

ALWAYS CHRISTMAS
Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40
- Wilma Boyce

Here we are on the threshold of a new year. Did you know the new year for the Church calendar actually began with Advent – the preparation for Christmas – that’s a bit different than we normally think of the New year. *So you might say we are already in the New Year*

Always Christmas: Christmas going on forever;

...when I mentioned this to a group of people, one man said, “I don’t think I could handle that much shopping”...

What is your first response? What feelings surface? *For some it may be great delight... especially if all goes as they hoped or wished....*

I’m sure it makes some people shudder given the rituals that have developed around this wonderful event. Demanding schedules for Christmas preparation and events cause many people to get out their planners or make to-do lists; (some people really enjoy this part) and others have bought books on how to reduce the stress of Christmas. People make plans for decorating, they have schedules for when to write letters to Santa and when to send cards to friends, family, business associates; there are schedules for baking for the cookie exchange; party dates have to be set, guest lists compiled, and food or catering arranged; shopping dates to be set (you only have so many shopping days and if you wait too long you won’t find what you are looking for); decisions need to be made about what to get for each person on the list; dates for Christmas programs at school, at church and at various organizations, and for concerts for all ages, ...Christmas - where planning becomes an art or a highly valued skill set. For those who follow this ritual or ‘law’ of Christmas give thanks that it has a start date of November 1, right after Hallowe’en, and it has an end date soon after boxing day, unless you celebrate the Christian Orthodox Christmas and then it is early January. – and then, BOOM, it’s over ... but who can sustain a Christmas like that going on forever?

I must tell you, I enjoy many of the rituals we have for Christmas.– some are life giving. But if they are not life giving they can become soul destroying. Rituals are not necessarily bad, but they can be if they turn into rules or laws (even unwritten laws). For those living under the law of Christmas an unexpected event - something out of human control – like job loss or a change in circumstances, like an accident, a birth, an illness, or a death - can play havoc with an intricately structured schedule. An unexpected event could forever colour that special day too.

Rituals that we make into rules or laws can stop people from enjoying a celebration, and even from participating; there becomes a right way to do things; some people are elevated and others are put down; there are expectations to be met. And grace gets lost in the process.

How did the wonder of “God with us” get so perverted that ‘Peace on earth, goodwill to humankind’ becomes ‘the stress of Christmas’ where the pressure to perform and make dreams come true leads to anxiety and depression?

Perhaps part of the anxiety and depression that becomes a reality for many at Christmas is because everything is focused on that one day, and then it’s over: like a

sugar rush that gets you high and then plummets you because your blood sugar takes a dive.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians' churches asks a similar question: what went wrong? Who is responsible for their "turning to another gospel?" (1:6) He asks them, "who has bewitched you?" (3:1), and "Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (5:7) Paul is baffled, astonished and very upset at what is happening in these churches. Paul had founded the churches and so he knows they were on the right track to begin with. The churches were made up of Galatians converted directly from paganism. They had no Jewish history with the Torah and even though they likely heard of the Torah through Paul's preaching, they had no connection to Torah law and no reason to observe it. The Letter to the Galatians tells us that when Paul preached a crucified Messiah to them (3:1) and they had accepted this message as "good news" in faith. In this way they had come to know God, or rather to be known by God" (4:9), they had received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and it was manifested in wondrous deeds (3:2-5). So what happened to make Paul so upset?

It seems the community did not have a mature grasp of their identity "in Christ", and they have gone from loyalty to Paul and his message, to challenging the adequacy of his message and their experience. "Someone" has led them to believe now that maturity as a Christian means to observe Torah law – that in order to be truly righteous – to be in proper covenantal relationship with God – it is necessary as well to observe the commandments of the Torah – to be circumcised. And this is precisely what Paul has been preaching against.

