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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Conveying Christmas All Year Round”

Scripture Text: Luke 2:21-24, 39-40, 52

Dear people of God, let me read to you a poem entitled, “’Twas the Day after Christmas.”

“’Twas the day after Christmas, and all through the house, every creature was hurtin’, even the mouse. The toys were all broken, their batteries dead; Santa passed out, with some ice on his head.

“Wrapping and ribbons just covered the floor, while upstairs the family continued to snore. And I in my T-shirt, new Reeboks and jeans, I went into the kitchen and started to clean.

“When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter, I sprang from the sink to see what was the matter. Away to the window I flew like a flash, tore open the curtains, and threw up the sash.

“When what to my wondering eyes should appear, but a little white truck, with an oversized mirror. The driver was smiling, so lively and grand; the patch on his jacket said ‘US Postman.’

“With a handful of bills, he grinned like a fox. Then quickly he stuffed them into our mailbox. Bill after bill after bill, they still came. Whistling and shouting he called them by name: ‘Now Dillard’s, now Walmart, now Penney’s and Sears. Here’s Macy’s and Lowe’s and Target and Zehr’s. To the tip of your limit, every store, every mall, now charge away, charge away, charge away all!’

He whooped and he whistled as he finished his work. He filled up the box, and then turned with a jerk. He sprang to his truck and he drove down the road, driving

much faster with just half a load.

“Then I heard him exclaim with great holiday cheer, ‘Enjoy what you got. . . . You’ll be paying all year!’”

Well, folks, after we have sung the Christmas carols and opened the gifts, after we have gotten together with our families and watched the Christmas specials on television, after we have thought again of the meaning of Christmas, can we return to our everyday lives, indifferent, unaffected, not changed in any way? Has Christmas kindled any kind of spark within us, revived any ray of hope that life need not be the same? Is there any possibility for you and me to convey Christmas all year round?

Mary and Joseph had to do it. After the visit of the shepherds, the journeying of the Wise Men, the revelation of the angels, and the manifestation of the Star of Bethlehem, after all of those wonderful events, there came that moment when they were all gone, and Mary and Joseph were left alone with their new child, left alone with a tremendous responsibility of having to take this child and help him to become what God wanted him to be. They had the responsibility to take what they had learned at Christmas and convey it throughout their lives. So do we. But how do we go about doing it? What does it mean to convey Christmas all year round?

First of all, we must begin in the home. Mary and Joseph had to do that. What a tremendous privilege for them to be the parents of the only begotten Son of God. But what an awesome responsibility! They had to help Jesus to grow up to understand the importance of God and of doing God’s will. That wasn’t easy. Jesus didn’t know these things innately. He had to be taught, just like any other child. Whatever it meant for Jesus to have been divine, it certainly did not mean that he knew all things.

Jesus was like any other baby, any other little boy. He probably got sick in the middle of the night and kept his parents awake with his crying. There were

undoubtedly times when he was naughty and needed some scolding. I am sure that he squirmed in the synagogue services, distracting the worshipers from hearing the sermon. Probably he didn't always do his Hebrew lessons, he didn't always pick up his clothes, he didn't always finish his meals. There may even have been times when Mary and Joseph tried to teach Jesus something about God, but Jesus wasn't listening to them; instead he was more interested in playing with his friends.

But Mary and Joseph nevertheless knew that they had a special boy to raise. They knew that God had given them Jesus to be raised in their home for a special purpose. And so they tried to teach him the right way. They taught him the Old Testament. They taught him to read and write Hebrew. They taught him God's commandments. They took him to synagogue. They took him to the Jewish religious festivals. They taught him everything they knew about God and their religion. But more importantly, they lived their faith in the home.

Through it all, Jesus saw and heard. And the result was, as we read in Luke, that Jesus "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52). Somewhere along the way in his home life, Jesus understood what he was supposed to be and to do. Christmas caught hold of Jesus for a very important reason, namely, that Mary and Joseph took the significance of Christmas and conveyed it all year round.

We often reminisce about the Christmasses of the past. Most of the time we talk about our family Christmasses. We remember the good times when we were with the ones we loved and how nice it felt. This Christmas, I am sure, many of you got together with your families. You had reunions. How good it felt to see relatives that had been away. How good it was, that feeling of togetherness, how you wished that you could keep it. You can, you know. But it won't be easy. In order for us to keep alive the spirit of love and joy and peace and hope that we feel at Christmas, we've

got to keep it in the home. We've got to teach it to one another. We've got to live it in the home. It cannot be a secret that is revealed only on December 25. If our children are to grow up and to understand all that Christmas means, they've got to learn it first in the home.

I frequently visit Harvard Divinity School. Its building is old, but majestic. The hallways are filled with paintings of past great theologians associated with the school's rich theological heritage. Harvard, perhaps the most prestigious university in the world, had its beginning right there at the Divinity School in 1636. Even so, the world's greatest theological school is not found in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It's found in the home. More is learned about God in the home than in any other place, seminary or divinity school notwithstanding. By what we teach our children, by our attitudes and the way that we live at home, they will learn about God, and how important or unimportant God is. It's a tremendous responsibility to convey Christmas in our homes all year round.

