

***December 29, 2019***

This is about the time of year that people suffer from something we might call “post-Christmas letdown.” We may know in our minds that Christmas has in fact only *begun* a few days ago, but here in America, we start seeing Christmas trees put out for the trash by now.

There are three ways I fight post-Christmas letdown, and our readings today helps us enter each one:

First, Christmas is a beginning.

Second, Christmas is an ending.

Third, Christmas is perpetual beginning, and it never ends.

**Christmas is a beginning.**

Isaiah writes:

“For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.”

Like a seed sprouting, or a first tender shoot of spring, our God chose to be with us, not this time in a pillar of fire or cloud, not showing great power in a flood or a plague, but as a helpless (and inevitably adorable) baby. All raw beginning.

Like us, Christ is born an infant.

Christ is born an infant, like us.

This gift of incarnation strikes awe. It summons shepherds in from the fields. It brings learned people trekking across the desert. Christmas Day is a beginning: Christ is a mere green shoot. Yes, we know what comes next, but can we also offer ourselves the gift of staying in that beginning for at least twelve days? To at least let the gold, frankincense, and myrrh make it to the baby before we pack up the creche again for next year? All that is to follow has meaning—the presentation, the teaching, the signs and wonders, the parables, the betrayal, the flogging, the cross, the tomb, the resurrection and ascension—indeed, its impossible to imagine meaning for Christmas

without those things. But for twelve days in December and January let us hold those loosely, and let us *be* in the beginnings of things. Lets give ourselves the gift of dwelling in that beginning, and drinking deeply of it.

### **Christmas is an ending.**

Paul is clear about that. "we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian," he writes. "You are no longer a slave but a child," he writes. No longer this, no longer that. Something has ended. But here is a moment where we have to pause with Paul and consider what he was up to, and what we can do with his writing now. Today's passage is a decisive rejection of the Jewish law under which Jesus lived, and under which Paul had also been raised and in the name of which he had persecuted Christians before his conversion. Scholars have gone back and forth as to whether Paul was doing the right thing here, and many other early Christian communities didn't agree with him. Still, he is offering a radical vision of the universal Christ that should be profoundly liberating. Unfortunately, Paul words and rejection of Jewish law has been the ground on which a truly fearsome amount of anti-semitism has been built, so how do we work with it?

Perhaps we can push our way through the specificity of rejecting the law, and into Paul saying that "God sent his son... that we might receive adoption as children." Perhaps Paul was trying to wrestle with what John points to in our gospel today when he writes, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." God had already called ancient Israel to be his people. God called Noah to survive when all the world was destroyed. God called Abraham to be the "ancestor of a multitude of nations." God called Moses to bring the law. God called David and his line to rule forever. God called Mary to carry his own self into the world and, by becoming flesh in Jesus, God calls each of *us* in all our messy, fleshly, complicated selves to be *children* of God, and not because we are children of any particular person or flesh or blood, or children of any particular will, or group, or nation, but because we believe.

So, let Christmas *be* an ending. Let Christmas be the ending of marginalizing and being marginalized. Let Christmas be the ending of walking in darkness. Let Christmas also be the end of regarding status over person: of looking at family, parents, children, nation and missing the person. Let Christmas be the end of looking into anyone's eyes and not seeing a beloved child of God.

When we pass the peace in a little while, try it for yourself: remind yourself as you greet each person, “This is a beloved child of God.” “And so is this.” And so are you.

**Christmas is perpetual beginning, and it never ends.**

I started by saying that Christmas is a beginning. And it is. *A* beginning. But “in *the* beginning,” John tells us, “was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Word is eternal. The Word was in the beginning. The Word will be in the end. But! “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” In time, in a known, countable moment of time the Word lived as flesh, and as a baby ate, and cried, and needed diaper changes. As the incarnate Word, Luke writes, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” The Word *was* in the beginning. The Word was made flesh in time. And the Word remains forever, at the right hand of the father, in unity with the Holy Spirit. The beginning of everything, the source of everything, and that to which we return in the end.

Christmas Day is the celebration of the incarnation, of the one day in which Christ came into the world. But through us, the church, the body of Christ in the world, Christ is coming into the world every day. Every day that we do as he instructed: feed the hungry and thirsty, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger, visit the sick and the prisoners, we bring Christ into the world, and we celebrate Christmas.

On this fifth day of Christmas, I’m not here to offer five golden rings but three invitations:  
Give yourself the gift of reveling in sweet beginnings for 12 luscious days.

Let Christmas end in your heart the divisions that separate people, classes, races, nations.

And let yourself trust in the eternal Word, which was, and is, and will be, by working as the embodiment of *Christ* in the world, be the embodiment of *Christmas* in the world.

*That* Christmas never ends.

***Texts for December 29, 2019***

[Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#)

[Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7](#)

[John 1:1-18](#)

[Psalm 147 or 147:13-21](#)



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