

Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve, '18

“KEEPING CHRISTMAS”

OVER THE PAST COUPLE WEEKS, A STRANGE QUESTION KEPT POPPING INTO MY MIND AS I THOUGHT ABOUT THIS CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE.

THE QUESTION IS *“WHY ARE YOU HERE?”*

I DON'T MEAN IT IN THE EXISTENTIAL SENSE OF *“WHY ARE YOU ALIVE – WHY DO YOU EXIST AT ALL?”*

NO, THE QUESTION I KEEP COMING BACK TO IN THINKING OF THIS WORSHIP EXPERIENCE IS MORE SPECIFIC.

“WHY ARE YOU HERE IN THIS SANCTUARY AT THIS PARTICULAR TIME?”

THINK ABOUT HOW YOU WOULD ANSWER THAT QUESTION.

YOU MIGHT SAY, *“WELL, IT'S TRADITION. BEING HERE ON CHRISTMAS EVE IS SIMPLY SOMETHING I DO – SOMETHING WE DO AS A FAMILY.”*

THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT IF THAT'S YOUR ANSWER.

AFTER ALL, THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS THAT WE COULD SAY THAT ABOUT, FROM SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS BRUSHING YOUR TEETH TO SOMETHING AS MEANINGFUL AS TELLING YOUR CHILDREN YOU LOVE THEM.

IT'S SIMPLY TRADITION – SOMETHING YOU DO - AND BRUSHING YOUR TEETH AND PROCLAIMING YOUR LOVE FOR YOUR CHILDREN ARE OBVIOUSLY GOOD TRADITIONS TO MAINTAIN.

SO IS THE TRADITION OF WORSHIPPING ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

SOME OF YOU MIGHT SAY THAT YOU'RE HERE BECAUSE YOU LOVE TO HEAR THE CHRISTMAS STORY AS IT IS PROCLAIMED IN LUKE'S GOSPEL.

OR YOU MIGHT SAY THAT YOU LOVE TO SING CHRISTMAS CAROLS AND THERE'S NO BETTER PLACE TO DO THAT THAN CHURCH.

AS I'VE THOUGHT OF THAT QUESTION – “*WHY ARE YOU HERE?*” – OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS, I CAME TO REALIZE THAT I'M ASKING IT – NOT FOR YOUR BENEFIT, BUT MINE.

AND THAT LED ME TO QUESTION WHAT IT IS THAT YOU WILL REMEMBER FROM THE HOUR YOU SPEND HERE TONIGHT.

THAT MAY ALSO VARY FROM PERSON TO PERSON, BUT I IMAGINE IT WILL BE ONE OF SEVERAL THINGS.

YOU'LL REMEMBER BEING HERE SURROUNDED BY YOUR FAMILY.

OR YOU'LL REMEMBER ALL THOSE IN YOUR *CHURCH* FAMILY THAT YOU SAW TONIGHT.

SOME OF YOU MAY MOST REMEMBER THE BEAUTY OF THE SANCTUARY AT NIGHT - THE CANDLES, THE TREE, THE POINSETTIAS & THE LIGHTS.

MAYBE YOU'LL REMEMBER SHARING COMMUNION WITH YOUR FAMILY & FELLOW CHURCH MEMBERS.

OR MAYBE YOU'LL FIND YOURSELF PLAYING ONE OF THE ANTHEMS OVER & OVER IN YOUR HEAD.

PERHAPS YOU'LL REMEMBER SINGING "SILENT NIGHT" AS WE CLOSE THE SERVICE, WITH CANDLE IN HAND.

I THINK ALL OF THOSE ARE STRONG POSSIBILITIES OF WHAT YOU WILL MOST REMEMBER ABOUT BEING HERE TONIGHT.

WHAT I CAN PRETTY WELL ASSURE YOU THAT YOU *WON'T* REMEMBER IS THIS PARTICULAR PORTION OF THE WORSHIP SERVICE.

YOU WILL NOT, I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY, REMEMBER THE SERMON.

AS I HAVE CONSIDERED THAT QUESTION OVER THESE PAST WEEKS – "*WHY ARE YOU HERE TONIGHT?*" – I KNOW THAT IT'S NOT TO LISTEN TO A CRITICAL ANALYSIS & THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF THE LUKAN BIRTH NARRATIVE PERICOPE.

YOU ARE HERE BECAUSE YOU WANT TO EXPERIENCE THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST & THAT COMES IN THE

FORM OF ALL OF THOSE OTHER ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP THAT YOU WILL REMEMBER ABOUT HAVING BEEN HERE TONIGHT.

