

December 5, 2021 Christmas Is About Hope Pt. 2 Matthew 1:1-5, 14, Romans 4:16-18

John was a disciple of Jesus. A fisherman. He was among the first to be called by Jesus, to follow HIM. We do not know a lot, but we know this. John alone among the disciples lived to be a very old man. He died in what we would call a concentration camp on the Island of Patmos. One wonders why he was spared when the rest of the 12, remember they chose a replacement for Judas, were all martyred. Could it be that John got to live, because Jesus gave him the responsibility of caring for, and providing for his mother, Mary? And did Jesus know that those things would happen?

We know this: Christmas is a season of hope. Songs that do not pretend to be songs of faith say of Christmas, "it's the most wonderful time of the year!" When December begins, more and more of the music that fills the airwaves on radio is Christmas music. Yes, a lot of it is about jolly old St. Nicholas, and decorating the home with boughs of greenery. But St. Nicholas was a bishop, with a reputation for being a charitable figure, especially where children were concerned. And the greenery, whether holly or Scotch Pine, reminds us of eternal things, ever green, unlike the leaves of birch, oak or maple.

John's telling of what Christmas is about does not involve the journey to Bethlehem, although if he cared for Mary, he probably knew more than Matthew tells us about the

birth of Jesus and the wisemen. He probably knew more than the details Luke shares with us concerning the humble shepherds, the angel chorus, and the great census which increased travel across the Empire that 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas. And so it seems natural that many travel at Christmas to be with family, and angels are placed at the top of the Christmas tree, or a star that marks forever what Christmas is all about.

John chooses to link Christmas with the Creation story of Genesis. When John starts talking about the WORD, he is talking about Jesus. He is making the claim that Jesus was a participant in everything described in the Creation story of Genesis. According to that Scripture, God spoke and things became. The WORD was there, with God, and it was God. The WORD was the means God used to create. And when John says “without him nothing was made, that was made,” he is telling us Jesus was so obviously divine in nature, only a foolish, or willfully sinful person would deny it. And when John says “In him was life, and that light was the light of men,” he is saying, at the same time Jesus lived and was like you and me, human, and we believed HIM and we were filled with hope.” No matter what was happening. Even when we lost hope at the foot of the cross, three days later we found it again. HE gave it to us, as HE stood among us.

This is John’s uncompromising testimony: “the light,” that is, Jesus, shines in the darkness, but the darkness, has not understood it.” Two things. Jesus coming into the world and living and dying to redeem it, did not transform the whole

of the world. Darkness still exists. Why? Because a lot of people still do not understand who Jesus is. What HE did. How HE changes us. Last week I read to you from the Oxford Dictionary. I read you an uncompromising definition of Christmas, one tied to Jesus, and Jesus alone. And I say uncompromising, because the Dictionary offers no other definition of Christmas than the one I read to you. John's Gospel, like the Dictionary, deals with the fact of Jesus. As John Ortberg says in that little book "Who IS This Man?" Jesus has changed the world, including the secular world, such that it cannot be recognized as the world into which Jesus was born. Christmas is about hope, because Jesus gives us hope.

And that is where the connection comes with the reading from Romans chapter 3. The Roman letter, written by Paul, that persecutor of the faithful, who met Jesus on the road to Damascus, and was changed by the experience, wrote the letter to the believers in Rome. They were facing persecution. They were being slaughtered and imprisoned as "entertainment" for the Roman masses. Paul wrote to them and what he celebrates in the whole of his letter, is that hope is one of the byproducts of faith. Long before Martin Luther, whose conversion would come about because he read the letter to the Romans, that is the Roman followers of Jesus, Paul had experienced the ultimate miracle. He believed Jesus is God in the flesh, saving souls, and he entered into new life. A life filled with hope.

When Paul changed sides, and mark my words, that is what Saul-Paul did, you could never say he was influenced by the worldly advantages of doing so. One moment he was searching for followers of Jesus to persecute and if possible, eliminate them. The next moment he wanted to be one. Regardless of the consequences. And there were consequences. Persecution. Prison. Trials. More prisons. And finally, execution in Rome. Was Paul mad? No. He met Jesus. Like John, and the rest of the 12, he followed Jesus. Filled with the Holy Spirit? Yes. And filled with hope. Christmas is the ultimate sign of Jesus ability to change the world.

The outpouring in our own time of charitable efforts and gift giving, providing food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, shelter for the poorest of the poor, at Christmas time, is remarkable. I walk every day. My target is 15,000 steps, that is 30,000 feet, close to 6 miles. Some days I don't reach that goal, but a majority of days I exceed it. I walked past a building in which they were processing coats, boots, headgear for the needy. I believe it is a project of the Belleville Police, but I admit I don't know that for sure. Anyway, a massive effort has been going on all Fall, in order that there might be supplies of new and gently used winter wear, for those who cannot afford, a coat that will keep one warm in the cold heart of the winter. The work of our own Helping Hands Group, sending knitted goods to the far north. Christmas is still a time of hope and of miracles of love and caring. And that is because there is an undeniable quality to the history Luke and Matthew share, and that the Scriptures in general celebrate.

As John says, Jesus is the God who made us. And at Christmas time the world celebrates HIS birth. Whether it recognizes that or not. As John put it in the 14<sup>th</sup> verse of the opening chapter of his account of the ministry of Jesus, “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen HIS glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Because Jesus is who HE is, Christmas is about hope!”

Let us pray;

Lord, as we look up at the night skies of December, and we see the stars, help us remember the star that led the wise. And help us to remember that they had but one ambition in their investment in that enterprise of travel. They followed the star because they believed they had to find YOU and recognize YOU, and worship YOU. Grant us the same ambition. Motivate us to worship you even as we meet and treat with others. We too have seen YOUR glory, and we find you irresistible, Lord and God. Amen