

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

In Defense of a Materialistic Christmas

(Matthew 1; Luke 2; John 1:14)

Introduction: Bah. Humbug! Indeed!!

Materialism on display

So here we are, five days away from Christmas, and prominent in many of our minds is whether or not the shopping is done.

Have you finished your shopping yet?

I am finished with mine, but that's not saying much. I'm not much of a shopper (the understatement of 2009), and am grateful beyond words for the Internet. What little shopping I have done this year has been on a couple of mercifully short trips with Kathy and while letting my fingers do the walking across the keyboard.

But speaking of shopping - have you noticed how materialistic Christmas has gotten?

It's been awhile since I've ranted against Christmas materialism. And such a rant, I'm sure you'll agree, is long overdue.

So, here goes...

Bashing Christmas materialism (what fun!)

Isn't it awful how, every year, Christmas decorations adorn stores earlier and earlier?

Malls are decked with the Christmas red and green immediately after the black of Halloween to avoid end of year red ink.

Every year we get fewer and fewer Christmas cards and more and more flyers from retailers wanting our recession-weary dollars.

From my observation (mostly from a drive-by distance), the stores are doing well enough, with parking lots maxed out. And from what I hear and read the spending is up this year over last, which translates into a GOOD Christmas for many stores (and a BAD January for many credit-card wielding consumers).

Given the opportunity, we could cite more evidence of the overly materialistic emphasis that surrounds Christmas in our culture.

It is true. Christmas has devolved, culturally, to such a low ebb that it is extremely materialistic. To quote no less an authority than Pope Benedict XVI (December 11, 2005), "*In today's consumer society, this time of the year unfortunately suffers from a sort of [materialistic] commercial 'pollution' that threatens to alter its real spirit.*"

And on and on we could go.

There are scores of bloggers who rant and rave against Christmas materialism. And, while it is fun to join them, it's kind of like shooting fish in a barrel. It's not really sporting. It's just too easy, too much of a "soft target."

All of us here today would agree that we need to get back to "the real meaning of Christmas."

And, Hallmark cards' messages to the contrary notwithstanding, we know that "the real meaning of Christmas" has nothing to do with snowy New England landscapes and much less with chipmunks frolicking in the snow.

No, "the real meaning of Christmas" goes much deeper than that. And Lord knows that many authors and movie makers have tried and keep trying to sensitize us to Christmas' "real meaning."

Getting back to “the real meaning of Christmas”

With the help of the angel, Clarence, George Bailey discovers one Christmas Eve that he really has lived “a wonderful life” in Bedford Falls. And the good folks of Bedford Falls discover the real meaning of Christmas when they help George out of jam.

Dr. Seuss teaches us that the Grinch couldn’t steal Christmas, because Christmas is not just about “presents and ribbons and wrappings, tags and tinsel and trappings.” No, the Grinch discovered that Christmas came even without ribbons and tags, without packages, boxes or bags. Christmas means a little bit more - and the Grinch’s heart grew three sizes when he “got it!”

Charles Dickens’ masterpiece, “A Christmas Carol”, has now been made into about forty seven films. The story is unapologetically all about helping Scrooge find and celebrate “the real meaning of Christmas.” And in the end, he does become a generous, giving person.

These Christmas morality plays are certainly wholesome fare and they are far different from the crush of consumerism we find in the malls.

But, the Christmas message advertised by the retailers AND the “real meaning of Christmas” message promoted by films like “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “A Christmas Carol” are both equally and completely WRONG.

Both ways of observing Christmas miss the point by a mile, just in different directions.

One (the buying frenzy, or what C.S. Lewis called “Xmas”) takes Christmas and turns it into an opportunity for a commercial windfall. **The other** (the books and movies), removes commercialism from Christmas, and winds up turning the message of Christmas into the Gospel of Nice.¹

¹ This, by the way, is the Christmas I grew up with. Especially in the church I attended, Christmas - and Christianity, in general - was all about being nice. There was never a “bite” or an edge to the faith.

When we turn to the New Testament, though, and see the events surrounding the actual birth of Jesus, we find no association with commercialism. “Niceness” is just as absent. And every last bit of the biblical Christmas story is quite materialistic. You might even say it is “earthy.”

On to a more biblical materialistic Christmas...

What we need is a movement away from the sentimental mush of the Gospel of Nice coupled with a movement away from commercialism and a rush toward a strong and GODLY materialism.

