

“IT’S NOT OVER, IT’S JUST BEGINNING!”

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Christmas Sunday  
Matthew 2:13-23

You want to know something? For some people, Christmas is over already! I’m sure you’ve already passed someone’s Christmas tree on the curbside waiting for the garbage truck to pick it up tomorrow. And not too long from now, the de-decorating will begin for a lot of people. The festive lights will be taken down from the outside of the house and stored back in the basement or attic ‘til next year.

Everyone’s finishing up their holiday leftovers, and some are heading off to the store to return or exchange gifts that weren’t quite right. And in the back of their mind, they’re also thinking about tomorrow, when they have to head back into work. For so many people, Christmas is over already!

Interesting, isn’t it, that once the day, December 25<sup>th</sup> is past, people think Christmas is over, yet the starting point for Christmas – oh, who can name that? Ask the retailers and Christmas starts about in September, doesn’t it? Isn’t that about when they started decorating for Christmas? (You think I’m kidding? I saw something on Facebook the other day that showed a local store that already had Valentine’s Day candy on a shelf! No joke!)

So Christmas starts culturally for us long before we Christians start thinking about it in Advent. It’s no wonder then that by December 26<sup>th</sup>, it’s over for so many people.

But friends, it’s not over! Christmas is not over! Christmas, the Christmas season and celebration in the Christian church lasts 12 days – until Epiphany, when we remember the visit of the Magi to Jesus. There’s so much more to the story than the birth in Bethlehem – it goes on.

There is the visit by the Magi from the East with their precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And there’s more, and some of it is not pretty – like today’s Gospel lesson – a reminder that from the very beginning, Jesus’ life was in jeopardy; from the very beginning, he was a threat to the powers-that-be. So afraid of Jesus was Herod, so threatened was he by the new-born King of the Jews, that he did the unspeakably horrible thing of killing all the children in Bethlehem who were two years old or under.

Joseph and Mary had to go home by another way so as to keep their baby safe. Which they did. God made a way.

So after we hear all those stories – after twelve days of Christmas – then we move on; but for now, Christmas is not over, it's just beginning!

Poet Ann Weems wrote a lovely little piece entitled “Later” which goes like this:

“Later

after the angels,

after the stable,

after the Child,

they went back . . .

as we always must,

back to the world that doesn't understand our talk of angels and stars  
and especially not the Child.

We go back complaining that it doesn't last.

They went back singing praises to God!

We do have to go back,

but we can still sing the alleluias!”

(Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, “Later,” p. 86)

Sadly, I think Ms. Weems puts her finger right on it when she says, “we go back complaining that it doesn't last.” We do. We complain, we whine, we're tired, we've had our fill of everything – shopping, wrapping, baking, partying, eating, spending time with family and friends – so by the time December 26<sup>th</sup> rolls around it's back to the same-old, same-old and too often, to complaining.

We all marvel at the good spirit that seems to prevail in general before Christmas – people being kinder to each other, offering good wishes to others, digging deeper to help others – and then, as if a switch has been thrown, as soon as Christmas is over it's back to the same old, same old – taking care of myself, looking out for number one. And so we complain about that too – after Christmas – how the Christmas spirit is gone again.

Hey friends, what would happen if instead we did what Ann Weems suggests, and that is – go back into the world after Christmas singing Alleluias!

“Alleluia” that God came into our world at Christmas in an ordinary yet extraordinary way, and changed it forever. And because He did, we are changed as well.

