

PACKING UP CHRISTMAS FOR ANOTHER YEAR

Jeremiah 31:7-14 & John 1:10-18

Second Sunday Morning After Christmas Day, January 4, 2004

You've noticed that we haven't packed up Christmas for another year here at Tabernacle. Take a few moments to just take in what you see in these lighted trees, especially the Chrismon Trees, along with the garland and the entire decor. It's still beautiful, isn't it? It still strikes you with awe, doesn't it? I'm not going to ask you to confess, but I do have an inkling that some of you haven't packed up Christmas either. If it will help, the Gentrys haven't. It will probably happen sometime this week. This Worship Center will be "undecorated" later this week by the Flower Committee and our maintenance staff. I know that "undecorated" really isn't a word. Somewhere, maybe in the Bible, it says preachers can make up words when appropriate. The "un" seems appropriate.

Now I realize some people think all of this Christmas stuff should have been boxed up the day after Christmas. I pastored such a person years ago. She was responsible for decorating the church at Christmas and always did a splendid job. A good woman, yet rather peculiar (who isn't), she had this thing about "undecorating" Christmas. As sure as there was a Baby Jesus placed in a manger, she and her family would, on Christmas afternoon every year, go to the church house and "undecorate" it. From her vantage point, Christmas was over on December 25. She told me once, "It is time to get on with life. No more carols and décor. No more Christmas until the Friday after Thanksgiving."

Her action of undecorating the church house begs a question. When is Christmas over? I mean when is the appropriate time to pack it up for another year? From the commercial standpoint I suppose it was over on December 24. But from the spiritual standpoint it's never over. From the Christian calendar point of view Christmas actually begins on Christmas Day, which is The First Day of Christmas, and doesn't end until tomorrow, January 5, which is The Twelfth Day of Christmas. Yes, Virginia, there really are Twelve Days of Christmas.

I know this all gets confusing since we Christians operate – or we are supposed to operate – with two calendars since we citizens of two kingdoms. We operate by the Civic Calendar, and rightly so, because we are citizens of this world. We also operate, or we should, by the Christian or Church Calendar because we are citizens of a Kingdom that is not of this world. The Christian Calendar binds us to other believers worldwide and it has nothing to do with being Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, or whatever. It has to do with being a believer in Jesus Christ. So we talk about and celebrate Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. This is why I'm still focused on Christmas. It's still Christmas!

A week before Christmas Day I purchased John Grisham's novel, Skipping Christmas, and read it. It really is a "made for TV" movie. If you've not read it, I encourage you to get it and read it just after Thanksgiving. Don't read it now. Wait until December. It will mean more to you. It is funny and drives home a powerful point. While it is tempting to skip all the festivities and decorating and buying that is associated with Christmas, you can't skip it since Christmas is about relationships with neighbors and family all year long. One thing that struck me in reading this short story is how we tend to forsake the spiritual for the secular. I think we do that partly by packing up Christmas too soon. Most of us are so tired of all the advertising and rushing around that we can't wait until December 26. With all the commercialization today is it any wonder? Sadly, even we in the church may have been tempted to forget and have already forgotten. Forget or forgotten what?

That Christmas is packaged in a Word – a Word that became flesh and lived among us. At least that's what the text Kevin read says. "***And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth***" (John 1:14). John, one of those eyewitnesses to the Word, which is Jesus by the way, wanted his readers to know for certain that God had been in their midst. And was He ever. God had come to humanity as a flesh and blood human being. You can't get more personal than that. It was the fulfillment of what prophets, like Jeremiah, had preached in previous centuries. Such knowledge brought joy to those who heard such powerful words like: "***He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God***" (John 1:12-13).

Most people sitting in here have received the Christ of Christmas, have believed in His name, and have received the power to become His children – His own flesh and blood. And our lives, hopefully, have been so

wrapped up in Christmas that whenever we go into the community, let alone the world, we go with the same knowledge Jeremiah shared with the people of his day centuries before Christ's birth.

Those words Caroline offered in worship from Jeremiah 31 were directed to a people whose lives were wrapped with grief and discouragement. They had lost all as a result of their sinfulness – a sin shrouded in refusal: refusal to obey God.

They had been forced by an international power to pack up all, which was very little as a result of the destructive nature of war, and trek hundreds of miles east to a strange land. They were sad. They were despondent. They were pitiful. They were angry. So Jeremiah, that weeping prophet, wept with them and through his tears brought consolation and hope. Jeremiah understood God to have something good on the horizon for them. That is one of the many benefits of being in a relationship with this God of the Hebrews.

He is always about the business offering us something good in the future if we'll just seek to get it right in the present and acknowledge when we miss the right, owing up to the fact that we've done wrong – sinned that is, a refusal to obey God. When we make that acknowledgment, He begins the process of turning mourning into joy, dissatisfaction into satisfaction, punishment into comfort. He did just that for the folks of Jeremiah's day after their repentance and He does the same for us through the sending of His son in a beautiful package – a Word that became human and lived among us. I might add that this Word still lives among us and in us. As a result we can face things that otherwise can't be faced.

During the Christmas holidays or more appropriately, "holy days," 30 of our junior high and high school students went on a retreat to St. Pete Beach, FL. They departed last Monday morning and returned Friday evening. I had the great joy of accompanying them along with seven other adult leaders. We had a wonderfully enriching time of spiritual growth through quiet times, study, daily worship, pairing off and walking on the beach, sharing and praying with each other, in addition to playful activities like going to Busch Gardens on New Year's Eve. You'll be happy to know that I rode four different roller coasters, which I normally abhor, with our students, telling God if He would let me get off alive I wouldn't ride another, only to give in to the temptation of the likes of Jim Porter, Will Casaday, Daniel Montgolf, and others. The fourth roller coaster did me in so I didn't ride any more. Matt Warren and I spent nearly ten minutes as several of us stood watching a host of animals, including giraffes, trying to methodically figure out how to saddle a giraffe and ride it without falling off, since a giraffe's back is slanted a bit, As we discussed that, some weren't so sure how to take us – seriously or not. Well of course Matt and I were serious!

