

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2005, Liturgical Year "B"
ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY
The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"What Does Christmas Mean to You?"

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Well, you may not hear it in the schools. And you may not hear it in the stores. And you'll probably never hear it in the courthouse. But you will hear it in this place: Merry Christmas! And welcome to St. Bartholomew's on this glorious evening. I would especially like to welcome our visitors and guests.

Yes, it is hard to believe but it seems these days many people think that saying "Merry Christmas" is not only politically incorrect, but offensive. Just the other week I heard of a mother going to pick up her sick child from elementary school. On her way to the nurse, she passed the principle's office. There she noticed three students waiting outside in the hall. She asked them why they were there. The first said, "I'm here because I said the d_ word." The second replied, "I'm here because I said the sh_ word." And the third, said "I'm here because I said, "Merry Christmas."

We may laugh, but that's not too far off from what's going on these days. Like what they're doing at Ridgeway Elementary School in Dodgeville, Wisconsin. During their "winter program" (of course most schools never call it a Christmas program even though Christmas is a federal holiday) they changed the name of "Silent Night" to "Cold in the Night." It's still sung to the tune of "Silent Night," but the lyrics have changed. Now the children sing: *"Cold in the night, no one in sight, winter winds whirl and bite, how I wish I were happy and warm, safe with my family out of the storm."* Can you imagine? And Ridgeway's "winter program" not only includes decorating classrooms with Santa Claus, Kwanza symbols, Menorahs, but they also have Labafana—a Christmas witch!

THE "CHRIST" IN CHRISTMAS

I mean, you can have everything else in the schools but you can't even mention the baby in the manger. Who would have ever thought that Christmas would cause such a commotion? Who would have ever thought that in our nation, we would be banning nativity scenes. Banning Christmas songs in school. Banning Christmas in advertising. Calling Christmas trees "holiday" trees and Christmas parades "holiday" parades. All the while refusing to mention the Reason for the season.

Yet, should we be surprised? There's a reason why people would rather say, "Happy Holidays" than "Merry Christmas." There's a reason for all this commotion. It is summed up in one word - CHRIST. Not Christ as the baby, but Christ as Lord. That's why Christmas is offensive to so many.

No, we shouldn't be surprised. Jesus said it would be so. I mean when Jesus walked the earth, not everyone followed Him, did they? Many called him a false prophet, a liar, a follower of Satan. Even one in His own inner circle betrayed Him. Jesus knew He would create a stir and would continue to do so until the end of the age. And we can get riled up concerning what's going on around us. But really what's most important is not what people are saying or not saying these days. What's really important is what does Christmas mean to you?

IS CHRISTMAS ONLY IN YOUR HEAD AND NOT IN YOUR HEART?

You see, though hundreds of millions of Christians are celebrating Christmas the world over, there is often a disconnect in our lives between what is up here (pointing to the head) and what is in here (pointing to the heart). We know we are celebrating the birth of God's Son, God in human flesh coming among us. We know it up here, but what about in here. God doesn't merely want it up here in our heads, He wants it in our hearts. Because it's only when it's in your heart, it will change you life.

And the way we know what Christmas means to a person is by how they live their lives day in and day out. What's important to them? In other words, what's the fruit, what's the evidence? You can tell what Christmas means to a person by the fruit they are producing. And it better not be fruitcake. It better be the real deal.

And when the Bible talks about fruit, it's talking about do people know we are a Christian, can people see a difference, by how we act and what we say? And are we giving glory to God? And when the Bible talks about fruit it speaks of the fruit of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control (**Gal. 5:22-23**). Are these evident in your life? The only way you will bear the fruit is if you get the message of Christmas in here, if you get it in your heart.

THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS

And before we can get it in here, we need to understand the message up here. Though it can be found throughout the Scriptures, the angel sums it up in one sentence. We heard it in our gospel lesson from **Luke 2:10**: ***"Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."***

"Good News"

Our world needs some good news. I don't know about you but I can use some good news every day. If you go out into the real world you will get bad news. It is all around us. On the TV, in the newspapers, in our community. But God is reminding us that despite all the bad news in our world, there really is good news to this life of ours. And this good news will stand the test of time. It will last forever.

"Great Joy"

And this good news will produce joy. Not happiness, but joy. Happiness depends on our circumstances. If I am having a good day, I am usually happy. If I am having a bad day, I am not so happy. But joy transcends our circumstances. Joy goes deep down inside. It is the realization that no matter how bad things get, there is coming a time when the sorrow and the suffering and the pain will be over. That's why the Bible says in **Ps. 30:5**, ***"Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning."*** And **Nehemiah 8:10** reminds us that ***"The joy of the Lord is our strength."***

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"Born this day"

But now notice, this good news and this great joy is wrapped up in a person, the Person of Jesus Christ. God intercepts time and space and comes to us as a child. Why? Why was He born of the flesh? It is God's way of saying that this life of ours was established by Him. God didn't have to come as a baby, born in a dirty stable. But He did. God is saying I love you. I am with you. He is saying I am becoming like you because I made you like Me. And who is this one who has broken through time and space of human existence? Jesus Christ. What was His mission? To save.

