

IS IT OVER ALREADY?

Luke 2:21-24

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SCRIPTURE

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²²When 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, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:21-24 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Is it over already?

Christmas is one of those holidays that most of us enjoy preparing for and anticipating. It seems that for months we plan for meals, parties, concerts and (in my case) worship services. We also arrange for the purchase of all those special gifts.

The stores seem to help us anticipate the Christmas season earlier and earlier as they bring out the Christmas decorations almost at the end of summer. It used to bother me when I heard Christmas music in the stores in the middle of October. But Labor Day weekend? Come on!

Anyway, for months we plan and prepare and before we know it Christmas is here. I know for children it seems that time goes by very slowly, especially as they look forward to Christmas Day; but for adults the time seems to go by more swiftly every year. I am always a little saddened when I see the boxes, ribbons, and torn wrapping paper all collected in a heap ready to be taken out with the rest of the trash.

It is amazing to me how quickly some Christmas trees can make it to the curbside. The holiday has already come and gone and all that is left is to clean up. But why are we so anxious to put away our Christmas decorations and take down our Christmas trees? Why is it that we prepare for weeks and months and then we just celebrate for one short day? Surely, Christmas is not over with the passing of one day of celebration.

Of course, traditionally, Christmas lasts for twelve days; that's why we sing the song about the twelve days of Christmas. "On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me. . ."

This in turn reminds of George. George had a habit of giving his wife strange Christmas gifts. So she was not surprised when he came one night carrying a tiny, leafless tree. Attached to one limb was a shotgun shell. "All right, George," said his wife, truly stumped this time. "What is it?" "Why, honey." George smiled, "it's a cartridge in a bare tree."

The Christmas celebration continues until the day of Epiphany, January 6, when we celebrate the light of the star that appeared at Jesus' birth and guided the magi on their journey. But even if you observe the twelve days, it still goes by fast, and is soon all over.

Many have lamented the fleeting nature of Christmas and have wished it could be prolonged. They say things like, "We should try to keep the spirit of Christmas throughout the year." But it gets tricky when you try to pin them down as to what they mean by "the spirit of Christmas." What is the spirit of Christmas? Singing carols year round? Drinking eggnog in summer? Constantly wishing people joy and peace? Weekly showings of, "It's a Wonderful Life?"

Personally, I am not so much interested in the spirit of Christmas (whatever that means) as I am in the historical event that inspired Christmas, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and how the story went from there.

Luke, the physician turned historian, tells us that eight days after Jesus was born he had his foreskin removed in a procedure commonly referred to as circumcision. This is hardly the kind of story you want to use if you are promoting the idea of a year round "Christmas spirit." But it does underscore for us that the Jesus, whose birth inspired Christmas, is not a myth or legend but a real, historical person.

We know he was born into a faithful but poor Jewish family. I say faithful because Luke describes three different religious ceremonies that may seem strange to us but which all pointed to this idea that every child is a gift from God. I say poor because only those who are poor would use two pigeons or doves in such ceremonies.

Luke wants us to appreciate the authentic human nature of Jesus. Jesus was an infant and grew into manhood. His growth had an eyewitness in Mary.

It is one of the wonderful privileges of parenthood to be able to watch our children grow.

It is an exciting time to see the changes. There may be some drawbacks, such as, buying new shoes all the time because they keep growing out of the old ones. But overall, it's delightful to see our children grow. Some parents use a pencil mark on a bedroom wall or a special tape measure to indicate the growth of their children. And then for many children, a milestone is reached on the day when they are taller than one or both parents. They won't forget that and they certainly won't let you forget that. It's exciting to see them grow.

Now Mary, the mother of Jesus, would not have been any different. She saw Jesus as an infant. She saw the changes. Try to picture his tiny little hands and tiny little feet. I wonder how often Mary stuck out one of her fingers and Jesus wrapped his hand around her finger in love and affection. Mary saw those teensy hands and feet grow into the hands and feet of a man. Then one day outside the walls of Jerusalem, Mary saw those same hands and feet pierced by iron spikes. Still later, she saw them grow cold and lifeless. Jesus, the son of Mary, lived a real human life and he died a real human death.

But it was a death for us. The Bible says:

But God has shown us how much he loves us—it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us! (Rom 5:8 GNT).

Jesus did not remain in the tomb. By the power of God, he was raised from the dead, and is alive even today! We can know him, trust him, and love him forever.

Paul Little has said that if Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead then we have answers to the profound questions of our existence: "Where have we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going?" He goes on to say, "If Christ rose, we know with certainty that God exists, what he is like and how we may know him in personal experience; the universe takes on meaning and purpose, and it is possible to experience the living God in contemporary life."

This remains true even if we do not celebrate the "Christmas spirit" all year long or even at all. The fact is, while Christmas is tied to the celebration of a birth there would be no Christmas at all without the death and resurrection of Christ. Christmas is fleeting but the story that inspired it is not over yet. There is so much more to come.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16 NIV).