THAT’S ALL THAT I COULD HOPE FOR.

NO – THAT’S EVERYTHING I COULD HOPE FOR.

I HAD INTENDED ON USING THIS FOR THE “LITERATURE” PORTION OF OUR ADVENT SERIES – “*SECULAR CHRISTMAS SONGS, MOVIES & BOOKS THAT SPEAK TO THE SOUL.*”

I INTENDED TO USE HENRY VAN DYKE’S FASCINATING LITTLE BOOK CALLED THE STORY OF THE OTHER WISE MAN.

IN PREPARATION, THOUGH, I WAS REMINDED OF WHAT AN ABSOLUTELY FASCINATING MAN VAN DYKE WAS & THAT QUESTION THAT KEPT PRODDING ME – “*WHY ARE YOU HERE?*” – MOVED FROM THE SPECIFICS OF BEING PRESENT AT CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP INTO THAT EXISTENTIAL REALM – “*WHY ARE YOU ALIVE & WHY DO YOU EVEN EXIST AT ALL?*”

AND, AGAIN, I WASN’T ASKING THE QUESTION ABOUT YOU BUT RATHER ABOUT ME!

YOU SEE, HENRY VAN DYKE WAS A MAN WHO ACCOMPLISHED MORE IN HIS LIFE THAN COULD REASONABLY BE EXPECTED TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BY MORE THAN A DOZEN INDIVIDUALS!

HE WAS AN ENGLISH PROFESSOR AT PRINCETON, MINISTER OF THE BRICK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN NEW YORK, AMBASSADOR TO THE NETHERLANDS, THE AUTHOR OF DOZENS OF BOOKS AND HUNDREDS OF POEMS.

HE WROTE THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN BOOK OF COMMON WORSHIP & WROTE THE HYMN “JOYFUL, JOYFUL, WE ADORE THEE.”

HE WAS A CLOSE FRIEND OF HELEN KELLER & HE PRESIDED OVER THE FUNERAL OF MARK TWAIN.

THE MORE I READ ABOUT HENRY VAN DYKE, THE MORE THAT EXISTENTIAL QUESTION KEPT POPPING UP – “*WHY ARE YOU HERE & WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR LIFE?*”

READING THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF SOMEONE LIKE HENRY VAN DYKE CAN CAUSE YOU TO EITHER MARVEL AT THE KIND OF LIFE HE LIVED OR DESPAIR OVER YOUR *OWN* MUNDANE, MEASLY, MEDIOCRE EXISTENCE.

IT WAS THE LATTER IN WHICH I FOUND MYSELF MIRED – THE MUNDANE, MEASLY, MEDIOCRE LIFE WE FIND OURSELVES LIVING.

BUT THEN, IN THE MIDST OF THAT DESPAIR, I HAPPENED TO LISTEN TO SOMETHING THAT FITS WELL INTO OUR ADVENT SERIES OF “*SECULAR FORMS OF ART THAT SPEAK TO THE SOUL.*”

I LISTENED TO THE RADIO VERSION OF FRANK CAPRA'S
"IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE."

REMEMBER THAT GEORGE BAILEY WAS GOING TO GET
OUT OF BEDFORD FALLS & ACCOMPLISH ALL SORTS OF
THINGS THAT WOULD MAKE HIM KNOWN ALL OVER THE
WORLD.

HE WAS GOING TO DO MORE THAN HENRY VAN DYKE
EVER DREAMED OF DOING.

BUT WITH THE HELP OF HIS GUARDIAN ANGEL,
CLARENCE, GEORGE CAME TO REALIZE THAT HIS
EXISTENCE WHICH SEEMED, TO HIM, TO BE MUNDANE,
MEASLY & MEDIOCRE, WAS – IN REALITY – *"A WONDERFUL
LIFE."*

THAT REALIZATION AS I WAS THINKING AGAIN OF THAT
QUESTION – *"WHY ARE YOU HERE?"* – LED ME BACK, ONCE
AGAIN, TO HENRY VAN DYKE.

IT LED ME – NOT TO HIS *"STORY OF THE OTHER WISE
MAN"* – BUT TO SOMETHING ELSE HE WROTE ABOUT THIS
DAY – SOMETHING THAT IS PERHAPS MORE APPROPRIATE –
SOMETHING THAT CAN ENABLE YOU TO ANSWER THAT
"WHY ARE YOU HERE?" QUESTION IN A FULFILLING FASHION.

LISTEN TO WHAT HENRY VAN DYKE CALLS *"A SHORT
CHRISTMAS SERMON"* THAT HE ENTITLES "KEEPING
CHRISTMAS."