British writer and preacher Barrie Shepherd, in thinking about that, once wrote: “Might it be that in the very ordinariness of your Son’s birth there lies the first disclosure of his message, of the great good news? Might it be, this very night, that you are telling me to look for meaning, mystery, and miracle right here inside the matter-of-fact problems, pains, potentials that make up the daily round? I pray this may be so, Lord God, because the miracle of Christmas that I need will not be found in far-off Bethlehem, or even on the decorated altar of the church, but in the birth of hope and trust and love deep in my ordinary heart.” (J. Barrie Shepherd, *A Child is Born*, p. 126)

Shepherd’s prayer is that hope and trust and love would be born in our hearts because of Christmas, and friends, it is! And because it is, we can go into the world singing our Alleluias – life has changed, because of the baby born in Bethlehem, we have hope and trust and love in our lives – nothing is the same as it was before! All because of this seemingly ordinary event – the birth of a baby – which was anything but ordinary, indeed, it was extraordinary! It (He) changed everything – how can we help but sing our “Alleluias!”?

And how can we help but sing our “Alleluias” knowing that He knows our human condition, He was born like us, He lived like us, He died like us. We are never alone, for we have a Savior who has gone through everything we have or will go through. He’s not some high and holy Sovereign maintaining a safe distance from we humans – He came to be one of us.

If you have a hard time wrapping your head around that – think about this. Tony Campolo shares the story of something that happened in the 1996 Olympic Games. An American runner by the name of Derek Redmond, was entered in the 400-meter race. He has practiced it for years and years and years, and was so ready for the Olympics. His Dad had been his trainer and coach.

Well, the day of the race came, and during his heat, Redmond was well out ahead of the rest of the pack when his Achilles tendon snapped. He pulled up, then stopped running, but did not drop out of the race. Instead, in a struggling limp he pulled himself forward, dragging his wounded leg behind him. The crowd realized what was going on and stood and cheered him on, but the pain was so great and the wound so serious that it looked like he wasn’t going to make it.

Suddenly, a middle-aged man jumped over the guardrail onto the track, caught up with Derek, put his arm around Derek’s waist, and helped him all the way to the finish line. It was his father!

Later on, when Derek was being interviewed by the press, he said, “My Dad was the only one who could have helped me, because he was the only one who knew

what I'd been through." (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, "What We Overhear About Jesus," "The Race," p. 15)

Because of Christmas, friends, because Jesus came into our world as one of us, no matter what we go through, He is the one who can help us, because He's been there, He's walked where we walk.

Another reason we can go back into the world singing our "Alleluias" after Christmas!

Let me suggest one more reason we can sing our "Alleluias" – and it is that we know, because of Jesus, that evil will never, ever have the final word. And oh, does our world need to be reminded of that – because we live in such fear right now – fear of so many things. While we do well to be smart and safe, we do not do well to live in fear, and we have no need to – because God and God's love is more powerful than any evil humanity can devise.

And God always makes a way. Look at that dreadful story in today's Gospel lesson. A jealous and insecure ruler slaughters innocent children – but God made a way for the Savior of the World to be safe.

And look at the things we have witnessed in our lifetimes – war, depressions, terrorism – and every time God makes a way for us to get through it – every time!

No matter what – no matter how bad things are – God makes a way. I've been watching this week as our greater community has rallied around a local family who lost everything in a devastating fire. Their house was destroyed because of a space heater, and they lost everything. But they didn't lose God, and God made a way through His people – and they had a Christmas, and they have a roof over their head, and they have a future!

Because of Christmas, and with God, evil never has the final word. Sing "Alleluia" about that as you go back into the world after Christmas!

My friends, we have a choice. We can go back into our workaday worlds after Christmas the same way we left them. We can go back lamenting what a toll the holidays took on us. We can go back wishing the good spirit of the holidays was still there. We can go back to the same old, same old, humdrum ways of doing things –

Or – we can go back, no go forward, from Christmas in a new way – singing our "Alleluias!" We can go with our spirits lifted, our hearts filled with joy, and words of encouragement and joy on our lips. We can still be kind to strangers, and wish them well. We can still live in the spirit of the One who came at Christmas – Jesus our Savior!

Christmas isn't over! It's just beginning! May we all go forth from this place singing our Alleluias this day and all the days ahead! May it be so!

Amen.

