

I've Got You

December 24, 2022

You'd Better Watch Out

Are any of you familiar with the somewhat recent Christmas tradition called Whamageddon? In short, it's a silly game, with the goal being to try not to hear the song "Last Christmas" by the pop group Wham! before midnight on Christmas Eve. If a player hears the song, they are to post to social media and are out of the game. There are defined rules and versions, and it's all very elaborate.

Christmas music, both the absolutely gorgeous, sublime pieces we are celebrating with tonight as well as the pop songs like "Last Christmas" and the silly songs like "All I Want for Christmas Are My Two Front Teeth" shape the season. As I've been praying about tonight's message with Pandora playing Dean Martin's Christmas channel in the background, it occurs to me that many, if not most of us, are shaped more by the theology of Christmas carols than we are by our church's teachings.

Precisely, I'm thinking of how all too often, people conflate "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" with how they understand Jesus. Don't get me wrong, my household is going to put out cookies and milk tonight. The Jolly Old Elf and I are very good friends. No, the issue I'm taking up is that all too often, people seem to hear "He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake," and somehow think this applies both to Santa AND Jesus.

Again, don't get me wrong. I am in no way trying to tell you not to be good. But I think that all too often, largely because of popular culture, people have come to imagine that God is watching us, spying on us, hiding behind the curtains, lying in wait trying to watch us trip up so that we can be punished.

Another way we all too often blur the lines between Jesus and Santa is when we imagine that the purpose of prayer and a relationship with Jesus is to grant our wish list. If we scratch the surface, many times peoples' image of prayer is really a spiritualized version of sitting on Santa's lap. Just tell God what you want, and if you've been a good boy or girl, you'll get it.

Emmanuel and Reversals

As an antidote to this, I invite you this year to more fully embrace two under-appreciated aspects of Christmas: the name given to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew – Emmanuel – and the world of reversals.

Emmanuel. We sing this name in our most beloved Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." In Hebrew it means "God with us." God with us.

Friends, it may seem like it's a Christmas miracle to get to midnight tonight without hearing Wham's "Last Christmas," but the true miracle we celebrate today is God with us. As the Gospel of John says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us": the author of the universe, the

creator of the cosmos, choosing to infiltrate the mundane, and often heartbreaking plane of human existence.

As many of you know, one of our long-time, beloved church members died this week. Jerry Kalkofen was a dear soul and will be deeply missed. One of the greatest honors of ministry is when I get to sit with a family when someone is dying. When there's nothing we can do to change the outcome, the most Godly thing we can do is be present. To be with.

In seminary, they called this a "ministry of presence." Just to be with people can be one of the most profound gifts we can give. And you all do it, too. Sitting with a friend in the waiting room at a hospital. Bringing a casserole or plate of cookies to a neighbor as a way to check in. Presence matters. Being there for each other matters.

That's why Emmanuel, God With Us, matters. And as much as presence is a profound gift as we grieve, it is also powerful in how we model God's justice. When we stand shoulder to shoulder with people, we are living embodiments of Emmanuel. When youth are finally welcomed into stable foster families after months upon months in shelter care, those families are Emmanuel. Those families are literally putting flesh on God's love. They are modeling Emmanuel.

When my two-year-old daughter needs to be consoled, she reaches out and says, "I've got you." I've got you. It's what her daddy says when he gets her out of bed in the morning. I've got you. Daddy's got you. I'm here. I'm with you. You're not alone.

What if the meaning of the incarnation, of Christmas, of Emmanuel, is presence? God with us. I'm with you. I've got you. You're not alone.

The second antidote to mistakenly conflating Santa Claus with Jesus is to remember that in both Gospel versions of the Christmas story, our authors repeatedly remind us that Jesus' birth ushers in a world of reversals: vulnerability is strength, third-shift workers get the news first, the Messiah is born amongst the animals instead of in a place of honor, wise ones pay homage to an infant, and an unwed peasant girl is entrusted with the most sacred duty of all time.

In the Christmas story, we hear that the values and priorities and expectations of society at large aren't necessarily those of God. The last will be first. The consumer is consumed. The power of love takes over the love of power. Life springs forth from death.

Rev. Jared Gilbert puts it this way:

"Jesus did not come to win converts or to win political power. He didn't come to restore traditions or overthrow them. He came to make friends who would be transformed into the hands and feet and heart of the Messiah. He sat for meals, walked for miles, and talked into the night with people utterly unlike himself, until his whole world was transformed."

Conclusion

Friends, as warm and cozy and sweet as much of our pop culture Christmas is, there's a real danger in conflating Jesus and Santa. Yet all too often, we coningle our ideas of them, and instead of strong theology, we end up with a "Santa Baby" notion of God who will grant our wishes in the same way Eartha Kitt asks Santa to slip a '54 convertible under the tree.

Instead, my prayer for all of us this Christmas is that we'll more fully embrace the image of Emmanuel. God with us. That we'll look into the manger and appreciate ever more deeply that Christmas is the God of love saying to us, "I've got you," and then that we'll model that presence in this world God loves so much.

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Green Bay, Wisconsin
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2022