IT IS A GOOD THING TO OBSERVE CHRISTMAS DAY.

THE MERE MARKING OF TIMES AND SEASONS, WHEN MEN AGREE TO STOP WORK AND MAKE MERRY TOGETHER, IS A WISE AND WHOLESOME CUSTOM.

IT HELPS ONE TO FEEL THE SUPREMACY OF THE COMMON LIFE OVER THE INDIVIDUAL LIFE.

IT REMINDS A MAN TO SET HIS OWN LITTLE WATCH, NOW AND THEN, BY THE GREAT CLOCK OF HUMANITY WHICH RUNS ON SUN TIME.

BUT THERE IS A BETTER THING THAN THE OBSERVANCE OF CHRISTMAS DAY, AND THAT IS, KEEPING CHRISTMAS.

ARE YOU WILLING TO FORGET WHAT YOU HAVE DONE FOR OTHER PEOPLE, AND TO REMEMBER WHAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE DONE FOR YOU;

TO IGNORE WHAT THE WORLD OWES YOU, AND TO THINK WHAT YOU OWE THE WORLD;

TO PUT YOUR RIGHTS IN THE BACKGROUND, AND YOUR DUTIES IN THE MIDDLE DISTANCE, AND YOUR CHANCES TO DO A LITTLE MORE THAN YOUR DUTY IN THE FOREGROUND;

TO SEE THAT YOUR FELLOW-MEN ARE JUST AS REAL AS YOU ARE, AND TRY TO LOOK BEHIND THEIR FACES TO THEIR HEARTS, HUNGRY FOR JOY;

TO OWN THAT PROBABLY THE ONLY GOOD REASON FOR YOUR EXISTENCE IS NOT WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO GET OUT OF LIFE, BUT WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO GIVE TO LIFE;

TO CLOSE YOUR BOOK OF COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE MANAGEMENT OF THE UNIVERSE, AND LOOK AROUND YOU FOR A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN SOW A FEW SEEDS OF HAPPINESS—

ARE YOU WILLING TO DO THESE THINGS EVEN FOR A DAY? THEN YOU CAN KEEP CHRISTMAS.

ARE YOU WILLING TO STOOP DOWN AND CONSIDER THE NEEDS AND THE DESIRES OF LITTLE CHILDREN;

TO REMEMBER THE WEAKNESS AND LONELINESS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE GROWING OLD;

TO STOP ASKING HOW MUCH YOUR FRIENDS LOVE YOU, AND ASK YOURSELF WHETHER YOU LOVE THEM ENOUGH;

TO BEAR IN MIND THE THINGS THAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE TO BEAR ON THEIR HEARTS;

TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THOSE WHO LIVE IN THE SAME HOUSE WITH YOU REALLY WANT, WITHOUT WAITING FOR THEM TO TELL YOU;

TO TRIM YOUR LAMP SO THAT IT WILL GIVE MORE LIGHT AND LESS SMOKE, AND TO CARRY IT IN FRONT SO THAT YOUR SHADOW WILL FALL BEHIND YOU;

TO MAKE A GRAVE FOR YOUR UGLY THOUGHTS, AND A GARDEN FOR YOUR KINDLY FEELINGS, WITH THE GATE OPEN— ARE YOU WILLING TO DO THESE THINGS EVEN FOR A DAY? THEN YOU CAN KEEP CHRISTMAS.

ARE YOU WILLING TO BELIEVE THAT LOVE IS THE STRONGEST THING IN THE WORLD—STRONGER THAN HATE, STRONGER THAN EVIL, STRONGER THAN DEATH—AND THAT THE BLESSED LIFE WHICH BEGAN IN BETHLEHEM NINETEEN HUNDRED YEARS AGO IS THE IMAGE AND BRIGHTNESS OF THE ETERNAL LOVE?

THEN YOU CAN KEEP CHRISTMAS.

AND IF YOU KEEP IT FOR A DAY, WHY NOT ALWAYS? BUT YOU CAN NEVER KEEP IT ALONE.

SO, IN THE END, I KNOW THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION THAT HAS HAUNTED ME FOR SEVERAL WEEKS.

“WHY ARE YOU HERE?”

YOU ARE HERE BECAUSE YOU ARE “KEEPING CHRISTMAS” – AND YOU AREN’T KEEPING IT ALONE.

YOU’RE KEEPING CHRISTMAS WITH LOVED ONES AROUND YOU.

YOU’RE HERE “KEEPING CHRISTMAS” IN THE MOST BLESSED WAY POSSIBLE ON HIS “HOLY NIGHT.” AMEN.

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