

Christmas Eve 2009

“What Am I Missing Here?”
Why Christmas Makes Me Nervous

a sermon on Luke 2.1-21
by David C. Mauldin
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

Christmas makes me nervous. Christmas makes me nervous the way buying a car makes me nervous when the salesperson offers a deal that seems too good to be true. Have you ever had that happen when making a big purchase? You keep looking for the angle, wondering where the hidden fees and costs are hiding. *What am I missing?*

Christmas makes me nervous the way playing chess against a crafty opponent makes me nervous when he or she makes an apparent mistake. I think the next move through once, twice, three times, because it's *too* easy. I think to myself, “I'm missing something here. What is it?”

Christmas makes me nervous this way because Christmas is the soft side of Christianity. It's the easy side. It gives us exactly what we want, and I know from experience that exactly what we want is usually not what's best for us. Christmas gives us a baby to oooh and aaah over. It gives us warm, fuzzy feelings. We may struggle to find hope and peace, but we can always find comfort at Christmas, if for no other reason than the traditions are familiar.

Easter is the hard side of Christianity. Easter comes with Good Friday. Easter forces us to look at the cross before we celebrate the resurrection. Logically it is impossible to rise from the dead without dying first. Easter demands a hard faith, a faith unafraid to ask the big questions about life, death, and eternity. Christmas *invites* us to contemplate the mysteries of God: Why did God become human? Why did he come in person instead of writing a book or sending an angel? Why was the Savior born in humble circumstances? Why not a palace? Christmas invites us to ponder the miracle of the Incarnation and the depths of God's love. And if we accept the invitation, our answers should lead us to more questions, such as: Why do I need a Savior? And those questions may just lead us to God.

But Christmas merely invites us. It does not coerce. One can sing the songs, hear the story, and share the love – all without ever going deeper. And that's what makes me nervous. For many people, Christmas is just about all they ever hear or know about Jesus. I fear they will miss something – not just something, the most important thing.

I do not want you to miss it. Do not oooh and aaah over the baby, but miss the man. This baby came to do something. The shadow of the cross falls over the manger. We see it

in the humble circumstances of his birth. Herod's massacre of the infants reminds us of it. Even the angels' song bear witness if we know at what cost our joy must come.

Do not settle for the warm, fuzzy feeling and miss salvation. I apologize, by the way, for using such a religious word – *salvation*. I tried to think of a more common word that could describe the freedom Christ gives us, the power of God to change us, the transformation he works in us – in short all the thrilling, terrifying benefits Christ gives to those who give themselves to him. I couldn't think of one, so I used *salvation*, which is a good word. It means much more than going to heaven when you die. It certainly includes eternal life, but like the attic of a great old house, it has so much more packed into it. What I'm trying to say is: God wants to take you on a wild journey to make you a whole new person: immortal, beautiful, truly free. I am saying, do not settle for the peaceful, easy feeling Christmas can give you but miss out on God.

That is the basic outline of this sermon: Don't cherish the baby but miss the man. Don't settle for the peaceful, easy feeling when your salvation is the reason for Christmas. If you do these two things, you'll take a load off my mind and calm my nerves a bit. Christmas is a frightening holiday.

Do not ooh and aah over the baby but miss the man. This is easy to do, and a part of you deep inside wants to do it. And with good reason: The baby is safe. The man makes demands. God showed his love for us by coming to us as a tiny baby. He was weak, vulnerable, helpless. Love is always vulnerable. He showed us his character when he did that. But he also loved us when the baby grew up and told us truths we did not want to hear. Jesus warns us to repent. He commands us to forgive. He demands that we love him more than everything else. He demands that we have a passion for holiness like his. Admittedly, that's asking a lot. And he knows it. He loves us, though, and he knows that he can give us life while all we could ever find on our own is death ... and worse. So he makes his demands, and we make our excuses – I don't know about you, but mine are always very good – and he says, "I don't care about your excuses. Follow me!" Well, you can read in the gospels about twelve guys who did, and you can see what all they went through.

The baby makes us feel everything will be OK. The man threatens to turn our world upside down. He tells us that what we think will make us happy won't. He offers something better, but our way looks better to us because we don't know who we really are! Like a doctor who tells you to start exercising and stop eating a pint of ice cream every night, Jesus thinks he knows better than we do.

Is it any wonder we invent so many clever ways to avoid the real Jesus and his demands? We invent an abstract Jesus and bury him in theology. We try to enshrine him in hymns and confessions but keep him safely out of everyday decisions. We invent a Santa Jesus, who gives and gives but never asks for anything in return. We invent a witch-doctor Jesus; you can go to him when you have a problem, but he won't come to you. We make Jesus a prisoner in the church building, where we visit him

occasionally but never let him out into our businesses and homes. Or we just ignore him.