So Paul challenges them saying, "6 *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—*⁷ *not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.*"(1:6,7)

And he calls them to remember "we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ". (2:16)

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ;²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ ***I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.***(2:19-21)

Grace is what Christmas is all about, and for those who understand this, *Always Christmas* takes on a different meaning than the endless rush or preparation for the "one day" designated as Christmas. Instead it evokes feelings of hope and peace and joy and love. (We have rituals to remind us of that as well – the advent wreath). *Always Christmas* opens up possibilities that transform us and the way we live because it is the beginning of Heaven breaking in on earth. Things will never be the same!

The apostle Paul writes in his letter that this wonderful event happened "in the fullness of time", the promise fulfilled: Emmanuel, "God with us".

The fullness of time expresses a whole philosophy of history wherein God is the creator of the universe and the judge of all. God has a plan and that plan includes heaven breaking into earth. He has a time for everything and everything happened exactly on time. So Paul writes, in the perfect timing of God, at the appointed period of history, Jesus, Emmanuel was born as a human, under the law, and subject to the law throughout his life on earth. This meant Jesus was subject to the 'yoke' of the Torah:

rituals of prayer, washing, offerings, and obeying the Ten Commandments. (TIB Galations):

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (ch 4)

There is a good reason for Jesus living under the law.

Imagine choosing to give up the freedom of heaven for the law of the Torah in order to give someone else (us) freedom from the law: that is love divine, all loves excelling.

That is the Christmas that never ends.

There were 3 laws that are recorded in Luke that must be kept: the first is circumcision and Jesus is named; the next two are the redemption of the firstborn (Numbers 18:16) which could have been observed at 31 days but is observed at 40 days at the same time as the purification of Mary because it would have been the first time she was allowed back in the temple— after 40 days (Lev 12:8). The observance of these laws shows the conviction that the child was a gift of God – lent by God. It is interesting that Mary and Joseph wait to do the second two together – to me it shows Mary is not going to let Jesus out of her sight.

Mary and Joseph were daily reminded of this wondrous event going on and on. As much as anyone could, they understood "God with us"; their eyes were opened to the wonders and possibilities, ... (and, dangers).day by day:

²² *When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord* ²³ *(as it is written in the law of the Lord (Luke 2)*

There they met Simeon, a righteous and devout man, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and Scripture tells us the Holy Spirit rested on him, and had revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

And Mary and Joseph were amazed once again because of what they heard.

And then they met Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. Anna was 84 and had lived for decades in the temple: she worshipped there with fasting and prayer, a widow after only 7 years of marriage. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

But Heaven on earth does not come without risk and sorrow too: ⁴ *Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of*

many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

It must have been an amazing experience, but daunting too, to be always reminded that your child is the Son of God: ³⁹ *When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.* ⁴⁰ *The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

We as the church understand “God with us” and so *Always Christmas* is not something that should drain us, rather it should invigorate us. We are called to remember that we too have God with us always to help us celebrate Christmas, enjoying the rituals that remind us of all the wondrous happenings of Christmas without making them a burden or a law.

We can give gifts that are useful and helpful to people throughout the year, Just as the wisemen did; we can sing Christmas carols throughout the year, like the angels; we can take care of those vulnerable throughout the year, like Mary did... and we can make room for heaven breaking into our busy schedules and special events- like the shepherds and wisemen, just as God broke into this world as a helpless baby in the fullness of time – the perfect time.

Howard Thurman, an African-American theologian and civil rights leader (a mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.), wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

We can celebrate on Christmas Day – the day designated to remember, and we can also be excited about *Always Christmas* because of Jesus – because God is with us. I love the image Paul uses of us as children of God. Have you ever noticed how children are always looking or watching for something new their parent is doing so they can join in - so excited about life – everything is an adventure – that is *Always Christmas* – eyes wide open with expectation at what new thing God is doing so we can join in.
Happy New Year!

To God be all honour and glory

Focus quote:

“...think often on God, by day, by night, in your business, and even in your diversions. He is always near you and with you; leave Him not alone.” Brother Lawrence - from *The Practice of the Presence of God*

Commentaries: TIB Galations and William Barclay's Daily Study Bible Commentary NT