We have some exceptional students in this group of 30, in addition to many others students here at Tabernacle who were unable to go on the retreat due to some prior family obligations or other commitments like some of our students who marched with the Central High School Band in The Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena on New Year's Day. The band did a great job, by the way.

While away in Florida with the students, I never once observed any of them doing something they ought not be doing. Never once did I hear any of them complain or get irritable with one another or anybody else. Now to be honest, they had a right to be irritable, especially last Monday.

Monday was one of those days. We were to depart at 7:00 am. We didn't until 8:39 am because the bus driver went to Cartersville's Tabernacle Baptist Church instead of Carrollton's Tabernacle Baptist Church. No problem. Honest mistake. It could happen to anybody – I think. Off we go southward, which means heading toward the equator. Warmer temperatures, you know. The air conditioner didn't work. We dealt with it. At 6:30 pm the bus slowed and pulled over at Exit 51 on I-275 just outside of Tampa. The driver said he saw blue lights flashing in the mirrors. He disembarked the bus and a few minutes later he returned. Florida DOT told him that he was going 15 miles over the speed limit. He got all the necessary documents. Soon it was 6:45. Now 6:55. 7:05. 7:10. "How long does it take to write a speeding ticket?" I thought. At 7:20, an officer came and asked

for the leader. I said in my mind, “That’s Anthony.” As Anthony began to disembark the bus, he said to me, “You come with me.” The driver was arrested as a result of some sort of violation that dated back to 1972 and something in 1999 that appeared on the officer’s computer. Here we are on a bus with no air conditioning, parked on the shoulder of a busy interstate with cars and trucks and busses speeding by, stranded with a place to go, but unable to get there. The officers, by the way, were very helpful.

All the students on the bus were doing fine from what I could tell as I looked through the windows of the bus. A couple of them waved to me with smiles plastered across their faces. One of the officers finally got hold of someone at the bus company. It seemed to be a rather pointed conversation. Anthony had gone back to the bus for something. The officer gave me the phone as I began a rather pointed conversation with the bus company rep in which I’m glad I was alone standing on a bank about twenty feet or so away from the officers and bus. I’m also glad there was a church right in front of me to remind me that I was packing Christ in my life, because the very first thing the bus rep said to me after I had identified myself was, “Now Mr. Gentry, you need to know that we didn’t know that this driver had a criminal record. You need to know that and does it look like the bus is OK?” Never did the person ask, “I am so sorry you have been inconvenienced like this. I’m so embarrassed. Is everyone on the bus all right? Is your group OK?”

To make a rather eventful story short, the DOT folks got a bus, in which the air conditioner worked, and a driver from Busch Gardens to come take us to our destination another 45 minutes or so down the road. We arrived at 9:30 pm safely, but tired and hungry, six and one-half hours late. We were supposed to have gotten there at 3:00 pm. Everything Anthony had planned for Monday evening was cancelled.

I had a subsequent conversation with the same person, as did Bruce, on Tuesday morning. It was insinuated that this was partly my fault because we abandoned the bus, leaving the poor bus all alone on the I-275. Never mind that the DOT officers suggested we get everybody off that bus as soon as possible for each person’s safety and on our way. Our students and adults were great. Their response was one of Christ-likeness.

Now think how you would have responded. Some of our students expressed heart-felt pity for the arrested bus driver. They prayed for him. Would you? Our students made the best of it. Would you? Our students hung in there realizing that eventually this, too, would pass. Would you? To my knowledge none of our students complained to their adult leaders – at least they didn’t to me. Would you? How is that these precious young souls were able to do that? I mean these are teenagers. They can’t think. Some say they are just hormonal time bombs about to go off. How is they were able to respond the way they did?

Because their cherished lives have been packed with Christmas and I don’t mean the things they got on Christmas Day morning in material possessions. I’m referring to the Word that has become flesh for them and walks in their midst and, in fact, walks in them. The means for responding, as they did, is to allow your life to be packed with Christmas and then you can do what Jeremiah said we could do like rejoicing in dance, being merry, being joyful, having gladness, and being satisfied no matter what. Our students were symbolically engaged in a dance of merriment that brought joy and gladness and satisfaction. They were looking beyond the present moment to the future. Something better was awaiting them.

Whenever we allow Christmas to pack itself into our lives, we discover that it points us to something better. Just as these students were looking forward to being at the resort for their Winter Retreat, so we are to look forward to the future. Christmas, a day about a Child being placed in a Manger, points us to a Cross, on which this Child would die some thirty years later for our sins and then to an Empty Tomb where a resurrection took place through the very power of God, thus ensuring eternal life to all who would believe.

As a result of that belief, we await His Second Advent, which will result in each of us doing just what Jeremiah said we would do: rejoicing in dance, being merry, being joyful, having gladness, and being satisfied no matter what may come our way. As we wait, just as those students did on that bus Monday night, if we’ll allow the Holy Spirit to do His work, we’ll be packed up with joy and gladness and satisfaction no matter what.

So this week as you go about the task of packing up Christmas for another year – all the decorations and stuff that help you celebrate – make sure your life, your very existence is packed with Christmas. Now be very careful as you pack. You might accidentally pack up your faith for another year. Even worse. You might intentionally pack up your faith. Now that wouldn't be so good. Don't pack up your Christmas faith. You need it all year long. Why? Because you just might find yourself stranded out on I-275.

As preached by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor

Tabernacle Baptist Church

Carrollton, Georgia

All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989