



## 1 Christmas

### Right Relationship

[RCL] Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147 or 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

Merry Christmas! Today is the first Sunday of Christmas, and we have all woken up this morning with nothing on our minds but celebrating the coming of Christ incarnate, thanking God for becoming human and living alongside us, and celebrating the incarnation of God to save us – and the world – through a love beyond exception ...right?

When we celebrate Christmas, it feels good to cozy up to the Incarnation, to think about soft baby cheeks and cute coos and forget about the complexity of the place where Jesus was born: the smell of manure and feed, the terror and pain of childbirth, the stress and anxiety of travel, the fear and hopelessness of oppression by politics and poverty. Today, especially at the end of a hard year locally, nationally, and globally, we may feel particularly drawn to twinkly pine trees, cheery music, and lovingly given gifts in the Christmas season, and choose to forget about the hardness of the world in which Jesus lived.

We might also reflect on our own terror, anxiety, sickness, oppression, and grief, and think to ourselves... did it even work? Did Christmas come? Is Jesus really present—did Jesus' life and story even make an impact on the world today? Is Christmas just an excuse for a party—or is it always winter and never Christmas around here? Is it possible to think about hope and unconditional love and redemption in a time such as this? Maybe Jesus came but couldn't really save us from ourselves, from each other.

Sometimes it may seem that if we just do everything *right*, if we can just be *better*, then we'll get ahead, we'll be happier, we'll be more loved, more worthy, and things will get easier. If we could only make the right decisions, choose the best and most efficient path, then our worries would cease, and strife would end, and all would be healed and protected.

This is an easy trap to fall into as Christians, as well. We might think: if we could only follow God's commandments, we would go to heaven. If we could only follow Jesus' example, all of our pain would go away. If we could only stop sinning, we would be loved. The Hebrew Bible in particular often reads like an anthology of laws, some of which are laws to distinguish followers of God – the chosen people – from others.

Many of the first followers of Christ – and Jesus himself – were Jews who were familiar with these laws and their interpretations. In reality, the many legal requirements were probably more like ideals, not actually practiced, but that context is important as we read Paul's letter to the Galatians. At the time of the letter's writing, Paul had recently converted a number of Gentiles to faith in Christ in the region of Galatia. Soon after, other missionaries arrived on the scene and insisted that believers must follow parts of the Jewish law in order to be fully right before

God. Law and order—a dangerous perspective in any context—was outrageous to Paul, who thought that the legalism, which in this case centered on the argument about circumcision, was an affront to God and a rejection of the justification God provided through Jesus Christ. One interpretation is that the law acted as a disciplinarian, to keep God’s children on the right path until the arrival of Christ. At no point, however, was the law meant to put a person into right standing before God.

This is what Paul means when he writes that we are justified by faith, not action. It’s not a matter of following a set of checkboxes and, if you check them all off, you’re golden and beloved. The word justified is not the same as being loved, being saved, or being smug. To be justified is to be in right relationship with God, especially in times of crisis. Christ’s coming has not changed our relationship with God and it hasn’t changed the need for right relationship. Instead, the coming of Christ, our sibling, has transformed our relationship with God, solidifying us as God’s children through our faith, not our actions.

The relationship between God and humanity has a long story, one which continues today. Today’s psalm is a post-exilic song praising God, the Redeemer of Israel, who restored the exiles and rebuilt Jerusalem. The restoration resumes the covenantal relationship between God and the people – the return to right relationship after a tough season.

Today’s passage from Isaiah, also written at the end of the Babylonian Exile, similarly names the power of God through hard times. It’s written to people who were despondent those who were currently living in exile, or who had finally left it. Think about the stress, fear, anxiety, and sickness they must have experienced! The scripture reminds the people that the God of Israel is still powerful and still loyal. Only one God is the true God, and God alone has created the world and brings redemption.

Which brings us back to Christmas. It might feel like we’ve been in exile this year as well – isolated in our homes as injustice and illness and hate prowl around us, stressed out about money and violence and politics and pandemic. We, like the nation of Israel, also need the reminder that God created the world, is with us in it, and brings redemption. Christmas is not only a season to celebrate a baby’s birthday but also to celebrate the same thing we celebrate at Easter: God’s unimaginable, inexplicable love for us and for the world, no matter how much we mess up.

While the Gospel of John might be best discussed late at night around a campfire with a warm beverage, its poetic and mysterious language leaves much room for interpretation, including interpretations that can speak strongly to us today. The very first sentence is about the very beginning of time.

The “Word” used here is from the Greek *“logos”* and can be translated as “a word which embodies an idea.” The very descriptor “embodiment” brings to mind incarnation, flesh, humanness. Therefore, one could (and many do) interpret the use of this word, *logos*, or the Word, to symbolize Jesus. The one who was with God before creation is the same Jesus on Earth. God has been with us since before time, and Jesus has been alongside God since the beginning. God has not abandoned us through the history of the universe and will certainly not abandon us now. The season of Christmas gives us an opportunity to celebrate God who has come alongside us at this particular moment in time, as we come together to celebrate Jesus’ birth and journey to personhood, teacher, and sibling. Jesus was with the animals in the stable. Jesus was with the women at the tomb. Jesus was at the creation of the universe, and Jesus is here with us today.

Perhaps on this first Sunday of Christmas, you need the bright moments of the story – the ones that have twinkle lights and stars and angels and choirs and presents and an adorable baby. Perhaps on this first Sunday of Christmas, you relate more to the stress, anxiety, stench, and oppression that is the story of the life of Christ. The real miracle today and every day is that Christ is with us in all of it. Through the Incarnation – God somehow made fully divine and fully human – God has said, “I am with you.” From exile to restoration, from birth to death, God is with us and has been with us since the beginning of time. Nothing we do, no mistakes we will ever make, no rules we will ever break, can separate us from God. To be in right relationship is to seek God in all of our lives—no matter how beautiful or how messy our life gets.

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