



Christmas Preaching in a Contemporary Context

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As a pastor who has spent most of his ministry teaching in seminaries, I haven't had much of an opportunity to preach on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, except for those years when I served a congregation. Yet I have managed to preach nearly every year of the past twenty at a seminary chapel service in mid-December. It began almost by accident, when I was assigned to preach then and decided to have a service of Christmas carol singing and to include a sermon. While I know that mid-December is part of the season of Advent, the culture at large is well into the Christmas season by then; and if the church doesn't sing carols when the world is open to them, we miss an opportunity to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹

We should reacquaint ourselves each year with the assigned lectionary texts for Advent and Christmas and study them in terms of their overall portrayal of Jesus' life on earth. This will lead us to expand the message of Christmas beyond the birth of a baby once upon a time. We will include that birth, of course, but we also will retrieve the past promises and acts of God as well as the promises concerning the future coming of Christ in glory. Even more important, looking at this overall picture will remind us that Christmas itself is not the full story of the Christian gos-

¹See my Face to Face article in this issue, where I develop this theme: "Christmas Hymns in Advent? Yes, We Need to Connect with the Culture," *Word & World* 27/4 (2007) 425, 454.

The Christmas story is so well known and so embedded in the trappings of secular culture that the preacher might find it difficult to find new ways to bring it alive. Using unexpected texts and everyday stories might help.

pel. For that we need to include Jesus' whole life, teachings, and activities—and above all his crucifixion and resurrection. Even at Christmas. Especially at Christmas! This, in turn, will suggest other biblical passages that might serve as additional Christmas texts in light of this broader focus.

PAUL'S CHRIST HYMN

This was what happened with my first Christmas chapel sermon. For whatever reason, I had been working on Phil 2:5–11, the “Christ hymn,” and decided to use it for the sermon text. Here we have, apparently, a familiar poem or hymn that the earliest New Testament writer, the apostle Paul, included in his letter to the Christians at Philippi. The Christ hymn is older than the letter itself and therefore must go back nearly to the beginnings of the church after Pentecost. I referred to it as “The Earliest Christmas Carol.” It covers the main aspects of Jesus as the incarnate, crucified, and risen Messiah, who did not count equality with God the Father as something to be exploited, but poured himself out, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient even to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God highly exalted him (raised him) and gave him the name that is above every name: Jesus Christ—the Lord—to the glory of God the Father. This is a long way from “Jingle Bells.” But it's not far from many Christmas hymns and ancient carols.

As amazing as its portrayal is of the Son of God emptying himself and being born as a human, the hymn quickly moves on from his birth and reaches his death on a cross in the space of one verse. Only then is there a period in the Greek text. At Christmas *we* tend to pause and rest and even settle in to marvel at the birth of Jesus, but for the earliest Christians that was never the main point. When Jesus began his ministry, most people had no idea when or where he was born. His birth wasn't even observed by the early Christians for several centuries and then was celebrated only to oppose a pagan festival. The few Gospel references to his birth link it to rejection and violence: for example, Herod seeks to use the magi to find Jesus so that he can kill him; and when that fails, Herod kills all the male infants in the vicinity of Bethlehem in a futile attempt to be rid of this newborn king; and the songs of Mary and Simeon mention the conflict that Jesus' coming will bring.

God had begun to do something new and the foundations of the old order were shaking. There was no room in the inn for the baby Jesus at his birth, much as later he would be rejected by the people in his own hometown and have nowhere to lay his head—until he was laid in the tomb. The nativity scene by itself is not the whole story; it's only the first act. The Christmas gospel includes the rest of the story. We won't understand Christmas without Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. We won't find salvation without crucifixion. We won't find the Son of the true God without finding our neighbor in need. Only as we lose our lives for Christ's sake will we find true life. For at Christmas Christ emptied himself—as this earliest Christmas carol makes crystal clear.

TELLING THE STORY ANEW

Even with expanding the biblical coverage for Christmas, are there ways to tell the story that aren't so familiar as to be easily ignored yet not so far-out as to misfire completely? And even then, can they be surprising enough or pointed enough to be a means to proclaim anew the most surprising thing that ever happened? This is a tall order. Perhaps it is too tall and will only hamper us. But I don't think a preacher should be above looking for especially good stories and saving them for Christmas.

