

“What Really Matters”

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I think I've heard everything that can be said about the kaleidoscope of happenings and impressions that go with the marvelous time we call Christmas, but then more pops up to make me shake my head.

It is reported that Stephen King, a Republican congressman from Ohio has introduced House Resolution 847 entitled “recognizing the importance of Christmas and the Christian faith.”

What do you think will happen with this resolution? Does it matter?

And then one of my best friends for over 60 years calls and leaves me a message. He's two years older than I am, with plenty of time on his hands. He knows I appreciate some of the clippings about churches and religion that he clips from his Kansas City paper So now he's calling, maybe after a martini, to ask, “If the shepherds heard from the angels on that Christmas night and went to Bethlehem to find Jesus—what happened to their sheep?”

As I tried first to think of an adequate answer I realized that of course we're missing what matters about Christmas if we spend much time with such questions. If we start putting the original Christmas stories up to a microscope we're likely to miss what matters—especially if you spend too much time wondering, for instance, why the Gospels of Mark and John have no Bethlehem narratives at all. Or if we spend too much time with things like a new book for children I saw advertised this season entitled “The Fourth Wise Man.” Every Christmas brings new approaches and new questions—which in the long run don't really matter the most.

This Sunday, just ten days away from Christmas, It's good that we have prayed the Collect for Third Advent before this sermon: “Stir up your POWER, O Lord, and come among us” for that's what we need in every season-- and maybe even more so in these mixed-up days before Christmas. We need to pay attention to John the Baptist asking the question of all questions this morning, “Are you, Jesus, the one to come, or are we to wait for another?”

I remember someone saying once, “You know, I used to think it made sense to always ask ‘what would Jesus do?’ Until I really started reading the Bible: Sometimes Jesus did some crazy things!”

Sooner or later our ideas about Jesus just don't conform with reports of what Jesus is doing either in the Bible stories or in the world. Is he the one to come or do we wait for another? Jesus—the real Jesus—whose story jumps quickly out of the manger onto the center stage of world history, upsets our expectations. He breaks out of whatever box we put him in. Then it's time to ask ourselves if we want to follow the living Christ or simply our idea of who the Christ should be.

This season of Advent is the beginning of the church year because we start all over. It's the season to leave behind our scripts of everything we know and begin the journey toward Bethlehem in a new way.

These days are certainly darker in the waning daylight of December, but that darkness can be more than just the time of the year. Sometimes even the bright lights of Christmas decorations are not enough to help us deal with all the life-or-death issues that face us not just globally but oftentimes right here at home in our mixed-up personal lives. It's times like these that we join John the Baptist asking "Jesus, are you the one I need and waiting for, or do I wait for another?"

And at that level it doesn't matter at all whether or not we pass congressional resolutions about Christmas or know what happened to the sheep when the shepherds went to Bethlehem. Many of you will be here for the Children's Pageant at 5:00 on Christmas, and as many more will be here singing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" at 7:30 and 10:30. But none of this matters much if we just think of Christmas as a religious history lesson. Sure, some of us want to know how the world worked 2000 years ago. What exactly was the census? What were the marriage customs and what do we know about Mary? And who were the Magi?

The pageant and the services will be beautiful and the answers to those questions may be interesting, but none of it gets to the real point. The question of what really matters the most is: Do you experience, really experience God being born in your life? Jesus says to us what he says to John the Baptist: I did not come for titles—I came to bring healing and hope for people just as Isaiah proclaimed, and now I come to bring life, the new beginnings of real life for you now!

Another time later Jews gather around Jesus and say to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." What they were seeking was instruction, information, teaching, to be told in a way with no room for doubt. That was impossible. What Jesus always did was to point them to a relationship between himself and God and between his followers and himself. Reading and studying, or even acting and singing about the birth and life of Jesus as a figure in history is wonderful to do, but it is not sufficient to discover his reality deep in your heart where he must live if he is to live *at all*.

A friend writes about taking a yearlong Dante course from a professor named Arthur Evans, certainly the best teacher he had ever had. About halfway through the last class Dr. Evans stood up and walked to the door.

As he began to walk through the door opening he turned and said, “OK, now it’s your turn to make music together.” I imagine you get the point: the goal of the teacher is not to have the students always focused on him. The goal of the teacher is for the students to make their own music.

Jesus says to John’s disciples: “Don’t look at me; what do you see in yourself or in your world? What do you hear? Part of you was blind, now can you see? Part of you was lame; now can you walk? Part of you was dead inside; now can you feel new life?”

How can all this happen? Maybe a story will help. A monk was walking in the country one day and stumbled upon a valuable stone, a jewel, which he picked up and kept. Not long afterward he met a weary traveler in need. When the monk opened his bag to share his provisions the traveler saw the jewel and asked the monk to give it to him. So the monk gave it to him. The traveler was thrilled with a gift that would make him wealthy for life. But a few days later he came back and found the monk, gave him back the stone and said, “Please give me something much more precious and valuable than this stone, this jewel. *Please give me that which enabled YOU to so freely give me the stone*”.

The traveler knew that the monk was connected to the One who had shaped him into a person of generosity, even so generous that he was ready to give away the precious stone. And the traveler’s life was shaped by his brief connection with the monk. We are shaped most deeply by that to which we are really connected: that’s what changes our lives and the lives of others.

John asks Jesus, are you the one we’re waiting for? Jesus replies by pointing to relationships between himself and God and to relationships to others who are mutually drawn to each other, so “go and see what’s happening,” he says. That’s how they knew he was the One who was to come. That’s the way you will know he is the one who enables you to freely give of yourself to others, which is the most precious gift of all.

No, we don’t celebrate Advent and Christmas by just learning about them as seasons of the church year. Advent and Christmas are the stirring of the divine life in us and in our world. What is Advent for you this morning? It’s a time for all of us, to meet Jesus again for the first time. AMEN