

Advent 1

November 27, 2011

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son

Mark 13:24-37

Keep Awake.

The news has been filled with reports about Black Friday – the opening day of Christmas sales, when stores hope they will sell enough merchandise to be ‘in the black’ for the year. With all the hype about big sales volumes, there have been lots and lots of ads, convincing you that you really CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT chocolate colored diamonds, or a new car equipped with a red bow on the roof. A frequent experience for the consumers, you and me, is something called Buyer’s Remorse. I remember when I was about 12, I was consumed with the NEED to have a real leather jacket. This was the 1950’s; the time of James Dean and Elvis Presley – they looked COOL in leather, and I wanted to look cool too. I thought about it, dreamed about it, and drove my parents crazy about it, until finally on my birthday one year, I got a real black leather jacket. What I had not anticipated was that my parents could only afford for me to have ONE winter jacket, and in NNY winter lasted six months. So for years, for six months of the year, everywhere I went I had to wear that leather jacket. I remember in the winter, at 10 degrees, taking that jacket off two blocks away from church, rolling it up and carrying it into church, so I could hide it at the back of the clothes rack. I just couldn’t wear that black motorcycle jacket to church. That is Buyer’s Remorse. When it just doesn’t work out the way you thought it would.

I bring this up because there is a tendency for this to happen after Christmas. There is a kind of Christmas Remorse that happens. Many people, many Christians have high hopes for Christmas. We want the whole season to be more spirit-filled than ever. We want every day of Christmas season to be filled with worship and a spiritual awakening, as we celebrate that our amazing God sent His Son. We want some precious, unrushed, family times when we can just be together and celebrate Christmas together. We want to connect with friends we have not connected with the rest of the year. We want to give some of our time to the poor, simply to express our gratitude to God for fulfilling our own needs.

And often, when Christmas is passed, we are exhausted, emotionally numb, know that some family relationships have gotten bruised, realize that we never contacted most of our friends, and we did little or nothing for the poor. And when we take stock of it all, we feel further away from God than when the Christmas season began. Well, there is something we can do about this Christmas Remorse thing. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus challenged his followers to keep alert; keep awake for the signs that God is at work in the world. THAT is the key.

It wasn’t that long ago that we became a parish: November 2007. In the time leading up to that event we made a covenant with each other; to pool our talents and resources to change the future of St. Stephen’s. That spirit of being in covenant is what changed us into being a parish (much more than any vote by Convention). Well, consider what could happen if we all made a covenant together that this year, we are going to Get Christmas Right? We could make a covenant with each other to move closer to God, and make some really good family decisions, and make some really good friendship decisions, and make some really good decisions about the poor. We could be deliberate about Getting this Christmas Season Right. And that is the goal of the next few sermons I am going to give: for us all to work and act and pray together, to Get Christmas Right.

Let’s get started right. Let’s listen to the Christmas story right now, at the beginning of this Christmas season, so the real content of Christmas is fresh in our minds. I will read this from a

modern translation called The Message. Luke, chapter 2: “So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David’s town, for the census. As a descendent of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth, and she gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel. There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God’s angel stood among them and God’s glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid. I’m here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide. A Savior has just been born in David’s town—a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you’re to look for—a baby wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger.’ At once the angel was joined by a huge, angelic choir singing God’s praises, ‘Glory to God in the heavenly highest. Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.’ As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. ‘Let’s get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.’ They left running. They found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed. Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and they let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they had been told.”

This simple story is overflowing with images of how God has chosen to be present to us. I hope you will read Luke 2 often over the next 4 weeks, and consider what God has done to meet your need and mine – how God saw the condition of this planet and did not look the other way.

Maybe you have heard this quote before: “If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was for forgiveness. So God sent a Savior.” Christmas reminds us that God sent the best he had for our most pressing need, and he met that need. God had you and me in mind when he commissioned his only Son to take on human flesh.

When we let that truth in, it draws us closer to God, we feel His presence more. We begin to understand that God sent his Son for the sake of other people too, and we see them differently; we treat them with more dignity. We recognize that Christ has given you and me eternal life; we have been adopted by God; and we develop a bigger heart to help those who have less than we do. Taking on this heart for God changes the way we relate to our family and our friends. A Christmas spirit begins to take root in our spirits. This isn’t Christmas hype; this is the real Christmas story.

And so we are going to work for the next few Sundays, washing our hearts and spirits with the real content of Christmas; which will help us Get Christmas Right. We will work at it, but I assure you here and now that this is going to be fun. There will be fabulous music; Advent candles; the manger scene assembled by children; hanging of the greens while being fueled with hot cider, cookies and Christmas music; the Posada procession as Mary and Joseph search for a place to stay – as Mary prepares to deliver her baby boy; silent Advent reflections every Friday evening; a Christmas Party; the Children’s Pageant; and two Christmas Masses.

The concern, the thing we should worry about, is what happens between our services. How do we keep the real content of Christmas washing over us and through us every other day of the

week between now and Christmas? Well, I plan to help you with that. I have identified four Christmas objects that you see and touch and use throughout the Christmas season. I am going to describe for you how you can use them as memory aides to tie each of them to a Christmas truth. There isn't time today to go over all of them with you, but let's start with one today.

The first object is a nativity scene. Besides the one here in church, you will see them on some people's lawns, and on some church lawns. You might even see them in a few public places. In my neighborhood there will be quite a few nativity scenes; maybe four or five of them on my way home. And if I let my mind stay in its engineering mode, I can find myself saying, "How daring of them to have that on public property," or "How do they store all that stuff all the rest of the year?" or "How do they keep the circuit breakers from blowing when it rains?" Doesn't that make Christmas sound exciting?

I am asking that you and I enter a covenant for this Christmas season, when we see a nativity scene, to think or even say out loud something much more focused on the reality of Christmas. Let's say or think, every time we see a nativity scene, "That really happened in human history." (All together once.)

Here is the point. Lawns display more than nativity scenes. There will be Santa and his sleigh; or lighted up candy canes; or snowmen; or a bunch of elves inside an inflated ball where it is snowing inside (in San Jose!!).

We have grown up hearing and seeing these Christmas stories and images. They have become a collection of Christmas folklore. But there was an actual day when shepherds were in the field, and angels sang "Glory to God in the highest." There was a real stable where Jesus was born. There is a town called Nazareth where Jesus grew up and learned to be a carpenter. There are grassy hillsides along the Sea of Galilee where Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount, and preached about God's amazing love for every man and woman and child. These things really happened in human history. This is not like flying reindeer, or singing snowmen or elves. This really happened in human history. But there is more; it happened – in part – for you. God took human form and came here. This is the planet he chose to visit. And he did it for you.

So, are you in this with me? Next week I will have some other objects to discuss as part of our Christmas season covenant. But starting now, from today until Christmas Day, whenever we see a nativity scene, can we say, "This really happened in human history." Together, let's get Christmas right. Amen.