



Sunday January 2, 2022

Pastor Tony Acompnado

John 1:1-18 (Second Sunday of Christmas)

I realize that I prefer beginnings over endings. Now don't get me wrong, I still like endings – like when I finish mowing the lawn or crossing the finish line at the end of a race or coming to the end of a good book. But I'm still partial to beginnings – like the beginning of a new season, the first slice of freshly baked bread, or the first time I wear a new pair of running shoes.

When it comes to Christmas though, I think for many people it's the ending that's most important. *“Can we just get to the presents and parties and move on already?”* Let's face it, once December 26th rolls around, and if we're being generous, then January 1st, Christmas for the most part is over. Christmas trees have been packed away or are tossed out by the street. Decorations and lights are coming down, credit card bills have started to come in, and Christmas along with the Christmas spirit quickly fades away. But while the rest of the world may be done with Christmas, I just wish Christmas would last a little longer.

We give Easter seven weeks, Pentecost gets three times that much, and even Lent and Advent get six and four Sunday apiece, but Christmas gets only 12 short days. And because our cultural attention span is so short and the rise of New Year's Eve as a significant holiday, Christmas barely gets a week of our attention before it's lost in the shuffle of resolutions, bills, and everything else. However, the gospel we hear today should remind us that Christmas isn't just a season, it's a way of life. Christmas isn't over when we reach New Year's Day or even Epiphany. So, while the season may pass, the hope and life it promises are just beginning.

I wonder if it surprises some of you that we're still singing Christmas hymns or wishing one another Merry Christmas. Well, here in the church things are a little different – Epiphany doesn't even begin until Thursday, and so today, since we're technically still in the Christmas season, we get to take one last look at Christmas. More importantly, we get the opportunity to reflect on what it means that Jesus came to dwell among us so many centuries ago. As far as the rest of the world is concerned though, it's really nothing more than just the second day of a new year because almost immediately we're back to school and work and all the ordinary challenges and routine activities that all too often feel more like a daily grind than daily life.

Which is exactly why we need a reminder that Christmas isn't just a holiday or a celebration, but a gift meant to spread throughout our entire life. And I'm not sure there's a better reminder of the ongoing significance of Christmas than today's Gospel. Why? Because John invites us to begin this year by contemplating the very beginnings of Christmas to fill us with hope and joy for the whole year.

It's a new year and a time known for new beginnings. For some it's beginning a new diet or exercise program. For others, it's beginning by going back to school, starting a new job, or taking your first steps into retirement. And still, others are beginning more difficult chapters in their lives – maybe you're starting a new journey because of a death or divorce, or because you're recently unemployed, or you're coming to terms with a life-threatening illness. And sometimes, because we're walking through these difficult chapters of life, we also find it challenging to fully embrace Christmas. Our struggles make it difficult for us to dive any deeper into the story beyond the manger or see past the culture driven story being told by what we see around us – Christmas lights, decorations, presents and parties.

When we only glimpse the surface then we miss out on the real significance of the events of Christmas. And when we do that, then we miss Christmas as the celebration of God becoming one of us – a fact we can never fully grasp. But God demonstrates God's unimaginable love for us by coming among us to live a fully human existence with all the pain and suffering, the human tragedies, and the sin and dying. The point of verse 14, *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us”* is to remind us that amid our agonies in this life we are not



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alone – In Jesus, God is with us when we're depressed and feeling hopeless, when we're hurting and sick, when we're hit with bad news, when we're worried about someone we love, and even when we feel guilty and ashamed.

In Jesus, God has come and lived in our world; he has become part of our life of confused priorities, aching bodies, heartbreak, and loneliness. Christmas tells us that God isn't unapproachable and separate from our world, but that God is in the world *with us*. This is the very meaning of the name Emmanuel – God with us. In today's gospel, John not only names the truth of our broken and difficult circumstances, he goes on to name the truth of our great and enduring hope: *"It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."* Here, John makes clear the whole purpose of his writing: to show us Jesus – because in seeing Jesus, we see God.

Christmas isn't merely a season or a celebration; it's a promise that invites our participation every day of the year. Our lives matter to God. Our well-being is of tremendous importance to God. There's no worry too small and no challenge too great that God does not desire to share with us. Christmas invites us to trust Jesus and challenges us to take Jesus seriously – not just on Christmas Day but every day.

The Word of God, as Jesus is referred to in the scriptures, came to give his life for us in the shame of the cross, and through his suffering and dying for the sins of all people. In the cross we see just how far God will go to tell us how much God loves us. After centuries of communicating through the teachings of the law or the words of the prophets, God in Jesus took on our human form and flesh, to speak to us more directly, more personally, more fully, and show us just how much God loves us and values us.

This is the promise of Christmas – that God will stop at nothing to communicate God's tremendous love for us and be a part of our lives here and now so that we can share in God's life. And because of the cross and resurrection, even in the great hardships of life, we can cling to the promise that God indeed loves us and is determined to be with us every step of the way. Therefore, we can live confident in the promise that light is stronger than darkness, love is stronger than hate, and life is stronger than death.

Maybe then on this second, and last Sunday of Christmas, a new opportunity lies before us. To treat it as the first Sunday of a year where we begin to imitate God's activity to come among us in grace and love so that the light might continue shining even in the darkest of places.

And if so, if we do that, then I think the poem *"The Work of Christmas"* by theologian and social justice leader Howard Thurman, might just be a perfect complement to John's gospel:

"When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and 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 the people."

Dear friends, what difference will this Christmas make in your life beyond being just another Christmas? Perhaps you would consider joining me on a new beginning – the work of Christmas – to live the Christmas life – because the hope and life that Christmas promises is simply too good to limit to only twelve short days. Merry Christmas! Amen.