To the complaint that Christmas has gotten too materialistic, I say, “Bah! Humbug!” It’s nowhere near materialistic enough!²

Among the most materialistic aspects of Christmas is the idea that Jesus was born to a woman who had never been intimate with a man. When Jesus was born, His mother, Mary, was a virgin.

A VERY Materialistic Incarnation (Matthew 1:18; John 1:14)

Jesus - Born to a Virgin (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:26-38)

The Bible’s teaching

Look at Matthew 1:18-20 and you will find a remarkable teaching. Matthew tells us that there was no human father involved in Jesus’ conception.

² My thought is not original. After deciding to champion a “materialistic Christmas” today, I ran across the blog of Richard Hall, a Methodist Minister in Wales, who writes, “The commercialism and materialism of Christmas is such a soft target, I almost wonder why we bother. If everyone agrees it’s wrong (At last! Something the whole church can agree about!) why do we bother talking about it? I want to suggest that even in the materialism of a modern Christmas, there’s a lesson for God’s people if we are willing to hear it. Christmas is a supremely materialistic festival. We celebrate the fact that God took human flesh - became incarnate - and lived among his people. He did not enter the world as a glorious heavenly being. He came as a baby, doing all the things that babies do. Forget the sentimental carols and Christmas cards. If the Christian gospel means anything at all, it is that ‘God is with us’”.

Matthew tells the story this way:

[Matthew 1:18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. [19] And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. [20] But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; FOR THE CHILD WHO HAS BEEN CONCEIVED IN HER IS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. (emphasis added)

Dr. Luke’s version of the story includes a visit by an angel to tell Mary of her surprise pregnancy. Mary, who lived in the small town of Nazareth, is explicitly called a “virgin” - a woman who has never had sex.

Gabriel told her that she would conceive and bear a son.

When Mary understandably expressed confusion, Gabriel explained, ***[35]...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.***

Those passages seem to me to be pretty clearly saying that Jesus’ mother, Mary, was a virgin when He was born. But some who come to the Bible understand them differently.

This different understanding - that Mary was NOT a virgin - was all the rage back in the early 20th century. So, to address the issue, a brilliant evangelical scholar named J. Gresham Machen wrote a book called The Virgin Birth of Christ.³

In defense of the virgin birth

In this amazingly thorough book Machen investigates Greek, Roman, and Jewish sources to see if they influenced Matthew and Luke in claiming that Jesus was born to a virgin.

³ J. Gresham Machen was what some people have regarded as the premier evangelical biblical scholar of the early 20th century.

He found that there is so much difference between these various streams and the Bible’s story that there can be no link. The account of the Gospels is original, fresh, and has all the marks of genuineness.⁴

He explores the passages in Matthew and Luke in great detail and shows that there is great credibility for both accounts and argues convincingly that they mean what they appear to mean - Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived and when He was born.

You can look in bookstores around town - Christian and otherwise - and you won’t find many recent books written that argue the case that the Bible teaches the virgin birth of Jesus. That’s because Machen’s book ended the argument.

Machen showed that there is simply no way to read the Bible honestly and avoid the fact that it teaches that Jesus was born to a virgin mother.

Christianity has always said that Jesus was born to a virgin. But have you ever considered what that means?

The virgin birth considered:

Biologically

I’m not going to engage in heavy lifting when it comes to biological matters. As some of you know, I’m not very biological.

At the same time, like most of you, I understand where babies come from. A husband and a wife come together. An egg and sperm unite. That’s conception, and it defines the formation of a human being. The process moves along, according to plan, until a baby emerges from a mother’s womb.

In Jesus’ case, the process moved along quite nicely, too. But it began without a father providing sperm.

⁴ It is reported that there are legends of virgin-born children in ancient mythology. One Internet site claimed that there was a belief among some that Plato was birgin-born, but I found no corroborating evidence.

The Bible is not rich in detail here. It never says or implies or hints that God had sexual relations with Mary! It says that the Holy Spirit would “*come upon [her]*” and that “*the power of the Most High would overshadow [her].*”

So, there is great mystery here. What, exactly, joined with Mary’s egg? And how did that happen? All we know is that the agent of conception was not human and that it was God. Wow!

And consider what the virgin birth meant for Mary and Joseph, socially. Talk about an inconvenient truth!

