

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

Sermon for 12/27

THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

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Summary: Responsibility, respect, and reverence.

I remember going to a Halloween party many years ago, where I kind of stood out like a sore thumb. Back then, unlike now, I was a pretty arrogant guy, and I kind of figured that anything I did was automatically the right thing, simply by virtue of the fact that it was me doing it.

So when I was asked to go to the party, I agreed, and then pretty much forgot about it. The idea of going to a lot of trouble dressing up for a party seemed to me to be a waste of my valuable time, which of course should always be devoted to more serious things.

Anyway, Halloween came around, and about ten minutes before it was time to go, I took a magic marker and drew a little black mustache above my lip, and I crushed flat an old hat I had lying around, and went to the party.

When I got there, everybody else had on an elaborate costume. Some were kings and queens, complete with royal diadems and scepters; some were Hare Krishna monks in neon orange robes and some sort of head covering that made them look bald; some were disguised as animals like lions or giraffes; some had on football uniforms, and so on and so on. You get the picture. Everybody had really put a lot of thought and creativity and effort into their costumes.

And then I walked into the party with my little magic marker mustache and squashed hat.

Each time a giraffe or Hare Krishna monk asked me what I was supposed to be, I somewhat condescendingly explained that I was James Joyce, the famous writer, at which point the giraffe or monk would look at me as if they didn't quite know what to say next. And in the meantime, I was experiencing a glow of prideful superiority towards all these people who had spent so much time and expense to make their costumes, when I had been able to accomplish the same effect in about two minutes. Quite full of myself, I wandered among these frivolous people, feeling like the only serious adult in the room.

That is until a friend of mine, dressed as Tinker Bell, after she had a few glasses of punch, took me aside and informed me that, out of everyone there, I was the only one who hadn't gotten into the spirit of the party.

The spirit of the party. Of course, arrogant as I was back then – unlike now – I didn't give much weight to her words; but looking back, I can now see her point. If you're going to go to a theme party at all, then it's important to enter into the spirit of the thing. If you're going to a Goldie Oldie dance party, you want to be prepared to enjoy Goldie Oldie music. If you're going to a football watch party, then bring beer and chips and be prepared to cheer for your side. And if you're going to a Halloween party, dress up like a giraffe, for goodness sake, or a clown, or Tinker Belle. Anybody, literally anybody, except James Joyce.

Not to do these things is, simply, not to enter into the spirit of the party. Our Gospel reading for this morning brought that old embarrassment to mind, for some reason, because it led me to think about the spirit of the Christmas season, what it is, and what it means to enter into it.

These days, of course, it can mean decorating your house and sending Christmas cards, and putting presents under a tree and singing carols, all those wonderful things. And those are certainly part of the spirit of Christmas present.

But the gospel reading got me thinking more about the spirit of Christmas past, and particularly the spirit of the first Christmas. And I noticed that each of the participants of this ritual Jewish ceremony described in our

reading really personifies some aspect of what the original spirit of Christmas was.

So let's read that passage now.

Read Luke 2: 22-40

Other than the baby Jesus, there are four participants in this account: Mary and Joseph, the parents, a man named Simeon and an elderly woman named Anna. Each of whom, I think, can serve to all of us as representatives of one of the important elements of the original spirit of Christmas.

Let's begin with Joseph and Mary. We find them coming to the temple in Jerusalem to satisfy the requirement of Jewish tradition that was called the purification after childbirth. This was at least forty days after birth, and that time the woman was to bring a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon for a sin offering. Since lambs were quite expensive, Jewish law laid it down (Lev. 12:8) that a poor woman might substitute a second pigeon for the lamb. And so we read in the passage that that's what Mary and Joseph did, brought two pigeons.

These rituals seem strange to us, but what I want to focus on is not the rituals themselves, but the state of mind of Mary and Joseph that brought them to the temple to engage in those rituals.

They were a poor family, as witnessed by the fact that they brought two pigeons to the temple. And it would have been a long and hard day's journey to get to the temple from Nazareth, or even longer and harder if they were coming from Bethlehem. But nonetheless Joseph and Mary made the trip together.

And doesn't that speak to responsibility being part of the original spirit of Christmas? Remember when Joseph learned that his young fiancée was pregnant, and he nonetheless took responsibility for that child. WE see another element of that here, drawing upon their meager means and transporting his wife on this difficult journey, all to fulfill his responsibility as a father.

We don't normally think of parental responsibility as part of the spirit of Christmas, but that's what the Bible teaches us here. And surely that's a Christian message our own society needs to hear.

In a world where one out of four children are raised in fatherless homes and where children themselves are often regarded simply as unintended consequences of casual sex, surely it is good to remember that the divinity and preciousness of human life itself imposes divine obligations on those who choose to participate in its production. Life doesn't begin either at birth or in the insemination of an egg by a sperm. It begins in the mind of God and is presented to the world as God's special and unique gift.

And so reflection on this story teaches us that the spirit of Christmas is fundamentally a spirit of responsibility.

Or consider Simeon, the man they encountered in the temple. The only thing Luke tells us about Simeon was that he was a man imbued with and obedient to the spirit of God; a man upon whom the holy spirit rested, that that spirit have given him an assurance that he would someday before he died see the long awaited Messiah of Israel, and that the Spirit had guided him that very day to the temple to see the young couple bringing their baby.

And doesn't that teach us that the spirit of Christmas is one of revelation. Christmas teaches us that we are to rely for the guidance of our lives not only on our own God-given abilities and rational calculations, but that we are to seek out and rely upon the word of God for direction in our lives. Simeon did not arrive by the power of his own reasoning at the understanding of God's personal message to him; he opened his heart to the promptings of the spirit of God, and surrendered his own pride to that revelation. God did not speak to him through his intellect; God spoke to him through his faith, as revealed in the word of God spoken to Simeon's own ancestors in faith.

And what that teaches us is that the spirit of Christmas is fundamentally a spirit of reliance on the promises of God. Human reasoning would have imagined a child born of royalty, laid in a cradle of gold and presented to the Temple with royal pomp and circumstance. What Simeon saw with human eyes was a baby with insignificant parents, wrapped in rough swaddling, offered with the minimum that poverty could afford. But what he

saw with the divine vision presented to him by revelation was the savior of his people, the long-awaited anointed of God.

And finally, Anna, the prophetess, a woman near the end of a long life of devotion, granted at the very end of that life with the reward of her devotion.

And surely that teaches us that the spirit of Christmas is also one of reverence for the wondrous ways of God. During those long years and decades of Anna's daily worship, God was surely paying attention to her unwavering faith, to her constant attendance and submission to God's will. Her reverent focus was always on God, and never on all those false allurements that certainly beckoned to her from outside the temple precincts. And then one wonderful day, her abiding reverence finally had its reward.

Responsibility, reliance and reverence. These are not things we normally think of when we talk about the Spirit of Christmas. But when we look back at that very first Christmas and reflect on this simple story, we find that the spirit reaches much deeper than the many lovely rituals and practices we have evolved over the centuries to celebrate it. Wonderful as those celebrations are, we must not let them distract us from the original revelation that Christmas is most fundamentally about who we are to be as Christians. We are to act responsibly, and then take responsibility for our actions. We are to rely on God's revelation as revealed in God's word and in our own faithful conscience. And we are to act always with reverence, not to our earthly idols, but to the one and only God.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father, is that we may today and always participate in the true Spirit of Christmas, that you reawaken us to our responsibilities as caretakers of your kingdom, that you strengthen our faith in the trustworthiness of your revealed purposes, and that you fill us, as you filled Anna, with a full and unshakable reverence for the wondrous gift of grace you have offered to us in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.