How are we doing with this task? What are we conveying in our homes? During Christmas, we talk about hope. Are we hopeful persons in the home, or are we pessimistic, always complaining about the way things are and the way people are? During Christmas, we talk about peace. Are our homes peaceful places? Or are they battlegrounds where family members are constantly at war with one another? During Christmas we talk about love. Are we loving one another in our homes? Or do we take each other for granted, treating one another as things or conveniences. During Christmas, we talk about joy. Are we experiencing joy in our homes? Is our home a refuge from the not so always nice world where the family can gather to be renewed in gladness and comfort? Or is our home a place from which we need to escape in order to be happy?

Many of us talk about God. But how significant is God really in our lives? We

attend church every Sunday, yes, but do we really see ourselves doing God's will in the world, doing God's ministry in our homes, extending God's kingdom in our work? We have a growing Sunday School and that's wonderful. But what's going to happen when our children grow up? We have a wonderful Confirmation Class this year, five very bright and eager students. But what's going to happen after they are confirmed in June? Are they going to continue to attend church and be active in the church. They will if they see that Christianity is something real in their homes.

And we must also convey Christmas all year round in our work. Mary and Joseph didn't have the luxury of raising Jesus full-time without needing to work for a living. Joseph was a carpenter. That was very hard work. The pay wasn't very good. Joseph and Mary were poor. But somehow they survived through all the hard work that they had to do. After Christmas, I think that the work they undertook had a new significance and a new importance. They were conscious that they were servants of God. God needed them. God needed Mary and Joseph to raise Jesus in the way of faith. Mary and Joseph were aware that God was using them for a special purpose. They were important to God.

Knowing this divine purpose in his life, I think, made Joseph's hammer not so heavy, his saw not so strenuous. Knowing this divine purpose in her life, I think, made Mary's scrubbing not so severe and her tidying not so tedious. They both understood that they were offering service to God through their work. What they did was being used by God, every nail that Joseph hammered, every pot that Mary cleaned. Jesus learned the value of work in God's kingdom. His father taught him to be a carpenter. Jesus got blisters on his hands and probably came home every night with a sore back and shoulders. But he learned from his parents that human work could be dignified and bring honor and glory to God by serving others and advancing God's kingdom on earth.

What has been our attitude as we have gone back to work after Christmas? Have we done so with a sense of excitement and joy? Or has it been routine and boring? As the Christmas music has stopped in our places of work, has the Christmas hope also stopped? Has the good news of Christmas, that God has come to dwell with us in the midst of the world and in the midst of our lives, been thrown away with this year's Christmas tree? Let's never forget that this world belongs to God, and so, this world is sacred. This world is going to be redeemed, every square inch of it. God claims this world as God's own, God's own beloved creation. And so, keeping that in mind, perhaps we can begin to understand that what we do is important to God.

Finally we must convey Christmas all year round in our faith. Mary and Joseph would need to remember Bethlehem often because there would be moments in their lives when God would seem to be absent. There would be times when their faith would be sorely tried and tested. They would have to run for their very lives into the strange land of Egypt with their still infant Jesus in their arms. Later Joseph died, and Mary was left alone with the tremendous obligation of raising Jesus and his brothers and sisters. She perhaps wondered during weak moments if God had deserted them. During these times of discouragement, though, Mary would remember the Christmas event. She would remember the promise given to her that it was to be through her son that salvation would come to the world. She would remember that in Bethlehem, God had not forgotten them, that God was at work in mysterious and hidden ways, keeping herself and the baby Jesus safe from harm. She didn't understand everything then, and she would continue not to understand how God was working in Jesus's adult life, but she nevertheless lived by faith, trusting that God was there with them, accomplishing the divine purposes.

No doubt some of us will go away from this Christmas season and land in some "Egypt" where our faith will be tested. Maybe it will be a sickness that won't go

away. Maybe it will be a job or a home that we will lose. Maybe it will be a disappointment with one of our children or our spouse. Maybe we will just find ourselves weary with our routine lives. And in the middle of this testing, we will ask, “Where are you, God?” We sang all of those Christmas carols about God being in our midst, but where is God now in the midst of my turmoil?

That’s precisely the time when we need to remember Christmas. That’s precisely when we need to convey Christmas in our lives. In the midst of our difficulties, our trying moments, we need to remember Bethlehem. We need to remember Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” We need to remember Jesus, which means, “God is salvation.”

Christmas tells us that we can go on in the face of all of our adversities as long as we keep our eyes on Christ, who is with us, with us in our homes, with us in our work, with us wherever we are, even in our doubts and confusion. Christ never leaves us. His very last words on earth were, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

And so the Christmas season is over. The decorations have come down. The Christmas carols have stopped. The trees have been thrown away. But while the Christmas season is over, Christmas must never end. Christmas must continue in our lives all year round, for Christmas is all about Christ being with us at home, at work, in our faith. Amen.