

The Work of Christmas

*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 flock,
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 people,
To make music in the heart.*

~Howard Thurman

On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me... To the rest of the world Christmas begins approximately the same time as Thanksgiving and ends with a paper-strewn, overeating, dysfunctional family gathering accompanied often by the sound of wee ones who are wildly exhausted and overstimulated screaming in the background. As you read this, many of you may still be in recovery from just such a Christmas day!

But as the line from the ancient, well-beloved Christmas Carol above states, Christmas is in fact a liturgical season that is encompassed by twelve days of Christmas celebration or observation. The season of Christmas begins after sundown on Christmas Eve and concludes on twelfth night in which we celebrate the Epiphany of Christ on January sixth.

As the lovely and hauntingly inviting poem from Howard Thurman says, the work of Christmas is just beginning as the sun goes down on Christmas day. A new life and light has come into the world, Jesus, the holy child of God, and now we too are summoned to join with this child in creating God's justice, mercy and compassion here on earth.

Jesus is still just a baby when the news of his birth, given unwittingly to Herod by the Wise men, inspires Herod to enact the bloodthirsty killing of all male children two years old or younger. The resistance to the good news of Jesus' birth begins with a fast and furious hatred of all that is good by the forces of darkness that Herod represents.

As those who welcome this great gift, this beautiful child, into our world, the summons to love as God loves, and act as God hopes we will act, is swift and deeply necessary from the start. The work of Christmas, to share this love and crave God's mercy, is ours now and always.

This coming Sunday, we will hear the stunning words of the Prologue in John's Gospel. As Dr Lose, former President of Luther Seminary says, "John doesn't give us the birth of a baby at Bethlehem, but he is intensely interested in the birth of you and I as children of God."

We will hear that "he was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

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.

This is *so* important. Jesus came that we might become children of God. Children that is, who are not dominated by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, not defined by our limitations or

hurts, and whose destinies are not controlled by others. Rather, we are those individuals who know ourselves to be God's own beloved children.^[1]

To fully appreciate the significance of what John is saying, I think as Dr. Lose says, we need to distinguish briefly between those things that describe us and those that define us. All too often, I believe, we allow certain elements of our life to dominate and define us. Things like our upbringing or interests, our good experiences and our bad ones, our current marital state or our sexuality, our past triumphs or tragedies.

Yes, these things may be descriptively true. But all too often we allow them not just to describe parts of our life but also to define us completely. In the Prologue, John invites us to hold all of the ordinary things that describe us as "important but insufficient, as valuable but partial, as meaningful but not definitive. What is definitive -- and therefore more important than all the good or bad things we carry with us -- is that God has called us God's own children, individuals who hold infinite worth in God's eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God's beloved world."

Can we imagine that? That Jesus came and was born, lived, died, and was raised again not simply to pay some obscure "penalty for sin" but rather to remind us and even convince us that God loves us more than anything?

So easily said, but for many oh so hard to believe. We always try to make God's love for us or for others provisional. When I stop doing this or maybe when I start doing this...on and on we go. So, this is why John's unconventional Christmas message is so important. Even though yes, we have made mistakes, disappointed ourselves and others, and all the rest, John asserts that what is definitively true about each and every one of us is that Jesus gives each one of us the "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." And nothing can change that. Now or ever. Let us claim that love fully and completely and let the real work of Christmas begin in us and through us in the ever pregnant and perfect now.

Merry Christmas, Stephanie+

^[1] David Lose