Two philosophers who recently published a book telling the history of Western philosophy through jokes make the point that it is nearly impossible to choose a philosophical concept and then find a joke to fit with it.² They both noted that a really good joke comes first and then one may come to realize how it could relate to a particular concept or development. I think it works the same way for using good stories with Christmas texts. Also, this increases the element of surprise, since such stories usually have nothing directly to do with Christmas but rather open up an unexpected angle on Christmas or Advent texts.

One of my favorite (and true and local) stories has to do with a legendary used-book store on the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota. The bookstore was owned by a man named "McCosh." McCosh was worse than a curmudgeon; he was a crusty, cynical, peevish man with an amazing collection of used books, if he would only let you look at them. (The books may have hinted that he had a nicer side, but it was well concealed.)

One year in December McCosh topped even himself when he put up a large banner across the front window of the store that said: "Put the X back in Xmas." I'm pretty certain that McCosh only meant to be cynical, but in an odd way he said something important. Put the "X" back in Christmas. Put the "cross" back in Christmas. The birth of Jesus by itself never saved anyone. Shocking, but true. Those who worship only at Christmas and Easter may miss the heart of the gospel—the Son's obedience even unto death—if we do not include it also at Christmas, the one Christian festival the world most embraces.³

PREACHING WITH THE CAROLS

Singing Christmas carols is itself a form of proclamation, as many of us know from walking around our neighborhood caroling with friends or choir members or a youth group. But it's more than only the music or the words or the good feelings. Think of the passage from Eph 5:15–20. Following the soaring sentences of the first half of Ephesians, in which God is said to have revealed the whole mystery of the divine will in Jesus Christ, the one who unites all things in heaven and earth, the

²Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy through Jokes* (New York: Abrams Image, 2007).

³See my article, "The Birth of Jesus Never Saved Anyone: The Lucan Advent Texts," *Word & World* 11 (1991) 415–421.

passage reads, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise” (or, as the Phillips translation puts it so well: not as those “who do not know the meaning and purpose of life but as those who do”). “Making the most of the time” (buying it back, redeeming this moment), “because the days are evil.” Don’t get drunk with spirits, but instead be intoxicated with the Spirit of God, “as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.”

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The days are evil, no less so for us than for the early Christians. What are we to do? The author offers the seemingly absurd suggestion that we should sing! The days are evil; temptation is everywhere. So: full speed ahead with a song! When the effort of life is overwhelming, yet the purpose of life is clear because it lies outside ourselves in the One who destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5), what else is there to do but sing?⁴

Erik Routley insists that genuine carols are world affirming; they are neither a Puritan denial of the goodness of life nor a Romantic escape into some nostalgic past.⁵ Instead, they bring the truth of the gospel directly into our evil days so that we may make the most of this time. Almost as a sacrament, the profound but simple words are added to the joyful and singable melody and the carol becomes a vehicle of Christ’s presence for those who sing and those who hear. They bring Christ’s light into our darkness.

Whatever we may have been feeling, the words with their joyful melody draw us outside of ourselves to the Lord. They can burst into our private prisons, when words alone or prayers or sermons may leave us unmoved. And then their truth dawns, particularly when the days are evil—as we hear in the words attributed to the German pastor Martin Niemöller from his Nazi prison cell: “In the old days, I used to be a bearer of the gospel; now the gospel is bearing me.”

No wonder that at crucial places the Bible is full of songs: the song of Moses after crossing the sea; the song of Simeon after finally seeing the babe who would be the Messiah; the song of Mary when it was announced that she would give birth to the savior of the world. Carols echo these songs’ hope of justice and righteousness, of a leveling of wealth and power, and an end to oppression. In our carols today, we too magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God our savior. Let us make the most of the time (redeeming it, buying it back, setting it free) as we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all our

⁴For a fuller treatment of the role of singing for Christians, see my article “Rollicking Advice for Evil Days: A Biblical Rationale for Christian Singing,” *Word & World* 12/3 (1992) 236–242.

⁵Erik Routley, *The English Carol* (New York: Oxford, 1958).

hearts. This passage from Ephesians may not fit well with Christmas Day itself, but it fits extremely well with the longer Christmas season of December 15–30.

