

## Christmas Connections

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas is usually a time of connection. In a normal year, company Christmas parties bring together people from all over who work together. Family and friends gather together, college students return home and meet their friends again.

Christmas also is a time of disconnection. If you can't be with family, there's no more obvious time for you to notice this lack than when everyone else is coming together except you, when everyone else's mailbox overflows with cards and packages except yours, when there's only one stocking hanging up in your house. If you've just experienced a breakup, a major move, or the death of a loved one, Christmas can amplify the disconnectedness you already feel.

Even if you're with others, there can be disconnection. Sin separates us from each other and from God. The first lesson, from Genesis 3, tells us of how humanity was separated from God. After Adam and Eve committed the first sin by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, they hid from God, cutting the connected that had existed between them since they were created. The rest of the lessons show how that separation was seen in darkness and death. Abraham almost sacrifices his only son, Isaac, but God provides a substitute to save Isaac. The prophecies of Isaiah and Micah, to a people looking toward a future of exile and captivity, tell of how God would come and rescue them, restore them, and bring them out of darkness into light. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, sin cut the connections between people, between families, between nations, and between the whole world and God.

And nothing anyone tried could protect or repair those connections.

The first Christmas was a time of disconnection. Joseph and Mary were far from home, having traveled 90 miles or so from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census. Joseph must have had relatives in Bethlehem, but none of them would take them in. They'd gone through a whirlwind nine months, with angelic messengers needed to keep them together after Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father. Their travels must have been, at least in part, a relief in being able to escape from the gossip and shunning they received from others in Nazareth.

But Christmas is also about connecting. So how do we stay connected in an isolating age, where the way to keep others safe from the virus is to stay away from them?

We find ways to connect in ways that don't endanger others. Earlier this week, maybe you were among those who traveled out of town to look for the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Cars lined the gravel roads outside of town, and social media was full of people sharing their pictures of this once in a lifetime astronomical event. While some speculation about the conjunction makes people think of the Christmas star, we do know it brought people together in a shared experience where they didn't have to be physically by each other.

We connect using technology. Everyone is much more familiar with Zoom and other video conferencing services now than they were at the beginning of this year. You can connect by finding concerts and church services you'd

never be able to attend in person, but now can watch from the comfort of your couch.

And we connect by using old ways of communicating, too, like Christmas cards and Christmas letters. Every year, family and friends write to each other. Some just send a simple card, with a brief message. Others write elaborate letters, complete with fancy fonts, headings and footnotes. Still others fill their letters with pictures of the places they've traveled and the people they've seen.

Why do we send Christmas letters? We send them so that we can share what has happened to us over the past year. We send them in the hopes that others care about what has happened to us. We send them in the hopes that we will be able to maintain friendships and connections across great distances. We send them in the hopes that they connect us to each other.

This year has also taught us that while these ways of connecting can help, they don't work as well as they could. Letters don't connect us as much as we can connect in person, though. It takes being able to hold a hand, give a hug, see a smile to truly communicate. Body language is important. When you really need to make sure that your message is communicated, when you really want to connect with someone, it takes more than a letter, a phone call, a tweet or a Skype conference. It takes a person.

Herman Gockel tells about a nuclear scientist making an urgent plea for scholarships to be given to American students who would study in foreign lands. Stressing that such scholarships would win for America a much greater measure of understanding abroad, he said significantly: "The best way to send an idea out into the world is to wrap it up in a person."

That's what we celebrate every year at Christmas. We celebrate family and friends, gifts and gadgets, songs and Santa, to be sure. But most importantly, we celebrate Jesus. Jesus, God made man. Jesus, the Word made flesh. We celebrate how God didn't just tell us that he loved us, but he wrapped that love up in a person, in Jesus.

You are Christmas letters. You are letters that share all that happened in your lives over the past year. More importantly, you are letters that share how God has worked in your lives over the past year. Whether it's the joy of a new birth or the sorrow of a funeral, or the many ways this strange pandemic year has affected and changed you, God has been with you through all the events of the past year, celebrating your joys and bearing your sorrows.

You are Christmas letters. You are the ones that share the true meaning of Christmas with your children. You are the ones who share the message that God came to earth with those who don't know. You are the ones who carry God's name, from your baptisms, as the signature of your letters.

After we gather here, after we hear the familiar stories and sing the familiar carols, like letters you are all sent out. Some local, some out of town. Sent out to share the message of Christmas, the message that God came down to earth, to love us, and die for us. He didn't just send a letter, but came himself. As we go out, we invite others to join in that message, to join what we just sang. O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

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