

Christmas 2

January 3, 2021

## **Giving Christmas Away!**

**John 1:1-18**

How do we keep Christmas.? It's a worthy goal, and we talk about it every year. Even the quite secular people in our society think we've made Christmas too commercial. In truth, however, our culture is so secular that we'll have a hard time keeping Christmas the way we should. I expect we'll have to make the case every year.

But today, on this second Sunday after Christmas, I'd like to come back to the subject one more time. But this time I'd like to talk about giving Christmas away. Please hear me: I didn't say I wanted to talk with you about Christmas giving; NO, I want to talk about giving Christmas away.

There's a great African-American spiritual that got it right; that's why I've chosen it for my sermon title. It's a Christmas song to be sung after Christmas, because it's about giving Christmas away. Listen:

Go, tell it on the mountains,  
Over the hills and everywhere;  
Go, tell it on the mountains,  
That Jesus Christ is born!

I don't know who the original authors of this song had in mind. They could have been thinking about the shepherds, because the Bible tells us that when the shepherds left the manger where they had seen the baby Jesus, "they made known what had been told them," and "all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them."

Or they might have been thinking about the aged woman, Anna, who was in the temple when Jesus was presented to the Lord. After she had seen Jesus, she began "to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Like the shepherds, she wanted to tell the message "everywhere," that "Jesus Christ is born."

Or maybe the folks who gave us this wonderful spiritual were thinking about John the Baptist. John, more dramatically than anybody, tried to tell the world -- from the wilderness, from the Jordan River, from wherever he might be -- that Jesus Christ was born. He didn't begin telling the story until Jesus was 30 years old, but that was just the right time for him to start the announcement, and he did it well.

That's the part of our scripture of the day that I'd like to discuss with you. There's so very much in the 18 verses of the first chapter of John's gospel that a person might well preach from those verses for a month or more and still only scratch the surface. I want to talk with you about someone who seems to

come into the passage almost as an intruder, or at the least, as a complete surprise.

All of us agree that the opening verses of John's gospel are as poetic, as majestic and as other-worldly as anything could be. They take us back before time, to the moments of creation. "In the beginning," they say, there was the Word, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1-3). That's breathtaking. It's the sort of thing you wish you could set to music, because you feel you can't really grasp it anyway, so perhaps it would be easier to bow it or strum it or drum it.

Then, suddenly, when we're so caught up in this eternal scene, the writer says, without even a pause (though we have a paragraph division in our modern translations), "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6). When you read it for the first time you want to say, "What's this doing here? What does this fellow John, about whom we've heard nothing until this moment -- what's he have to do with the light so powerful that the darkness has never been able to put it out? What in the name of heaven does this John-person have to do with a scene as breathtaking as all of this?" And we're told simply that he has come to bear witness to the light.

As I suggested a moment ago, the opening verses of this gospel are overwhelming in their poetry and majesty. And in truth, you aren't ready to receive these words unless you're ready to confess that Jesus Christ was the pre-existent Son of God.

But if, on theological grounds, you find it hard to accept the opening verses because of their majesty and daring, it's almost as difficult to accept the words about John the Baptist because they seem so ordinary and mundane, and so out of place in such a dramatic setting.

After all, if Jesus is, indeed, the eternal Word, by whom the universe was made, and if he is the light of the world, then why does he need a witness? How, exactly, does one testify to a light? Isn't light self-evident?

Well, that's the earthly side of this remarkable gospel story. God's part is to send his Son into the world -- that is, to give us Christmas. Then it's our human responsibility to tell the world about Jesus Christ; that is, it's our job to give Christmas away.

And if it is a miracle -- as it surely is -- that God came into the world in Jesus Christ, the Babe of Bethlehem, then it is almost as much of a miracle that God has entrusted the news of this event to human hands. The event itself is so eternity-shaking, and we carry it on in the most commonplace ways.

John the Baptist led the way in introducing Jesus to the world. And John had no illusions about his assignment. After he had been preaching for a while, and the crowds were thronging to hear him, some people began to ask John who he was. Was he a special prophet or was he even, perhaps, the Messiah? And John quickly answered that he was nothing more than a voice in the

wilderness, the one preparing the way for the Christ. He was the first to give Christmas away.

And people have been doing it ever since. That's what the first apostles were about: they went everywhere sharing the Good News. Of the original apostles, tradition says that everyone except the apostle John died the death of a martyr. Giving Christmas away isn't necessarily a safe and easy job!

These Christmas-givers have come in remarkable variety. Some have been among the greatest intellects our world has known -- persons like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. Or Jonathan Edwards, who is often described as the greatest philosopher and preacher America has ever produced.

But God has also used some of the simplest folks imaginable. I'm very sure that a good many of us will get to heaven because of the witness of someone barely able to read and write, if even that. Indeed, think of the persons who first gave us the spiritual I quoted earlier.

They may have been illiterate plantation workers, unsophisticated in matters of this world, but they were wonderfully sensitive to their faith and belief in Jesus as their Savior. We're still singing their words today. Surely, they've managed to "tell it on the mountains."

If I could, I'd add some verses to this spiritual. After singing, "Go, tell it on the mountain," I'd want a verse that would say, "Go to tell it with my

mouth,” because we have to verbalize the news of Christ if people are to learn of him. And again, “Go to tell it with my money,” because while some of us can’t go to the far corners of the earth with the message, we can help pay the way for those who do. And of course, “Go to tell it with my deeds of kindness,” because sometimes the story is told best by a pot of soup, a note of concern, a smile of patience.

If each of us did what ought to come to us naturally as Christians, we would start telling the story -- on mountains, hills, and everywhere -- that Jesus Christ is born. That is, we would start giving Christmas away.

Isn't it strange? We so often say that “Christmas is all about giving,” but we forget the most important giving of all -- giving away Christmas. That is, giving away the wonderful, eternal, life-changing story of Jesus Christ. And isn't it remarkable that when the Fourth Gospel tells the Christmas story, it begins with such magnificent, eternal language about the Word that was with God from the beginning -- and then it tells us that there was “a man sent from God, whose name was John,” and that his job was to let the world know God's Christmas story.

Go, tell it on the mountain, John! And you, too, and me, too. It's time to give Christmas away.