FINDING JOHN THE BAPTIST

“I saw John the Baptist once.” Those were the first words of my mid-December sermon on John 1:6–8 to a startled congregation. The previous Christmas my wife and I and our dog had gone out for an evening drive shortly before Christmas. We had clipped a newspaper column describing the best displays of Christmas lights on homes in the whole metropolitan area. Following its directions, we drove for over three hours in lightly falling snow through dozens of neighborhoods, oohing and aahing over light displays of everything from manger scenes—complete with moving shepherds and wisemen, to Christmas trees and camels, Rudolph and the Virgin Mary, Santa Claus and all the reindeer spread across the roof of rambler homes, and choirs of angels broadcasting Christmas music. At times inspiring, often excessive, frequently corny, full of nostalgia but also of hope, the displays left us pretty much overwhelmed by the time we turned toward home.

We stopped to look at the newspaper list one last time and discovered we had missed one—the home with the most lights of all. Since it was only a mile away we decided we’d better see it. As we got close to the street, traffic was backed up for some distance, and although it was now past 10:00 P.M., at the far end of that street the light was so bright it looked like high noon. Slowly we made our way toward our goal, frequently having to stop as the cars ahead of us took in all the splendor. Finally, we were just one house away, stopped in front of a quite small home next door to the massive display. The small house was dark except for a single string of perhaps thirty lights, hung in the shape of an arrow pointing toward the extravaganza next door. We laughed and laughed, and then I thought of John the Baptist, who “came to witness to the light, so that all might believe....He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light” (John 1:7–8). The ironic simplicity of that arrow on the small house, and its slightly mocking tone, reminded me of the difference between the true light and the many bright lights that blind us to Christ’s coming. It seemed almost as if God had sent us to that one last display and also had sent that ironic witness.

Often in a city it’s very difficult to see the stars at all because of all the artificial lights. Yet even in a darker area, where we may see thousands of stars, we may not be able to find a particular star or constellation. We need assistance or a guide of some sort to see it. One of our callings as followers of Christ is to point to him who is the light: to do it in our families and our circle of friends, among our fellow church members, and especially for those who cannot find it. Someone—or, more likely, many people—did that for each of us. It may have been as unexpected or even preposterous as was that ancient figure John the Baptist or that little house with those modest lights, but God in Christ works that way still. Or, as the apostle

Paul put it: “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation [of salvation through Christ crucified] to save those who believe.”

Our proclamation at Christmas may fail if it is too familiar. Sinners have highly developed defenses against truly good news. Our “foolishness” may need to be like God’s—wiser than human wisdom, or at least different from it.

THE NAME OF JESUS

Sometimes the ancient biblical story seems to select an already existing present-day story. In translating the passage from Matt 1:18–21, in which Mary is found to be pregnant and the angel convinces the understandably reluctant Joseph to marry her and name the baby “Jesus,” I noticed that the opening sentence (usually translated “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way”) contained the Greek word “genesis,” translated here as “birth.” Literally, “genesis” means “beginning” or “origin” or “birth.” Here the parallel between the beginning of all life in the first book of the Old Testament and the beginning of new life in the first book of the New Testament is too important to miss.

In both cases *genesis* is the work of the Spirit of God and it is very good. And in both cases the name of the creature conveys the point: “Adam,” meaning “humankind”; “Jesus,” a form of a Hebrew word meaning “God saves.” Each one is the rare person whose name means exactly what it says. “Adam” identifies all people as God’s creatures (and later, also as sinners). “Jesus” tells us who he is and what he does: he is God, and he does salvation. That’s why we sing “Jesus, Name All Names Above,” “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name,” and “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds.”

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“Jesus” would seem to be the most widely known and respected name in the whole world, even if at that moment it must have sounded to Joseph like the worst imaginable suggestion for naming that baby. He wanted to break off the engagement, yet not only was he not to do that, but the angel was saying that the baby ought to have a highfalutin name that would call even more attention to an already embarrassing situation. Why not something less attention-getting than “Jesus” (God saves)?

Some years ago, when personal computers were first coming in, I was just learning to use a word processor—one step up from a typewriter. It was slow and cumbersome but it had one feature I liked a lot. Whenever I made a typing error the word processor beeped. Or when I typed a word it didn’t recognize, such as “hermeneutics,” it beeped. Imagine my surprise when I typed the most famous name in all the world and my word processor beeped.