"A Savior"

Now if there is a savior, we need to be saved from something. Jesus is the one who saves us from our sinfulness, our selfishness, our shortcomings, and death. Jesus' mission was not only to teach us about the things and kingdom of God, to heal the sick, and to raise the dead, Jesus came to save all humanity from the curse of sin and death. Jesus came to forgive and to restore life the way it should be.

"The Messiah"

Moreover, Jesus is the One for whom the people of God had been waiting. He is *the* Messiah – the one foretold by the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) in over 70 different prophecies. Our reading from **Isaiah 9:6** is one example. ***"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*** Notice the angel did not say that Jesus was "a" Messiah. Jesus is THE Messiah. But Jesus is more than just the Messiah. Jesus is the Lord.

"The Lord"

The good news is that Jesus did not only come to save us, but that He is THE Lord. He was not some great prophet or teacher. He was, is and forever will be Lord. There is no good news if Jesus were just another "great" man. A "great" man can't save us. But the Lord? He saves. Jesus is the Lord. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. There's no one else. Jesus said, ***"I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through ME."*** (Jn. 14:6). So when we come to Jesus, we are coming to the very One who made us. We are following the Creator of the Universe.

So let me ask you? Who is your Lord? Who are you following? Yourself, another person, money, work, accolades from others? There is only One Lord, One Truth, One Way and that is Jesus Christ.

And so the good news is wrapped up in Christ. Who He is, what He has done, and what He has promised. For He is the Savior, He is the Messiah, He is Lord of all. Don't go for second best, don't go for the counterfeit, go for the real thing, follow Christ.

HOW WILL YOU RESPOND TO THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS?

Now all of what we have just seen is the unpacking of the Christmas message. It is powerful and life transforming, but it will not do us any good, unless we respond. And it is the shepherds who show us how should we respond (**see Lk. 2:15-18, 20**).

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First, the Shepherds believed the message. When it comes to the things of God, you have to believe. And I suspect most of us here believe. But it's more than belief. The Shepherds acted on their belief. They went to see what the angel had told them. They acted on the message. They sought after the Christ. Are you seeking after Christ in your life?

Now notice *how* the shepherds sought the Lord. Verse 16, tells us. "***They went with haste.***" Now, I don't know about you, but when I am going to a place with haste, I am totally focused on getting there. I have only one thing in mind and that is my destination. Everything else is takes second place. Does everything else in your life take second place to Christ?

But the shepherds did more. After they saw the Christ child, what did they do? They told others. Jesus said, "***Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.***" Are we letting others know about the good news of Christ by what we say and do?

Finally, we are told that the shepherds glorified and praised God. In other words, they worshipped God. And that's what we are doing tonight. But what about tomorrow and the next day and the next week and the next month and the next year? Is the worship of the Lord a priority? Do we go to church on the Lord's Day? Do we praise and thank Him throughout the week for what He has done and what He is doing?

A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY

You see we have been given a wonderful privilege. We have heard the truth about Christ. We have experienced the love of Christ and we have been given the way that leads to eternal life. Christ was born. He lived. He died. He was buried. And He rose from the dead. His journey is our journey. We were born, we will die, and we will be buried. But we will also rise again. That should not only give us hope, it should fill us with joy, and give us peace. But between our birth and death we have work to do. And it is no different than what the shepherds did 2000 years ago. To make the most of what God has given to us in Christ, means responding like the shepherds did.

Over 800 people will have passed through the doors of the church within the next 18 hours. 800 of us. Do you know the impact we can have if we are taking the message of Christ into our hearts? We saw the impact that Christians had on retail stores when it came to saying "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." As a result, many stores are now including "Merry Christmas" in their advertising. That may be well and good. But we have even more important work to do. And that is reaching our families, our friends, our neighbors and our coworkers and those who have never heard the gospel with the truth and love of Jesus Christ.

Do you want to have joy of the Lord? Do you want to have the peace that surpasses all understanding? Do you want to have the love that never fails? Come to the One who is the essence of Christmas. Come to the One who is the good news, who is salvation, who is our prince of peace. Come to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So I ask, "What does Christmas mean to you?" The answer will be found in what you will do from this day forward. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!

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Target includes Christmas in their TV ads. Lowes says their trees are now "Christmas trees." Costco says, "When you walk into our stores, you see Christmas." Walgreens says things will be different next year with how they handle Christmas. Sears added "Merry Christmas" signs in all their stores.

It is time to take a stand for our children, our families, our faith and our freedom!

Your efforts are having a powerful effect! Our boycott of Target is working! According to the New York Times, a spokeswoman for Target said it did not intend to ban Christmas and might use Christmas in advertisements later this year! In addition, Sears is adding "Merry Christmas" signs in their stores.

And here is new evidence of anti-Christian bias: A survey done by AFA shows that 91% of TV ads ban Christmas from their advertising. **We want you to help us stop this banning of Christmas.** The survey included one night (Dec. 1) of prime time programming on the four major networks.

AFA found that the "holiday" theme was used in 105 commercials while Christmas was the theme in only 11. This follows the pattern in print advertising where "holiday" was used 25 times more often than Christmas.

Ask these companies why they banned "Christmas" in their in-store promotions and retail advertising and they will tell you they didn't want to offend anyone. They mean, of course, anyone except Christians.

These retailers are willing to use Christmas to secure about 20% of their yearly sales, but they absolutely refuse to mention the Reason for the season.