
Sermon – Christmas Day

John 1:1-14

December 25, 2018

“Would Jesus Celebrate Christmas”?

Here’s a thought for you this morning - “would Jesus celebrate Christmas”? When a newsfeed with those words in the subject line popped into my computer, I rolled my eyes and prepared to hit the “delete” key. But curiosity got the better of me, so I did a quick scroll up and down the page to see what was on the blogger’s mind. The usual background material about Christmas was rehearsed - how the actual date of Jesus birth is unknown, how the account in Luke of “shepherds in their fields keeping watch over their flock” clearly shows that Jesus was born in the summer, when the fields were dry and grazing possible, instead of winter, when the rains make those fields soggy and next to impossible to graze. Finally how December 25 was chosen (probably) in the 3rd century, when the pagan “Festival of The Invincible Sun”, observed on December 21, the shortest day of the year, was converted by the church to a holy day celebrating the coming of “the Sun of Righteousness”, Jesus Christ.

Moreover, he said, Jesus himself had only told his followers to observe his death, which is why he instituted Holy Communion, and he gave no instructions regarding his birth. So....the article went on to suggest... what would Jesus do about our Christmas celebrations - would he celebrate his birthday or not? ‘What’ll they think of next’ was my initial reaction! True, there is much to say and even criticize about “Christmas in America” but that’s not my intended subject this morning. I enjoy our traditions, our willingness in our own ways to join the nephew of Ebenezer Scrooge, who to his uncle in “A Christmas Carol” says, I am sure I have always thought of Christmas...as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time...when men and women seem by one consent to open up their hearts to one another freely.”

Still, there is no command to celebrate Jesus’ birth in the Bible, no record of anyone in the early church doing it, and not much to suggest that God cares for lavish parties anyway. After all, through the Old Testament prophet Amos, God himself declares “I hate, I despise your religious feasts, I cannot stand your assemblies....away with the noise of your songs, I will not listen to the music of your harps. But, let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream”. Yikes, sounds like we’re in the wrong place this morning, eh? Sorry for getting you all up so early after your, umm.....feasts of last night and our service of songs and carols!

What part of Christmas might Jesus find acceptable then? He went to weddings after all; we know that from John 2. He observed the Jewish Festival of Passover; we know that from all four gospels. He ate dinner, and presumably drank wine, at the home of Simon the Pharisee, and for that was condemned “as a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners”. And above all that, Jesus himself describes heaven in lavish terms, like a great banquet. Would Jesus celebrate with us today? Would he take part in an event so focused on happiness, and him?

Of course he would – for Jesus was always in attendance at the celebrations of his people - the Jews, Passover, Succoth (Pentecost), Rosh Hashanah or the Day of Atonement, all of them. And though lost on his fellow Jews at the time - he was there to celebrate... himself. Or rather, he was there because each of those festivals was about the celebration of a redemptive act of God – the Lord saving his people from certain death at the hands of Pharaoh, providing shelter and food for his people in the wilderness, hearing the penitential cries of his people and forgiving them from heaven.

And what does Christmas really mean other than all that? What does Christmas represent if not a redemptive act of God? Listen to what Matthew says; “You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”. Or John; “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God”. And from Isaiah; “for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Israel...all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God”, and from Hebrews; “after he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God”. Would Jesus celebrate Christmas? Why, that’s the very meaning of the day. Not a birthday bash for a little boy, but the remembering of a redemptive, kind, gracious gift of God to the world...to you.

“For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world...to testify to the truth” said Jesus in John 18:37. And the truth is Jesus was born to save, Charles Wesley got that right when he wrote of a ‘Son of righteousness’ that was “born to save each child of earth, born to give them second birth. And Jesus was born, so says he to “rule the world with truth and grace, to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found, to prove the glories of his righteousness, and the wonders of his love”.

Mohandas Ghandi, a Hindu, but a keen observer of Christianity of Jesus once said; “I have never been able to reconcile myself to the gaities of the Christmas season. They have appeared to me to be so inconsistent with the life and teachings of Jesus”. If Ghandi was referring to the gaity of Christmas in America, I might grant his point. But Christmas joy itself - inconsistent with the life and teachings of Jesus? Jesus - not celebrate Christmas? Jesus, skip the celebration of his redemptive love? Perish the very thought! Why would he be here this morning then? Why else would he have laid out the feast behind me? If we’re ever going to convince a watching world that God is with us, here and now, there is no better day to here and now to celebrate, with Christ the gleaming host, and the wonders of his love. AMEN