It knew Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah; it knew Isaac and Jacob,

Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Amos; and Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, and Paul. For goodness' sake, it knew Muhammad and Confucius and the Buddha, Aquinas and Luther, Calvin and Wesley. It knew Herod and Nero and even Lady Godiva and Madonna! It knew all of these, but it didn't recognize "Jesus." It beeped every time I typed Jesus.

I could have fixed this, of course, but I left it—to remind me that Jesus was and is a scandal: God hidden in human flesh; one who is righteous precisely in relating to sinners; an offense from conception to crucifixion, unrecognized by wisdom both human and mechanical.

Christmas is about the genesis of Jesus, the second great creative work of the Spirit. Just as the Spirit once was the sole source of all life, so now again the Spirit is the sole source of new life—first in Mary's womb, now in us. As someone has said, "Every conversion is a virgin birth." Mary bore a child. His name was "Jesus." "Christ," "Messiah," "Son," "Lord"—these are all titles; but his *name* is Jesus. That may have seemed to Joseph to have been a mistake, just as it did to my word processor. Yet a "beep" calls attention to something important—like a tornado warning moving across the bottom of a television screen or the surprising name of Jesus.

MORE STORIES

Some other connections I have made with stories, doctrines, or artifacts and aspects of Christmas include the following:

- I recently used the details of my birth certificate, with all of its names, dates, times, and places—which lock a person into historical, social, familial, and legal reality—to get at the importance of Paul's words in Gal 4:4–5. In the fullness of time God's Son was "*born of a woman, born under the law* [emphasis added], in order to redeem those who were under the law" (which here, in the context of Paul's letter, means "enslaved to sin"). Notice that in this passage Jesus' birth in itself does not redeem us from the law; his birth is his submitting to its dominion in a particular time and place in historical, cultural, and political reality. Our deliverance is the result of his taking the curse of the law upon himself in his suffering and death, thereby setting us free from it, so that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters of God (v. 5b).
- In Luke 2:8–20, after hearing the angelic announcement of the birth of the Messiah, listening to a choir of angels praising God, going to Bethlehem, and seeing Mary, Joseph, and the child in the manger, we learn that "the shepherds returned." After the most astonishing night of their lives (or anyone's life) they went back to their sheep and their fields and their work. They didn't go to seminary; they didn't start a crusade or write a book or appear on a talk show or create a website. They went back to where they had come from. Why? Their action fits perfectly with the story as a whole. The God of heaven and earth becomes incarnate (enfleshed) in the baby Jesus. In him we see God deep in the flesh. We see salvation that does not save us *from* the world

but *for* it. Here we meet the God who calls people to obedience precisely in their ordinary lives, because nothing created by God and assumed by God's enfleshment is adequately described as "ordinary." Meeting the God who is in Christ is not about spiritual transcendence or being especially "religious" or fleeing earthly life for that which is novel or extraordinary or mystical, for that is not where Jesus is. He is in, with, and under the creaturely, amid the historical, physical, political, economic, and social stuff where humans live, love, serve, and celebrate. As with those shepherds, we too may return in good faith to those people and responsibilities that God has given us.

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On Sundays, unlike in a brief weekday chapel sermon, a preacher can take enough time to retell the biblical basis for the sermon and make the connection more explicit between the "what" of the text and the "so what" of the sermon. Failing to allow people to see how the biblical text "authorizes" the proclamation makes sermons more difficult for hearers to follow and may undercut even a good sermon by implying that it is only the preacher's opinion.

Stories or examples must not replace the text but instead should help to establish its claim as God's word on the hearer.⁶ Yet with the Christmas stories in the Bible, their association with childhood and miraculous occurrences may have already eliminated any claim those stories by themselves can make on many adults. That is the reason for trying to find new ways into those biblical passages, even with the risks such attempts involve.⁷ ⊕

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⁶Cf. Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006). Cormode offers careful analyses of how stories help to legitimate meanings of texts, doctrines, or practices—a key responsibility for Christian leaders.

⁷A few of my sermons have been published and may be consulted as further examples of how I have tried to approach Christmas preaching. See "Dominus Vobiscum": Luke 1:26–31," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 21 (December 1994) 455–457. "People of His Pasture: Psalm 95:7a," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 18 (April 1991) 122–124, is not a Christmas sermon but I include it here because a short story served to break open a biblical text in a way that had not happened for me previously.