

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Titus 3:4-7

The Christmas story is really only recorded in 20 verses of Luke's Gospel. Luke spends more time describing the birth of John the Baptist in his first chapter. Matthew tells us about how Joseph was told by God to take care of Mary and Jesus and the story of the wise men, but that is all there is about Christmas. It is not mentioned in Mark and John, who both begin with Jesus as an adult. By contrast half of Mark's Gospel and over 1/3 of John's Gospel describe what took place in just one week—Holy Week, the week of Jesus' death. From a literary standpoint all four Gospels center on Holy Week, around the events leading up to and including Jesus' death.

Yet we have such a big celebration for Christmas. Far more music has been written for Christmas than all other events in Jesus' life including Good Friday and Easter combined. Why?

We could say that Christmas was actually a pagan holiday which the Church "Christianized" to get people to stop doing pagan things. Christmas has become a pagan holiday with all the commercialism. But I think that the main reason why Christmas is so big is that it is about a birth. Good Friday is about death. Even Easter, though it brings life, is not the same as birth. Birth is at the beginning. Good Friday and Easter are at the end.

A championship season is great to experience, but where would you rather be—at the beginning of it or the end? Back in the days of Harrison Barnes and Doug McDermott, Ames High dominated Iowa high school basketball. But with their second championship it ended. The players graduated. An epic movie may have a good climax, but where would we rather be—at the beginning or the end? Wouldn't we rather be young, at the beginning of our lives, than old, at the end? Even if the end is great, it is the end. It's all over with!

That's fine if we are going through something bad like an illness. Then we want to be at the end. But it is not when things are good. And we want to think about the good, not the bad. Birth seems so much better than death.

But now we are at Christmas Day. It is just about the end. Radio stations won't play Christmas carols tomorrow. As the nights go on fewer people will turn on their lights. Old trees will be seen along driveways waiting for trash pickup. Sales at stores will be about New Years. Bowl games will replace Christmas specials. In this town most Christmas activities have to take place by the 15<sup>th</sup> before school is out. It is just about over.

People used to celebrate 12 days of Christmas beginning with the 25<sup>th</sup>. Parents put up the tree, decorated, and set out the presents on Christmas Eve night. But now it is all the "getting ready for Christmas" that dominates. For many, Christmas is more about getting ready for Christmas than it is Christmas itself. Soon it will be over with. Soon it will end.

But not with the real Christmas. Christmas was not just about how Jesus was born. No, it is God coming down into our world, into our lives. And that story is just beginning.

Our Epistle lesson this morning is from Titus 3 where Paul writes:

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Paul mentions the “washing of regeneration and renewal.” “Regeneration,” means “rebirth.” It is a “washing,” literally a “baptism.” In baptism you and I are reborn. It is a birth story, a beginning story, the Christmas story. When Jesus began his ministry, He announced, “The Kingdom of God is here.” The Kingdom was not a political movement or a new administration. It is Jesus ruling in our lives. The best definition of God’s Kingdom I know of is what we sang in the hymn before our Gospel reading. Martin Luther wrote in His Christmas hymn:

Ah dearest Jesus, Holy Child/  
make Thee a bed soft, undefiled/  
Within my heart that it may be/  
a quiet chamber kept by Thee.

That isn’t just what happened 2,000 years ago when Jesus was born—or more rightly so nine months before when He was conceived. It isn’t even just the day when you and I were baptized. Each and every day God’s Kingdom comes. Each day Jesus comes to bring a birth, a new life in us to turn the ending into the beginning. We pray, “Thy Kingdom come.” Luther said God’s Kingdom comes without our prayer, but we pray that it may come among us also. Each day Christmas can come as Jesus knocks on the door and asks to come into our lives.

No full life, no epic story, no great emperor or nation, no great cause will go on. They will all come to an end, a death. Everything, that is, except God’s Kingdom. What Jesus brings into our lives is about birth, about beginning—about going beyond the end at death.

So today and each day we say, because Jesus was born on Christmas—“Happy Birthday!”