Socially

Here are two young lovebirds blissfully looking forward to their wedding date. Out of the blue an angel’s announcement upset the apple cart of their expectations - and did a real number on their reputations.

Mary and Joseph experienced what many, many young women and couples experience today - an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Out of wedlock births are increasingly common in our day, and they do not carry the social stigma that they did in times past.

Now, it is a good thing to not be heaping shame and scorn upon unwed pregnant girls. It is a good thing to support them rather than to look down on them. It is a good thing to not ostracize them.

Over the years, our church has been a loving support to teenage moms - and we may be called upon to be a greater support to other young women in the future. It is Christian and it is loving to be supportive of women who find themselves in such a tough spot. Supporting them in their pregnancy is God-honoring AND is an important way to say, “*We love YOU and we love your baby!*”

But that is not to say that sex outside of marriage is a good thing. Sex outside of marriage is not a good thing.

God knew what He was doing when He established marriage as the best context for sexual relations between a man and a woman.

And here at Northwest we want to nurture a culture that:

- (1). affirms the importance of marriage;
- (2). affirms that a home where mom and dad are both present is the best possible environment for raising a child, AND
- (3). supports those who find themselves in a situation other than this!

Mary and Joseph found themselves facing an unplanned pregnancy. And they lived in a culture that regarded an out-of-wedlock pregnancy as a thing of shame. The small, tight-knit, Law of Moses-centered village of Nazareth would likely have been most unwelcoming to an engaged, but pregnant, Mary. People would have been just as unwelcoming to Joseph, who took Mary into his home before they were married.

It is not likely that family and neighbors would have believed either the couple’s reports about angelic appearances or their claim that Mary was still a virgin. Their formerly upstanding reputations in the community were shot by the disruption of Mary’s pregnancy.

So, the virgin birth was a miracle - of the magnitude of the parting of the Red Sea. And it put Joseph and Mary in a very bad light, socially.

But, from a biblical perspective, it was essential that Jesus should have been born to a virgin.

Theologically

The virgin birth was necessary in light of Jesus’ DIVINITY.

We can say that Jesus was fully God and fully man throughout His entire life because of the virgin birth.

If he had been conceived in the same manner every other baby is conceived, He might have been an amazing person, might have grown to be heroic, and might have done great things. But He wouldn’t be God! Only the virgin birth allows us to say that Jesus was the God-man.

And, the virgin birth was necessary in light of Jesus’ SINLESSNESS.

The Bible teaches that each person born into this world is infected with the disease of sin. Without exception.

All of us are sons and daughters of Adam and we inherit the disease of sin (sometimes called “the sin nature”) from our parents.

Jesus was the lone exception to this rule because his conception was unique. His one-of-a-kind entrance into the world broke the pattern that was set in the Garden of Eden and that has been followed by every birth since Adam and Eve’s kids were born.

Every child ever born has been born into Adam’s family and is therefore a sinner, just as Adam was a sinner.

But Jesus wasn’t born into Adam’s family because Adam wasn’t His father. God was His father. He was therefore sinless and was therefore able to offer Himself as a sinless sacrifice for your sins and mine!

Summary: The virgin birth is crucial to Christianity. And today we affirm the stupendous truth that Christmas celebrates the miraculous conception of Jesus. He was born to a virgin mother.

And today we also affirm something else equally stupendous. We affirm that when Jesus was born, God was clothing Himself with human flesh.

The Son of God (John 1:14)

In the first several verses of John’s Gospel we hear John speak about an entity he calls “*the Word.*”⁵ Here in the Prologue, we discover a few things about “*the Word.*”

⁵ Some believe that “*the Word*” John envisions in this passage has as its historical reference something out of the world of Greek philosophy, as in the Gnostic idea of some special knowledge, or “logos” (Word) that leads to eternal life. But John was not a Gnostic and the world view out of which he wrote was not one that embraced or even dealt with Gnosticism, an early church heresy. No, when we read the word “*Word*” here, we should have our Old Testament ears on. John, in referring to “*the Word*” was thinking of the phrase that is repeated in the prophets - “**THE WORD OF THE LORD came to such and such a prophet...**” What followed “*The WORD OF THE LORD*” was either a message from God, or the statement of some truth about God. So, whatever John is going to say about “*the Word*” in the statements that follow, we can be certain that he is going to be telling us about some communication from God to us.

