Christmas is the day for which we have been waiting our whole lives long. But what does Christmas mean to us as Christians?

To ask that question is to acknowledge that Christmas has many meanings, not all of which have very much do with our Christian faith. For example, Christmas obviously has a huge economic meaning. I have read that last year alone Americans spent some 450 billion dollars on Christmas. Yet no one here believes for a minute that American consumerism teaches us anything about the true meaning of Christmas.

There are also cultural meanings of Christmas, but as important as they may be, they too may have little to do with our Christian faith. I love Christmas trees, for example, but the Christmas tree is primarily a cultural, not a Christian symbol. That’s not to say that we should get rid of Christmas trees, but it is to acknowledge that Christmas trees are not associated with the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we come to know

him in Scripture, but were later appropriated from secular celebrations associated with the winter solstice.¹

And of course, there are distinctive family meanings and traditions associated with Christmas that are important, but which also may have very little to do with Jesus. For example, in the family in which I grew up, we opened presents on Christmas morning and then had a Christmas dinner later that afternoon. In my wife's family, both the sharing of gifts and the family feast take place on Christmas Eve. However significant such traditions may be for our families, they may have little relationship with the Gospel message of Christmas that Jesus was born to save us from our sin.

So today I would like to briefly explore with you the biblical meaning of Christmas according to the Gospel of John. To do that I will speak of the three 'r's of the Incarnation on the pattern of the three 'r's we were supposed to learn in school: "reading, (w)riting and 'rithmetic." I propose that the three 'r's of the Incarnation are "relationship," "revelation" and "redemption."

To speak of the three 'r's of the Incarnation is to speak of the over-the-top love of God who goes all the way to and for us in Jesus Christ, who loved us so much as even to become human for us. To speak of the three 'r's of the Incarnation is to speak of a God who chose to flesh Godself out not only for our sakes, but also for the sake of God's much-loved world.

I believe that the three 'r's of the Incarnation help us, as confessing Christians, to flesh out the true and biblical meaning of Christmas. For although we may readily acknowledge that there are other and important meanings of Christmas, we gather this morning at a church, and not at a shopping mall. Because we are a church, we gather not just around a Christmas tree, but around the word of God, and we summon that living Word into our very presence this morning.

I believe it is our job as Christians to reclaim Christmas as the church's day. It is for us to proclaim together the true meaning of Christmas, not as it may be announced by retailers, news commentators and politicians, but as it is known among disciples who call upon the name of Jesus and seek to follow him.

1. The first 'r' of the incarnation stands for "relationship." The Incarnation is all about relationship: (A) Jesus' relationship with God, (B) Jesus' relationship with us, and (C) Jesus' relationship with the world he came to save.

A. From its very first verse, John's Gospel teaches us that Jesus was in relationship with God at the very beginning of time. That relationship is marked (i) by intimacy, (ii) a unity of intention and purpose and even (iii) identity.

i. To get an idea of the intimacy between the Father and the Son that John has in mind, consider verse 18 which states in the NIV that Jesus "is at the Father's side." The way the NRSV puts it is that Jesus "is close to the Father's heart," which is a better translation, I think, but still gets no cigar. You see, John didn't use the Greek word for either "side" (*pleura*) or "heart" (*kardia*). He used the word for bosom or breast (*kolpos*). The image of Jesus at the breast or bosom of God is one of extraordinary intimacy, and one that has profound implications for us as a believing community, as we will soon see.

To better appreciate the power of that metaphor, consider this: scientific research suggests that when newborn infants lie on the breast or bosom of their mothers, they are

¹ Traditions regarding Christmas trees, wreathes, holy and mistletoe were appropriated from ancient Roman and Germanic celebrations associated with the winter solstice long after the reign of Emperor Constantine.

better able to regulate both their body temperature and their heartbeat. Lying at the breast or bosom of their mothers actually helps premature babies return home sooner than they otherwise might.²

To imagine Jesus at the breast of God speaks volumes about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son whose birth we celebrate this morning.

ii. But the relationship between Jesus and the Father is not only one of extraordinary intimacy, it is also one marked by a unity of purpose and intention. The mission of God the Son is the mission of God the Father. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus expresses the God's intention for us and for the world. That is partly why Jesus declares that he and the Father are one (John 10:30).

iii. But here in the Prologue of his Gospel, John seems to go even further, for he affirms that Jesus was not only godlike, but was himself God (John 1:1).

The identification of Jesus as God is not made many times in Scripture, and mostly in liturgical settings (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom 9:5; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet 1:1). But the claim of unity and even identity between God the Father and God the Son is deeply significant for our faith, one taken up by the early Church in its earliest ecumenical creed, the Nicene Creed.³

B. But the Incarnation not only concerns the intimate relationship between God the Father and his only Son, who are identified in their saving purpose. The Incarnation also concerns the relationship between God the Father and all of us through Jesus Christ.

We see that (i) in the intimate relationship God intends with us through Jesus Christ, (ii) in the kinship relationship with us that God makes possible in Jesus, and (iii) in the promise that Jesus that shall accompany as children of God.

(i). We already commented about the image of Jesus at the breast of God. But the Greek word for "breast" or "bosom" appears not only at John 1:18, but also when Jesus' beloved disciple rested on Jesus' breast after he washed his disciples' feet and predicted his own betrayal (John 13:23).

