**John 1:1-5,12-14** December 25, 2015

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Christmas Day

*John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning.*

*3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it…*

*12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*

*14 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.*

**“The True Meaning of Christmas”**

Dear Friends Who Have Come to See the Newborn,

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. If a Christian knows no other books of the Bible, a Christian should know that these are the four Gospels. They are the four books within the Book that tell us the life of Jesus.

Did you know that only two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, tell us about the birth of Jesus? One Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, tells us nothing at all of Jesus’ birth. In the Gospel of Mark, at age thirty Jesus appears center stage with hardly an introduction. Just “Poof,” there he is. And then there is the Gospel of John. John is a little different. It does not tell us the story of Jesus’ birth, but it does tell us the meaning of Christmas..

You know the phrase “The Real Meaning of Christmas?” That old phrase has been batted around for decades. Actually it has been around for over 150 years. But what is the “real meaning” of Christmas?

People have different ideas. The one thing everyone seems to agree on since 1850 isn’t what Christmas means but what it doesn’t mean. Nearly everyone agrees Christmas is over-commercialized. Of course, in the average year, almost every single one of us spends far more money around Christmas than at any other time of year, so we can’t protest too loudly. We are part of the problem!

But why did I say “since 1850?” Around 1820 there was a poem “The Night Before Christmas.” Some say this was the starting point where gift giving became popular in America. Apparently the idea caught on. By the 1850’s, people were objecting to the commercialization of Christmas. Now that was 1850, not 1950![[1]](#endnote-1)

If that is what it is not, then what is the real meaning? Some say the real meaning of Christmas happens when we exchange gifts—not the getting part, but the giving part. Others describe the real meaning this way: “To give oneself up—to think only of others.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Others apply the meaning of Christmas to natural and humanitarian disasters, to charity. Whether we agree or not, I think we can see some virtue in every one of those viewpoints.

Others say that the real meaning is celebrating Jesus’ birth. That sounds good, but what does that mean? Am I just supposed to sing “Happy Birthday Jesus…and many more”? Am I supposed to do lots of good, generous things that will make Jesus happy? Is that the real meaning of Christmas?

Well, listen to John’s Christmas message: ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”*** (1). Now that is different! When people talk about the real meaning of Christams people like to focus on what we should be doing. But John tells us to stop focusing on ourselves.

He says, ***“In the beginning was the Word…”*** In explaining the meaning of Christmas, John goes back to the beginning. Not to the beginning of Christmas, not when Mary gave birth—before that beginning. He goes to the beginning of all creation. John goes back and says that “Jesus” was there before there were animals on this earth, before there was a sun in the sky, before this planet we call earth. ***“In the beginning was the Word.”***

And that’s another thing! Why does John call Jesus “The Word”? That is weird. He doesn’t call Jesus “Jesus” because “Jesus” was the name Jesus was given when he was born as a human baby. And that wouldn’t happen for thousands of years yet. But this one we call Jesus existed, not as human but more than human, long before he was born. Are you starting to see some of the differences between what the world says about the baby Jesus and Christmas and what the Bible says about the real meaning of Christmas?

And why call him “The Word”? Is it some sort of stage name? “The Word” takes us back to Genesis chapter 1. When God created the world—do you remember how that went? *“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”* When God “spoke,” it wasn’t like when we speak. Our speech is just air passing over tissues in our throats. The Word wasn’t a sound, and it wasn’t even just a power. The Word is his will, God himself. Or to clarify, The Word isn’t a “what”, it is a “who”. ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…Through him all things were made.”*** (1,3) The Word is the Christ before he took human flesh.

Many people subscribe to a view, an anti-Christian view I must point out, that the only “real” things in this world are things we can observe with our senses. For those people, there is no place for God. They claim that because they can’t see him, he doesn’t exist. They say that a really long time ago there was some sort of explosion and the universe came into being.

A good question to ask God-deniers is, “If you don’t think there is any God, where did this universe come from.” Good question. Often they will reply, “Well, if you think you are so smart, where did God come from?” But they don’t get it. The science-only person says, “This universe is like a box. Everything in the universe is in this box. There is nothing else.” The Christian says, “The universe is like a box. But God is outside the box. He is the one who made the box. God caused the box to exist. You claim the box simply popped into being.”

That is what God’s word says when we read, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…Through him all things were made”*** and then says, ***“The Word became flesh”*** (1-3,14).

You see what John is doing. All that the Old Testament believers believed about the Almighty God—that he existed from eternity, that he created all things—John puts that on the tiny shoulders of that child who was born to Mary in Bethlehem.

We often say that Jesus is true God. That is true. That is a good statement. But that is not what John is saying when he explains the real meaning of Christmas. Instead of saying, “Jesus is true God,” John says, “God became Jesus.” That is a little different.

No longer do I think of Jesus as an empty container filled with a bit of God. I think of God squeezed down, unimagineably densely into a little capsule of humanity. The great God who fills the heavens and earth, who takes the entire universe in the palm of his hand, contained in a little baby.

Have you ever looked at the religious Christmas postage stamps closely? It used to be every year, now every second year, the postal service issues a religious Christmas stamp with a picture of Mary and baby Jesus. Usually the pictures are from Rennaissance painters of the 14th to 17th centuries or so. On many of these stamps, Jesus has a golden ring around his head, a halo. In the paintings of that time that halo meant that this person was connected with God – sometimes angels and saints also had a halo. From those Rennaissance paintings you get the impression that it was obvious to everyone that Jesus was different. Well, when Jesus was born, it *wasn’t* like there was a halo around his head. It was not obvious who he was. He looked like every other baby. And he stayed that way. Remember that the Shepherds had to be told by angels; the Magi led by a star. Thirty years later, think about John the Baptist. John’s mother and Jesus’ mother were relatives, they visited each other. Even if John and Jesus never met as kids, they knew of each other. And remember how John was sent. God said to John, “You are the lead man for the promised Savior. You are going to prepare the way for him.” Yet when John the Baptist was out in the wilderness preaching and saw Jesus, he said this, *“I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me.”* (John 1:33). The Word became flesh, so truly and convincingly that no one would or could or did know it just by looking at him. This is the miracle and meaning of Christmas.

Our role in the Christmas story is less happy. ***“In [the Word] was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness”*** (4-5). We are the darkness. By nature we sin daily and often. By nature we are not honest and selfless. And even the Christian confesses that while I can do things that might sometimes look good, the Christian knows what lurks within. The Christian knows that the thoughts, motives, inclinations of the heart come from a polluted spring. It is tainted, it is poisoned. And for that, and all that springs from it, we deserve God’s punishment.

***“Yet to all who received him [the Word], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”*** (12-13). The Word has come into this world. He is the light of the world, and those who believe in him have the right of being God’s children. It is not by doing and acting. It is not by loving and obeying. It is through believing. We are the passive recipients of God’s grace, not active contributors toward our ticket to heaven

When that becomes the real meaning of Christmas, that means a lot more than shaming people into trying harder to do better, to help more. It means more than cute Christmas carols vaguely mentioning a child in a manger, on whom we can write our personal preference for the meaning of Christmas.

I don’t put down living for Jesus at Christmas time. But we must realize that it isn’t the core of the Christmas message. Yet when we have understood the Christmas message, then we have a response to Christmas. Then we give gifts, we are generous, we love others, we are leaven in this world making it a better place by God’s blessing. It does not start with us. It starts with God. It is the goodness Jesus has won for us, and the goodness that God gives birth to in our hearts.

***“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”*** (14). Amen.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True\_meaning\_of\_Christmas [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-2)