



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“HOW DO WE SAY MERRY CHRISTMAS”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 80:1-7; John 1:1-28

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 19, 2021
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John 1:1-28

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"', as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of each of our hearts, be pleasing and even joyful in your sight. For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Back in 1998, Barbara Kingsolver wrote a wonderful book entitled *The Poisonwood Bible*, and while it was a best-selling book in its own right, it was interesting to me as a pastor, because, revealed in that book is also a rather compelling critique of the church. I referenced this book a couple of years ago in a chapel service, but I want to mention it again this morning because I think the lessons contained therein are especially relevant during Christmas season. The book tells the story of the Price family. Nathan Price is the main character and what we probably need to know about Nathan is that he is a husband, in a legal sense, and he is a father, in a biological sense, but he isn't really either of them in a very loving sense. Reason being, Nathan's identity is completely wrapped up in his work as a missionary, and he possesses such a fire in his bones about doing the work of God that it compels him to take his entire family to the Congo in order to witness to the native population. Upon their arrival, the locals welcomed Nathan and his family with open arms, and they exhibit a sincere spirit of hospitality; however, it soon becomes apparent that while Nathan's aspiration to the mission of God is seemingly limitless, his understanding of how to apply that aspiration is extremely limited. For example, early on we see that the villagers are gracious and kind, and share a meal with Nathan and his family, but what starts out as a warm and welcoming occasion, it quickly turns into a cold and inhospitable one when Nathan and with arguably the best of intentions, mind you, he offers a rather cold and condescending prayer.

Nathan had long since determined that one of the best ways to win the hearts of the indigenous people was through their stomachs, but even that good idea was subverted by the fact that Nathan was far more willing to teach than he was to learn. When a woman of the community saw him clearing away a plot of land for his garden, and suggested that he stay clear of the Poisonwood tree, and when she also recommended that Nathan plant his crops in mounds due to the occasional flooding, Nathan just dismissed her. Sadly, Nathan never does come to terms with the good could be found among the people living in the village of Kilanga; to that point, had he simply taken the woman's advice, he would have avoided a nasty rash and that first garden of his wouldn't have been washed away by the floodwaters. But Nathan was resilient, we can at least give him that. One of his hopes was that, one day, the whole community would gather down by the river to be baptized; however, in a river swarming with crocodiles, that was never going to happen. In fact, Nathan's proclamation about a future communal baptism was met with open disgust by some of the local leaders who suggested that what Nathan was trying to do was feed their children to the crocodiles. Still, and perhaps surprisingly, relationships were being formed as they lived and worked together and the Gospel was being shared and, eventually, even worship became a part of that community's life. It happened that every Sunday morning a man from the village would stand near the pulpit and he would listen to a sentence or two of Nathan's sermon, and would then translate it into the native language. Nathan, however, he always wanted to have the last word and he would offer the same benediction week in and week out. He would say it in their native language as best he could, "Jesus is most blessed." The problem was that Nathan's benediction was just as easily translated, "Jesus is Poisonwood."

Perhaps you have noticed that sometimes something that is “right” can be said or done in such a way that it comes across “wrong”? And it’s not that we don’t have the best of intentions or that we somehow lack the ability. In Nathan’s case, his greatest challenge, and one that he could not overcome, was that he knew only what he wanted to say and he saw only what he wanted to see!

Martha Ann and our boys are in New York City this weekend doing some college touring and a story about another mother and her two sons came to my mind. They were all on a New York City subway and the brothers were looking into the mirrored glass which separated them from the engineer’s compartment. Soon the older boy told his brother that he could see the tracks up ahead. But the younger brother was too busy admiring himself in the mirror, he couldn’t see what his brother was talking about. “Where?” He asked. “I don’t see anything.” Finally, their mother spoke up and said, “Look beyond yourself and you’ll see it.” Of course, when he did, he saw what he been missing. In much the same way, in this morning’s New Testament Lesson, John the Baptist looks beyond himself and he directs our attention to Jesus and by pointing beyond himself, John is making the point that the words he speaks are rooted in a much larger story, a story far greater than his own! “I baptize with water” John says, “Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

Picture that scene, if you will. I mean, there’s John, standing in the court of public opinion, with his wild hair, animal skins draped over his body, eating locusts and wild honey. He is the epitome of a prophet and yet he is continually about the business of proclaiming that he himself is not the “One!” In fact, everything he does it points to God, and I can’t help but to wonder if, the same be said of us? At Christmas time, our words, our attitudes, our activities, do they point people to God or do they send a different message? When we say, “Merry Christmas,” does the world hear the essence of the story of Jesus, or does it sound more like “Merry Shopping,” “Merry Decorating,” or “Merry Christmas Cards” perhaps? Does the world hear “Jesus is most blessed?” or heaven forbid, does it hear that, “Jesus is Poisonwood?”

Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, a professor on the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, she made the comment that “Our words are not always interpreted in the way that we might intend them to be. Coca-Cola discovered that fact when they noticed their sales in China were not anywhere near what they had been projecting. Then it was pointed out to them that the transliterated Coca-Cola logo came across in Chinese as saying something akin to: ‘Bite the wax tadpole.’ In a similar way, when Pepsi tried to translate their ‘Come to life with Pepsi’ slogan into Korean, it came across as implying that Pepsi would bring their ancestors back from the dead. Or, [my favorite] when the Purdue Chicken Company translated their motto: ‘It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken,’ the Spanish version ended up declaring, ‘It takes a virile man to make a chicken affectionate.’ The point Dean was making and which I want to make as well, is that while we might think that our words are conveying a crystal-clear message about Jesus [and about Christmas], sometimes our message is misunderstood” (Kenda Creasy Dean).

We say, "Merry Christmas," and what we hope to communicate is something of the celebration of that sacred occasion when God came to earth and became flesh and dwelled among us; but, alas, sometimes what people hear is: "That sure is a beautiful tree!" or "I can't believe Uncle Jesse is coming to Christmas dinner. That's going to stress everyone out." or "Are you going to the such and such event?" We get so upset when the world either misses the point of Christmas or markets the message in a way that is in stark contrast with the Biblical message; when the truth is, we do the same thing. Take this Lord's Table as similar example: Consider how it is that our souls, like our bodies, they get hungry and though we may not feel it as acutely, when we do not nourish ourselves with every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, and when we do not partake of this banquet of grace, our souls get weak. They become malnourished. Yet, here at this table, we are fed and our souls are nourished by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. But, if we leave this place and if we return straight way to the eggnog and the figgy pudding and if we don't, in some way, bear witness to having been fed in righteousness, then we are effectively telling the world that this Holy Supper is just another meal! But this is not just another meal and this is not just any season. That about it: What if everything about us proclaimed to the world that we worship and serve the One who has come, and lived and died and who rose again; the One who has the power, right now, to bring hope to the hopeless and power to the powerless; the One who will one day come again!?!

In the end, the extent to which we can point beyond ourselves and bear witness to God's faithfulness, that blessed story of salvation which spans the fullness of time. Oh, how we say "Merry Christmas," in thought, and word and deed, it makes all the difference in the world!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.