In a book called *A Passion for Christ*, Presbyterian pastor and professor Doug Webster reflects on how Christians can all too easily miss the man: “When I was in university one of my professors accused the majority of Christians of understanding Jesus as an infantile projection. He argued that celebrating Christmas allowed people to reminisce about their childhood and feel close to the ‘babe in the manger.’ Sunday School inculcated the “mild” morality of Jesus ...” [this and all subsequent quotes from p. 18]

Dr. Webster admits the professor caricatures Christians, but the caricature is a haunting one. Webster’s own childhood experiences introduced him to the real Jesus, but he adds, “Yet even then, many areas of Jesus’ life were never mentioned to me, such as his concern for justice and regard for the poor. Our traditions can impede our understanding of Jesus Christ himself.” In this regard he mentions Christmas traditions specifically, saying, “The historical Jesus is a shadowy figure in our candlelight services. We want a feeling – the quickening of sentiment or the inspiration of a mood – rather than an encounter with Jesus Christ.”

Don’t miss the man. He was born. He lived. He died. He rose again. He lives and reigns, and he is here tonight. Encounter him! Meet him in the Word, in the sacrament, in prayer. By all means, ooh and aah over the baby in the manger. Marvel that God became a human being. Wonder that he was born in a stable. Worship the love that became so vulnerable. But never forget who he is. In the words of the angel, “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Likewise, do not settle for comfortable, mildly happy feelings when he offers you so much more. Jesus offers you *freedom*. Freedom from what, you ask? Freedom from everything ... that keeps you from being the person God created you to be. Freedom from everything that prevents you from living an abundant, joyful life. Christmas can be a time to lay that burden down. Your burden may be sin, things you’ve done that you’re ashamed of. Your burden may be anger, resentment, or bitterness. Your burden may be a selfish streak a mile wide, or just the opposite, the feeling that you are worthless and unworthy of love. Your burden may be the illogical compulsion to please someone whom you can never please. Children who cannot win their parents’ approval often keep trying throughout life, even after their parents are dead. You might even project this compulsion onto God. You try and try to please him, but you never feel you’ve got it right. Jesus sets you free from religion ... if you define religion as our attempt to earn God’s favor by our effort.

Jesus can set you free from every bad thing. He can set you free from materialism. This time of year our culture’s consumerism gets to me. We spend, spend, spend on mostly waste and clutter. Some is good, but we have too much, yet we have this need for more. Surely something has gone wrong.

Now I'm making myself nervous. I don't want you to get the false impression that Jesus only heals our emotional hang-ups. He does so much more. He cares very much about our physical bodies and this physical world. That is why he was born with a body of flesh and blood into this physical world. God wants it all. God made it. God loves it. He will not give up any little part of it. Just as sin affects us emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually, so too Jesus saves us in all those ways. That's the point of Christmas and Easter. Jesus rose physically from the dead.

If God had wanted us to be happier, he would have sent a therapist. If he had wanted us to be more successful, he would have sent a coach. If he had wanted us to be healthier, he would have sent a doctor. I admit, in one sense Jesus is all of these, but all that is secondary. First and foremost he is our *Savior*. Why? Because God wants to make us a new creation. All who believe in Jesus Christ are forgiven. Their guilt is taken away – not just their feelings of guilt but their objective guilt before Almighty God. Jesus lives in them. He trains them in holiness and love. Death will not be the end for them, for God will raise them from the dead, and they will live eternally in his kingdom. They will love perfectly, just as God loves them perfectly now. Christ will return. He will transform heaven and earth, making them new. Heaven and earth will come together, and God will no longer be hidden. His glory and peace will fill everything. Sin, death, evil, and war will be no more. Is all this starting to sound far fetched? That's what *Savior* means! The angel called Jesus Savior, Messiah, and Lord. If that's your title, you've got a big job: to fix everything that is wrong with the whole creation. He did. He did, and he will.

Christmas, therefore, can mean either of two things to you. Either it can be a happy interlude to the problems of life, like an island in the midst of a raging sea or a desert oasis. The world is chock full of problems and pain, but for one brief moment we can forget all that and feel good. Either Christmas is that, OR ... Christmas was the moment when God himself invaded our world to take it back. Christmas is D-Day. God showed up to destroy evil, sin, and death. He came to give us life, freedom, and peace. Honestly, you can have it either way. Our culture hangs on to Christmas – or “the Holidays” as it is coming to be called – as a happy interlude, an island of refuge. Christians know it as the beginning of the end. The end of the old order. The birth of God's kingdom of righteousness and peace. Once God showed up in human form, nothing could stop him from breaking the power of sin and death on the cross. Now that he is risen, nothing can stop him from making all things new.

Don't ooh and aah over the baby but miss the man. Don't settle for a peaceful, easy feeling and miss salvation. Jesus is the Savior. He is here. Encounter him. Believe in him. Give yourself to him in faith. Amen.