The Word has existed forever

FIRST, the Word is eternal. We might guess from the wording of that first phrase that John had Genesis 1 in mind as he sat down to write the Prologue to His Gospel - and we would be right!

Genesis 1 begins, “***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth***” and John’s Gospel begins with a parallel, “***In the beginning was the Word.***”

“***The Word***” did not have a beginning point. At the earliest moment we can imagine or think of, the Word had already eternally existed.

The Word was also involved in creation.

The Word created and sustains LIFE

[3] All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

John says that from Day One, the Word was the prime creative force in the universe.

At the very beginning, God spoke a WORD, and the world came into being.⁶

Then John tells us, ***[4] In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.***

By these words John isn’t saying that the Word is alive. You and I and all animals and plants are alive. That is different than having LIFE within us.

All life on our planet derives its life from some external source. You and I are dependent for our existence on air, food, water, clothing and shelter. Take these things away and we perish.

⁶ The book of Hebrews tells us that ***[11:4] the worlds were prepared by the WORD of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.***

The Word, though, has life independent of anyone or anything else. Take everything else away and the Word lives on.

So, John tells us that the Word has existed from eternity past, is the source of all life and sustains all life. That sounds like God - and sure enough, the Word IS God!

God in the flesh

[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, AND THE WORD WAS GOD.

The Old Testament declares the essential unity of God with this, ***[Deuteronomy 6:4]... "The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!"***

The New Testament agrees that there is one God and then affirms that this ONE God has existed for all eternity in three separate Persons. And the second of the three Persons of God is the Word.

Then follows the most audacious comment found in Scripture: The eternally existing, universe creating, life sustaining Word ***"became flesh."***

[John 1:14] And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

JESUS = THE WORD!

At Christmastime we celebrate the truth that divinity took on toenails. God developed kneecaps and molars. Omnipotence now has eyeballs and elbows and whiskers.

So, the one thing Christmas is NOT all about is what movies and books insist that it is all about. Christmas is not about family. It is not about sappy good feelings. It is not about sentimentality. It is not about great meals. And it's certainly not about shopping!

Christmas is all about God becoming flesh. And you can't get any more materialistic than that!

So, what is the punchline for our time together this Sunday before Christmas? The "WHAT" of Christmas is, *"God became one of us"* and *"Emmanuel - God with us"* and *"the Word became flesh."* SO WHAT?

I'll suggest three "So what's" in response to the message of Christmas.

A VERY Materialistic Response to the Incarnation

Giving

Right off the bat I'm going to suggest that our culture is on to something in associating gift-giving and Christmas.

I'm not talking about consumerism or shop-till-you-drop-ism. And, really, there is something sort of twisted in our "gift exchange" mentality where we give mostly or only to those who give back to us.

But giving - true giving, sacrificial and intentional - is a great way to mimic the giving nature of God as seen in the event we celebrate each Christmas.

Your gift-buying may be finished for the Christmas season. If so, more power to you! (and many, many people resent you greatly...)

But can't each one of us think of gifts we could give that would either bless people or further Jesus' Kingdom?

The Incarnation was VERY material. And a material contribution to bless people and to further Jesus' Kingdom work from your store of time, talent, and treasure will both bring you great joy and reward AND will honor the Lord.

Let the Christmas season of 2009 be the season when you determined to be a 24/7/365 giver!

If the first outworking of the truths of Christmas has to do with giving, the second one I would mention has to do with proclamation.

Proclamation

Have you ever noticed that John the Baptist, the man whose mission in life was to make ready the way of the Lord, to proclaim that Jesus was the Savior and Messiah, is inextricably linked to the passage (John, chapter 1) that declares, “*the Word become flesh*”?

I wonder if the presence of John the Baptist in the first chapter of John’s Gospel alerts us to the link between the truth of the Incarnation and bold proclamation!

One powerful way to put flesh on Christmas is to simply and boldly and clearly tell others about Jesus. There are people you know who need to know.

Who will you tell about Jesus?

The final “So what?” of Christmas is an invitation to worship.

Worship

When the angel brought news of her conception, Mary worshiped. Shepherds worshiped the newborn Jesus. Simeon worshiped Jesus in the Temple on Day 8 of His life? Others worshiped, too.

Today, will you join those who have gone before and worship the Baby born of a virgin, the Word become flesh?