

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
December 27, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: How shall We Respond to Christmas?
Colossians 3: 12-17, Luke 2: 41-52

What do you and your family do the day and the week after Christmas? Many families travel, others have company in and some simply chill out. The process of getting ready for Christmas can be exciting and exhausting, so a break from the frantic pace can be good for us. Yet, do we consider why we, our families, our society and churches go through so much in our preparations for Christmas? Do we do all this because we feel sociologically and economically obligated to do it? Or is it because we truly want to celebrate and respond to the birth of a child, the Emmanuel, God with us, "the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," and the difference this child makes in our lives? Isaiah 9

There is an old joke involving children that illustrates both the secular and spiritual sides to our responses to Christmas, to the birth of the Messiah, God's Savior. Three boys are walking down the street of a city the day after Christmas. One is Roman Catholic, one is Protestant and one is Jewish. They begin to chat about how they celebrate Christmas. The Roman Catholic boy says, "We open our presents after supper on Christmas Eve and then we go to midnight mass." The Protestant boy replies, "My family goes to Christmas Eve worship at 7 p.m. or 11 p.m. Then on Christmas morning we open the presents and have a big family breakfast." The two Christian boys then turned to the Jewish boy and say, "Since you do not celebrate Christmas, what do you do on Christmas day?" The Jewish boy replies, "My family and I walk down to our toy store. My Dad throws open the door and we all burst into the hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

There are two sides to this joke involving children. Is Jesus our friend because his birth brings us lots of material wealth, or is he our friend because his birth redeems our lives not just at Christmas, but all year long, and we want to sing about and live it? Yes, the Christ child, and our own children can teach us a great deal about how to respond to Christmas in a positive manner.

Let us consider further how the Christ child, and our own children can help us respond to Christmas as God intended in a story shared by a Rev. Blair. "Some years ago, the Journal of the American Medical Association published an article by Dr. Paul Ruskin on the 'Stages of Aging.' In the article, Dr. Ruskin described a case study he had presented to his students when teaching a class in medical school. He described the case study patient under his care like this:"

"The patient neither speaks nor comprehends the spoken word. Sometimes she babbles incoherently for hours on end. She is disoriented about person, place, and time. She does, however, respond to her name... I have worked with her for the past six months, but she still shows complete disregard for her physical appearance and makes no effort to assist in her own care. She must be fed, bathed, and clothed by others."

“Because she has no teeth, her food must be pureed. Her shirt is usually soiled from almost incessant drooling. She does not walk. Her sleep pattern is erratic. Often she wakes in the middle of the night and her screaming awakens others. Most of the time she is friendly and happy, but several times a day she gets quite agitated without apparent cause. Then she wails until someone comes to comfort her.”

After presenting the class with this challenging case, Dr. Ruskin then asked his students if any of them would like to volunteer to take care of this person. No one volunteered. Then Dr. Ruskin said, ‘I’m surprised that none of you offered to help, because actually she is my favorite patient. I get immense pleasure from taking care of her and I am learning so much from her. She has taught me a depth of gratitude I never knew before. She has taught me the spirit of unwavering trust. And she has taught me the power of unconditional love.’ Then Dr. Ruskin said, ‘Let me show you her picture.’ He pulled out the picture and passed it around. It was the photo of his six-month-old baby daughter.

“Now, I like that story for several reasons. For one thing, it shows us the importance of perspective. And it shows us how essential it is to have all the facts before we make a decision. It reminds us too, that our children have so much to teach us if we will tune in and pay attention. But also, it reminds me of this dramatic scene in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus lingers behind as a 12-year-old boy and gets separated from His family for three days. Eventually they find Him in the Temple discussing theology with the rabbis.” (Sermons.Com).

Of course Jesus caused his parents anxiety and they were rightly upset with him. They feared for his life. They also missed that fact that he was becoming an adult, even at 12 years of age, who must spend time learning in the Temple in order to mature into what he was born to do on that first Christmas day. Yet, Jesus followed the fifth commandment, “he went down with his parents and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.” She was a wise mother, for she was open to learning from her child. She realized he was wise beyond his years in the ways of God. Imagine what else he taught his parents over the years. This is one response Mary had to Christmas, the birth of her first child; the one God sent her and us as the Messiah.

Just as Mary’s and Joseph’s child had so much to teach them on how to respond to Christmas, our children also have so many things to teach us about how we are to respond to the birth of Mary’s and Joseph’s child. I have heard and seen great theological insights on Christmas from children as young as two years-old. One Sunday as we talked about what Jesus has done for us in the children’s time, two year-old Bishopp Lain very seriously said to me, “Jesus is God.” Yes, Bishopp, Jesus was born to be God with us. Obviously, Bishopp’s response to the birth of Jesus was to believe in him. Our children can teach us the way of faith that brings us salvation if we respond to Christmas in this manner and believe that Jesus is God.

Our children can also teach us how to put into action this faith in the Christ child born to save us from our sins. Let us consider these actions in the context of the story we just heard on the care of a six month-old baby girl and Paul’s words from Colossians.

Basically, Paul tells us that our response to Christmas is to realize that we are God's chosen people, so deeply loved by God that he has made us holy by the Christ Child, who as an adult died on the cross for our sins. Not only have our sins been forgiven, but God in Jesus the Christ clothes us in a life style that Jesus was born to bring us in the first place. We can learn about this Christ-like lifestyle and how to live it as we consider again the story of Dr. Ruskin's baby girl. As we do this, let us try to remember our needs as a baby, and those of our children when they were infants.

Who more than a baby, who cannot feed, bathe nor clothe themselves needs to be shown compassion, kindness, humility, meekness or gentleness, patience and love. As our children grow they will make mistakes and need our forgiveness. What is amazing to me is how frequently our children forgive us our mistakes, our sins, and pour out compassion, kindness, humility, meekness or gentleness, patience and love to us, even when, as adults, we may not deserve it. As Dr. Ruskin said, his daughter, "taught him a depth of gratitude he never knew before. She has taught him the spirit of unwavering trust. And she has taught him the power of unconditional love." As we teach our children these ways of the Christ Child, they teach us even more if we pay attention to them. If we teach our children in word and deed these ways of the child whose birth we celebrate on Christmas, in return they can teach us to be thankful, to live harmony, peace and unity with ourselves, our families, our churches, our community and our world.

To help Jesus learn the ways of his father in heaven who sent him to earth, his parents took him to worship every Sabbath at the local synagogue as well as to the Temple in Jerusalem during Passover. When he was 12, he in returned the favor and taught them the importance of being about God's work. And so it is in our response to Christmas, and the promises we make in baptism, we also are to bring our children to worship: So that the Word of Christ might dwell in them richly: So that they might grow in the wisdom and gratitude of God as Jesus did: And so that they can join us in singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God with all their hearts. Who sings songs to God with all their hearts more than a child, a child of God? Jesus, as a child was taught all this and he passed it on to others as he "grew in wisdom, in years and in divine and human favor." In response to his birth, and what he has taught us, so let us teach our children.

To paraphrase Paul, whatever we do in response to Christmas, in word or deed, let us show that it makes a huge difference in our lives and the lives of our children. Let us "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, the Christ Child giving thanks to God the Father through him."