

## **IT'S OUR BIRTHDAY**

*December 25, 2011*

So, Jack, you are right. It is my birthday. I was born on Christmas Day; on December 25th in 1954. Those of you who can do math know how old that makes me. And the time was 10:35 a.m. – and it's almost that right now. That was an important time as I grew up because having a Christmas birthday meant that both things got celebrated, and in my house 10:35 was the time when birthday presents got opened. So, if you have anything, just bring them on up. And Fiona, I weighed six pounds, eight ounces. How much did Fiona weigh? Eight pounds, twelve. You were a big kid!

It's my birthday, but it's not just my birthday. It's also the birthday of Sir Isaac Newton...and Clara Barton...and Humphrey Bogart...and Jimmy Buffett...and Sissy Spacek...and Robert Ripley...believe it, or not!

And close to home, here, it's Phil Hauck's birthday. And it's John and Rosalie Shier's daughter, Elizabeth's, birthday, too. Anybody else? Any other Christmas birthdays in the room?

I was flipping channels a couple of weeks ago and on the Cooking Channel, chef Chuck Hughes was doing a show about hosting his first Christmas dinner! The title of the show was: ***Chuckmas***. I kind of like that name.

But Marlene, you already said it: the real reason we're here today, the real reason is because it's not my birthday or Humphrey Bogart's birthday or Sissy Spacek's birthday, it's Jesus' birthday. Today, December 25th...Jesus' birthday...or is it? Or is it?

I was asked last Wednesday evening at youth night if December 25th is really Jesus' birthday? And friends, the answer is probably not. A little history: Christmas comes right at the same time as the winter solstice. And the winter solstice has been a time for celebrations for forever. It is a festival of light, and pagan celebrations have surrounded the winter solstice all around the world. It is a celebration of the light coming back into the world as the days begin to get longer after their decline and descent into night. So, the winter solstice celebrates the coming of the light into the world.

Constantine, who was the emperor of Rome and the first Christian convert who was the emperor of the Roman empire, decided that he wanted to Christianize these pagan celebrations. And so for the pagan festival of light, Constantine laid along side it the message that Jesus is the light of the world as the gospel of John tells us. We celebrate the light because, in Jesus, we see the light. And so, for the first time in 336 A.D., the birth of Jesus was celebrated on December 25th by the decree of the emperor.

In the annals of our own Reformed tradition and theology – and Michael you can check me on this – festivals and celebrations were rejected as arbitrary and artificial, including Easter and Christmas; the big two. One of the early evangelists on the American frontier was a man named David Brainerd who was an eighteenth century missionary to Indians in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. David Brainerd refused to celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25th. Instead, he said, we need to be reading scripture and telling the stories of God's love that are relevant for today rather

than just observing what's on the calendar. So, for our own tradition, the celebration of Christmas was somewhat suspect on December 25th.

That means (and it's hard for me to say this!) that even though sharing my birthday with Jesus is a whole lot of fun, December 25th probably isn't the date of Jesus' birth. It's the day we celebrate, but it's probably not the day He was actually born.

But, I don't want you to let that become a Bah! Humbug! moment on this Christmas morning. Instead, let this news be a word of grace that sets Jesus' birth free from what we have made of this late December holiday...this late December holiday whose advent for us is marked not so much by the words of the prophets as it is by the number of shopping days left until Christmas!

You see, folks, if we aren't certain about the date of Jesus' birth...if we really do wonder if December 25th is the right day...then we don't have any choice but to celebrate Jesus' birth every day...and to celebrate it not just in the details of the drama – shepherds and wise men and no room at the inn – but in the meaning of the mystery. The meaning of the mystery, the mystery that the gospel of John sums up in this amazing phrase: ***And the word became flesh and lived among us...***

Jesus' birth means that the immortal...invisible...only wise God has become one WITH us by becoming one OF us. The Word of God that is from the very beginning, became flesh in Jesus. Yes, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But, for us, the possibility of that gift is that Jesus will be born in us. ***And the Word became flesh and lived among us***

Will the Word become flesh...in us? Will these words be spoken of us:

*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace!*

Friends, it's our birthday. That means Sir Isaac Newton, and Clara Barton, and Humphrey Bogart, and Jimmy Buffett, and Sissy Spacek, and Robert Ripley, and Phil Hauck, and Elizabeth Shier, and me, and Jesus, too! But it's more than that. It's ***our*** birthday...it's a birthday that's not limited to those who were born on December 25th. It is, instead, a birthday for all of us – for each of you – no matter what the date may be of your natal day.

It's our birthday...the day when the word of God's righteousness and mercy, of God's justice and peace, is born in us. In the words of the letter to the Hebrews:

***Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.***

God has spoken to us by a Son. And, because God has spoken so clearly, and persuasively, and divinely, and – most remarkable of all – so humanly in Jesus, we can speak ***for*** the Son. We can speak – each of us – for Jesus. It's our birthday...a birthday that is for everyone!

So my birthday wish – for you and for me – is this: may the Word become flesh in us. May this be the day when Jesus is born...in you and in me. Amen.

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