In this reference to the beloved disciple at the breast of his only begotten Son, just as Jesus was at the breast of the Father, we have a clue as to the intimacy of relationship that is possible for us as his disciples. For like Jesus' beloved disciple, we too are invited to rest at the bosom of our Lord. It is at the breast of the Lord that our own heartbeat and breathing are brought into alignment with God the Father.

(ii). Developing that notion of intimacy, John suggests that it is precisely through the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ that we ourselves become children of God. To those who receive Jesus and who believe in his name, God gives the power or authority to become children of God (John 1:12). That is to say that if we can call God Abba or Father, as Jesus did, if we can even recognize ourselves as children of God, as Jesus did, it is because in the Incarnation, Jesus has assured our adoption into the family of God.

(iii). And not only are we incorporated into the family of God, Jesus Christ assures God's continuing presence with us as we make our way as the people of God.

² I thank Johannine scholar Karoline Lewis for these and other reflections which she shared in a paper she delivered on John's Gospel at Luther Seminary on October 4, 2010.

³ The Nicene Creed describes Jesus the Christ as "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father, through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human... (*The Constitution of the PC(USA), Part I. Book of Confessions, The Nicene Creed, 1.2*).

For it is in the Incarnation that we recognize Jesus as Immanuel, God with us. The way John puts it is that “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Or, to put it more literally, in Jesus Christ God set up his tent with us.

Just as God “tabernacled” with the people of Israel in the wilderness, so Jesus sets up camp with us as we continue the journey of faith and discipleship. Because God hits the streets⁴ with us in Jesus Christ, and goes along with us as we make our way in his name, we can have full confidence as disciples of Jesus that we shall never be left alone.

C. But the Incarnation not only concerns the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son, and the Father and Son with all of us who call upon his name, it also concerns the relationship God intends with the good but fallen creation. In the Incarnation, God moves toward the creation completely and without reservation, not despite the fact, but because of the fact that good creation is fallen and groans for its redemption. In other words, in Jesus Christ, God “goes all the way” with the world that God created in love.⁵ The way John will put that is that, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son” (John 3:16).

But let me go even further. If Jesus Christ, the Word of God, was with God at the start of creation, if the Word Himself was involved in the very process of creation, that means that creation itself necessarily bears the stamp of God’s Word. And that in turn means that we can get an idea of who God is not only through his Son who reveals him and through Scripture which testifies about him, but also through the wonder of God’s good creation. Or to put it another way, the creation is itself an act of God’s revelation⁶, which brings us to the second ‘r’ of the Incarnation: “revelation.”

2. The way that John puts it at verse 19 is that Jesus “has made God known.” In other words, if you want to know who God is, look to Jesus, because it is Jesus who reveals or makes manifest precisely who God is.

Now if we really want to know someone, not simply just know about someone, if, that is, we want to know someone as an “I” and not just an “it,” we have to allow that person to communicate with us. The same is true of our God. We only know God because God has chosen to communicate Godself to us. According to John, the story of Christmas is the story of the birth of God’s self-communication with the world. God communicates who he is through his Son. Jesus is God’s own Word about himself. Jesus, the very Word of God, is God’s final answer to a world that longs to be made whole again.

3. And that leads us to the third ‘r’ of the Incarnation, redemption. Really the whole point of Jesus’ birth, the whole point of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, is our redemption and the redemption of our sin-sick world. That is to say that Jesus’ birth is inextricably connected with God’s saving intentions for us and for God’s good creation.

⁴ For this phrase I am grateful to Jim Wallis, and his insightful and prophetic essay, “The Real War on Christmas... by Fox News” (December 15, 2011).

⁵ This phrasing is from Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 528. Hall goes on to affirm that in the Incarnation, “the Creator enters into full communion with the creature.” Moreover, “God’s achievement in the Christ of the closest possible proximity to humankind (is) the divine goal that has been visible throughout the life of Israel.”

⁶ Paul picks up this claim in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 1:19-21).

Or to sum it up in the language of a hymn we sing around here, “Jesus Christ was born to save.”⁷

That means that if we look closely at the baby Jesus in the manger, we can already see little crosses in his eyes. It means that even in his birth the baby Jesus is already pointing us toward Golgotha. That’s because in the crucifixion and later resurrection of our Lord the purpose of this birth that we celebrate today was finally realized. And that means that without our proclamation of the purpose of Jesus’ birth: our salvation and the salvation of the world, our celebration of Christmas remains incomplete.

And so as we make our way into your Christmas day, may we celebrate the most distinctive biblical meaning of this day: Christmas is about the Incarnation or fleshing out of God’s love for us in Jesus the Christ. And may we remember the three ‘r’s of the incarnation: relationship, revelation and redemption. For confessing Christians, the three ‘r’s of the Incarnation sum up the true and biblical meaning of Christmas.

⁷ The hymn, “Good Christian Men, Rejoice,” from a 14th century Latin carol translated by John M. Neale (1853), includes the stanza: “Good Christian men, rejoice/With heart and soul and voice!/ Now ye need not fear the grave/Jesus Christ was born to save!/ Calls you one and calls you all/To gain His everlasting hall. Christ was born to save!/ Christ was born to save!”