

“Christmas Begins & Ends With A Tree”

CHRISTMAS EVE

December 24, 2018

7:00pm Service

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

A family who was going out of town for Christmas
loaded up their SUV with their luggage,
took the dog over to a neighbor's house,
entered the coordinates in their GPS
and had even recorded a CD with songs
for the ride.

Everything was packed and ready,
and they were so relieved to finally
be in the car and on the road.

They were halfway down the street
when the woman suddenly cried out
to her husband,
“WE FORGOT THE BABY!”

After raising our own family and
now watching our son and his wife
adding a new addition to their
family of four, the couple forgetting
their baby in their frenzy to get away
is today's picture of Christmas

We want that perfect ‘Hallmark’ Christmas.

We trim our trees

We make our lists

and check them more than twice.

We shop and wrap ‘till we drop’

We attend Christmas productions,
pageant's, and parties.

Then it dawns on us that

WE FORGOT THE BABY:

the Baby Jesus, the one

whom Christmas is all about,

In our post-Christian modern American culture,

It is possible to celebrate Christmas

and forget all about Christ
While visiting our son's house last week,
I admired how they displayed
all their Christmas cards on the
corner hutch in their kitchen
I counted thirty cards in all.
About half of them featured family
portraits in seasonable dress and
all but two of them wished their
recipients a happy holiday
rather than a Merry Christmas.
Not one card depicted or even mentioned
the Christ child.
It is possible to lose Jesus at Christmas.
It is possible for many families
to celebrate Christmas without Christ
Thankfully, even when we forget about him,
he never forgets about us.

As much as I love Charles Dickens' novella,
A Christmas Carol, the story of
the birth of Jesus is the greatest of all stories
Paul tells the Galatian congregations:
"But when the right time came,
God sent his Son born of a woman,
subject to the law" (4:4)
Jesus came when the time was just right.
There were dark times for the Jewish people.
Almost as difficult as their bondage in Egypt
or their exile in Babylon.
They were living under the rule of Rome
and its appointed, puppet king, Herod.
To make matters worse, the Jewish people
hadn't heard from God in over 400 years-
not a single prophet was sent to speak,
not one angelic appearance occurred,
not one miracle was performed
Nothing but stone-cold icy silence so-to-speak.

Then suddenly, the silence and the ice was broken,
and God dispatched his messenger angel Gabriel
to a godly elderly priest named Zechariah
He told Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth
would be the parents of the forerunner
of the Messiah.

Just a few months later, Gabriel was sent
to inform an unsuspecting young and
engaged Mary that she would be expecting-
a son, Jesus, the Savior of the world.

However as the gospel tells it; the Christmas story
starts with a tree- not a Christmas tree
but a family tree.

Both the gospels of Matthew and Luke
contain a genealogy of Jesus.

Genealogies were important to the
Jewish people in Jesus' time.

Their family pedigree, their genealogy
served as their identity;
it was a bit like a resume.

Both Joseph and Mary traced their lineages
back to King David.

It's interesting to note that the Christmas story
doesn't begin with the fabled words
"once upon a time" as so many fairytales do.

Instead it starts with a series of begats
and begots.

That's because the Christmas story is embedded
in a people's history.

It's a factual, historical event, in real time

All other stories we hear or see this season-

The Christmas Story, The Grinch Who Stole
Christmas, Polar Express, and Elf
are the best, seasonal, fantasy stories meant
to entertain,

The story of Jesus is different.

The story of the birth of Jesus started

in heaven and unfolded on earth.

When the angel appeared to the shepherds
in the middle of the night and announced,
“For there is born to you this day
in the city of David a Savior,
who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11),
the angel in effect was saying cryptically,
“Listen, Earth, Augustus Caesar is not
the Savior of the world. Jesus is

The Savior of the world does not reside in
a palace in Rome.

The Savior of the world is wrapped in bands
of cloth and lying in a manger in Bethlehem.”

Historians believe Augustus Caesar stood
around 5 feet 7 inches tall.

God touched his man who was a god in
his own mind to set about a chain of events
that would bring Mary and Joseph
from Nazareth to Bethlehem
because the prophet Micah predicted
the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (5:2).

Today the only time most people hear the
name of Augustus mentioned, it is
Luke’s birth narrative of Jesus.

He is a footnote to the greatest story ever told.

Jesus is the most influential person in human
history.

It has been said that history living on the
hinge of a stable door in Bethlehem.

Jesus came, as a baby to live on earth for one purpose-
to die an agonizing death on a cross to ransom humanity
from an eternal death sentence.

For true believers the shadow of the cross
lay over the beauty of that first Christmas night.

The child was born to die so that we may live.

When we look back at that first Christmas

we need to remember that the real
Christmas tree wasn't decorated with lights.
The real Christmas tree was a cross that
Christ hanged from.
Paul again said to the Galatians
"Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (3:3)
For the Apostle Paul, Jesus died on a tree-
on a cross- for the sin of the world.
Paul also wrote again to the Galatians
"Christ has redeeming us from the cross
of the law, having become a curse for us" (3:13).

Beloved people of God,
that is why red is the color of Christmas-
not because Santa wore red or
because we wrap our presents in red paper
or attach red bows to holly wreaths
or put red bulbs on our tree
Red is the color of Christmas because
it is the color of the blood Jesus shed
from the cross for each and every one of us.
Jesus died and rose again for us
so that he could make available to us
the greatest of all gifts-salvation
So, as we gaze upon the lighted tree
before us and the cross and crown
that adorns its peak, we are
reminded that the real Christmas
begins and ends with a tree.

Amen