

Homily – The Traditions of Christmas

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One of the wonderful things about being the Rector here at St. Barnabas is that there are some mornings in which I don't have to get up very earlier. I can set the alarm for an hour later, and inevitably I wake up before the alarm sounds.

At those times I lie under the down comforter, and think of gratitude and the things and people for which I am thankful to God. I also listen to the sounds throughout the house. Usually, I can hear the coffee grinder and microwave in the kitchen. Sometimes I can hear the dogs outside the bedroom door. They wait there for me to get up, and greet me when I open the door. I would like to think that this is because they missed me, but instead I think they are eager for me to take them for a walk. After I finish breakfast and read the daily newspaper, both Henry and Ben get a walk around the neighborhood.

This morning routine is usually only disrupted when we have forgotten to get something from the store and are out of coffee, half-n-half, or yogurt. Our daily routines can be very important to us.

We also have annual routines. These can surround summer vacations, birthday celebrations, and the school year. These can also surround our holidays, especially Christmas. Maybe the tradition is about food cooked and eaten at Christmas, or special music we listen to. Maybe the tradition is about when we do things on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Maybe it is about presents and Christmas decorations. At its best, maybe the traditions include coming to church on Christmas Eve. All of the best people follow this last tradition.

Now many of you know that when you get married one of the big steps is about the Christmas traditions you will have in your new family. We each bring traditions from our family of origin and sometimes that don't fit together. Does the Christmas tree have ornaments that each tells a story, or are the ornaments of all the same color, and they blend harmoniously together? Do you have colored lights or white lights on the tree? These can be major bones of contention in a new family.

When I was growing up, my dad always had to read Jesus' birth narrative to our family. This is the same story that we heard in today's Gospel reading from Luke – The decree from Emperor Augustus. The city of David called Bethlehem. The birth of a firstborn son in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

The shepherds and angels

The declaration “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

Or in the King James Version the declaration is “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Or in the New International Version of the Bible is says “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

It may seem silly, but sometimes our traditions get flummoxed with small word changes to traditional Bible phrases.

Our traditions around the birth of Jesus can be as important to us as our Christmas traditions. We want the stability of something that is unchanging. We want to be surrounded by things the way they have always been.

As an aside, one of the other things I appreciate about being here at St. Barnabas is that change is not feared, or at least not too much. With my arrival six months ago, we have started doing some things differently. This change could invoke much anxiety in some places, but there isn't too much anxiety here.

Now, there is some irony in the importance we place on the unchangeableness of the birth of Jesus. First, the birth narratives we just heard in the Gospel according to Luke are completely different from the birth stories in the Gospel of Matthew. And, the birth stories are completely missing from the Gospels of Mark and John.

But, there is more irony. The birth of Jesus is one of the most cataclysmic shifts in the universe that has ever happened. The change is so big it is hard to comprehend. I don't think any of us can fully understand God, or understand how the God of the universe could become a human baby.

I don't think any of us can fully grasp the grace of God that is signified by this birth.

I don't think any of us can fully appreciate the shift that occurs with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our brains can process a shift from rigidly following the Laws of Moses, to embracing and responding to the grace of God. Our hearts can feel some of this grace, but we all live lives that seem to ignore the immensity of the birth.

God's grace is eternal and omnipresent. It is unmerited on our part and freely available. It is ours for the receiving, but we must make a choice to accept it. God's

grace is what heals our relationships, and that grace is most evident through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our Christmas traditions are dear to us, but the grace that shakes the universe is still more important.

As I conclude this morning here is poem called "The Nativity" by Christopher Harvey (1597-1663)

UNFOLD thy face, unmaske thy ray,
Shine forth, bright Sunne, double the day.
Let no malignant misty fume,
Nor foggy vapour, once presume
To interpose thy perfect sight
This day, which makes us love thy light
For ever better, that we could
That blessed object once behold,
Which is both the circumference,
And center of all excellence:
Or rather neither, but a treasure
Unconfined without measure,
Whose center and circumference,
Including all preheminance,
Excluding nothing but defect,
And infinite in each respect,
Is equally both here and there,
And now and then and every where,
And alwaies, one, himselfe, the same,
A being farre above a name.
Draw neer then, and freely poure
Forth all thy light into that houre,
Which was crownèd with his birth,
And made heaven envy earth.
Let not his birth-day clouded be,
By whom thou shinest, and we see.