

“Showing Up Again”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
January 5, 2014

Well, I want to welcome all of you back to church this morning. I especially want to give some accolades to those who were in church last Sunday. I, of course, was on vacation. I understand that church did go on and that some people did show up. That is always a down Sunday in church life, the Sunday after Christmas, but “Amen!” to you who were here. It was wonderful, and “Amen!” to you who are here today.

The reason I start with those words of gratitude is because, this morning, as we gather for worship, we do so in the wake of what I call the “C&E season”. The “C&E season” is the time during the church year when the pews tend to be a little bit more full than usual. The “C&E season”, of course—that is, the Christmas and Easter season, is the time of the year when Christmas and Easter Christians show up for church.

During this season, pastors and church administrators tend to get very excited because people we haven’t seen for eight months show up again and, better yet, people we have *never seen before* come walking through the door, so Christmas, especially Christmas Eve, and Easter morning, are times of great anticipation for many church leaders.

But something new is on the horizon. Recently completed research about religious life in America reveals that the era of overflowing Christmas and Easter services has been on the decline for a long time and is really about to end. In fact, a recent Pew Research survey in regard to people’s feelings about Christmas showed that a significant number of Americans now say that Christmas has largely lost its religious meaning, and that it has primarily become a time to exchange gifts and visit with family.

Now, of course, there is absolutely nothing wrong with the exchanging of gifts and the visiting of family, although I would warn you that my experience is that family is a little bit like fish. You know, after three days it gets a little stinky! But the trend away from the religious significance of Christmas does beg the question of why this change is taking place and, more importantly, why the birth of Christ was so important and so central to the early Christians’ understanding and excitement about their faith?

I want to begin there, with the birth of Christ and specifically with the word “Christ”. All of us, of course, refer to Jesus Christ as the focal point of our Christian faith and when we say it, it rolls off our lips without much problem at all. Yet, in assuming the name ‘Jesus Christ,’ we often forget that, while Jesus is his name - *Jesus of Nazareth* - Christ is his title, and Christ means “Messiah.” It comes from the Greek word “Christos,” so when we say ‘Jesus Christ,’ we are really saying ‘Jesus the Christ,” and what we are actually doing at this point is making a claim for Jesus as *the Messiah*, and when we make the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, we are tapping into very old and ancient Jewish expectations that centered originally around King David and the Davidic line of kings that followed.

King David, and the kings that followed King David in the life and history of Israel, were known as the “anointed ones” which means “messiahs.” And they were, through the anointing process, given legitimated authority and royal power to rule. This was the first concept of what a Messiah was, but as we know and hear about, this all came to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. because, with the destruction of Jerusalem, their holy city, and the destruction of their temple, this was the end of the Davidic line of kings. Israel no longer existed and so, as the Jews suffered through this time of loss, this time of exile, as they saw their city and their temple destroyed, and as they lived and reorganized themselves under foreign powers and foreign gods, they began to imagine and to dream about the return of a new Davidic-like messiah. They wanted another messiah to come who would be like David and who would put everything back in order and clean-up the mess.

They had dreams about this as we do. If we are Republicans, we dream about that Reagan era—couldn’t we get someone back like Ronald Reagan? Or if we are Democrats, we dream about that JFK era—couldn’t we get someone back like JFK?

This is what the Jews were dreaming about—a messiah coming back to rescue them, so in Jeremiah, the 23rd Chapter, he writes:

“The days are surely coming”, says the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous branch. A new king is going to come who will be like David, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

They were dreaming about a better future, and this future would come about by a new messiah arriving on the scene. So Jews, who had lost their king, their nation, their city, and their temple, were longing for this coming messiah who would be in the model of King David and who would set things right. The early Christians who sought to understand and interpret Jesus, who were also informed by these other older Jewish traditions about messiah, began to see in Jesus the fulfillment of these expectations of a messiah, so in giving Jesus the title of “Messiah”, a title which he never claimed for himself, the early church was able to secure a place for Jesus in terms of the key expectations of Judaism. They were able to give some legitimacy to Jesus as a messiah, but in doing it with Jesus, they also radically reinterpreted what “messiah” meant because, while Jesus was, on one level, political to his very core, his status as “messiah” lacked the worldly political and military dimensions that typically went with a king like David.

The birth of Jesus to the early church was about the coming of a long- expected and long hoped-for messiah who would get them out of the social, political, economical and spiritual mess that they had been in for over 500 years. Additionally, under the Roman Empire into which Jesus was born, this longing for a messiah simply became more urgent. They wanted someone to save them and certain people in that first century pointed to Jesus of Nazareth and said “That’s the guy! That’s the Messiah!” So, as they wrote back into history those birth narratives, they did so by defining Jesus as Messiah.

Thinking about Jesus as Messiah has its roots in Jewish tradition, and that makes sense because Jesus was a Jew. So it presses us to think about, with this trend away from the religious significance of Christmas, a trend that has not so much to do with the fact that we are becoming a much more secular culture (though that is true), what I suspect about this move away from Christmas as a religious event is, I think it has much more to do with our sense of not needing at all what Christmas at its core has to offer; and what Christmas at its core has to offer is a Messiah—a Messiah that we are not so sure we need any longer.

Think about it. We are not poor. We live in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. We are not oppressed by foreign powers. We take the battle to them. We have the most powerful and deadly military in the history of the world. We have an abundance of food and consumer goods that keep us satiated and numbed to anything but our own wants and desires, and we are perpetually entertained. Whether it be through cell phones, movie theaters, TVs or computers, there is never a dull moment when we are not distracted by the idols of our culture.

With all of this, and more that you could add to that list of the abundance of our culture, who needs a Messiah? Beyond its sentimental value during the Christmas season, who needs a narrative of a God-child born in a Middle Eastern, backwater town? Who needs a different way to live when our system of consumer capitalism places everything we could ever dream of at our fingertips?

I think this is the source, or at least one of the sources, of the decline of the church. The fact is, we don’t need a Messiah because we have everything that we could possibly want right here and now. You can go get it at the Wal-Mart.

This is why, after the sentimentality of the Christmas season is over, it is so important that we show up in church again because we must begin to struggle with, and be reminded again and again, why we need a Messiah and struggle internally with our own demons. Do we really want our lives changed? Do we really want a Messiah to tell us how to live? Do we really want the restrictions of faith because there are

restrictions and expectations of faithful living? You can't just live any way you want to when you claim yourself a person of faith. The beginning point in answering this question of whether or not we need a Messiah is to simply confess that *we cannot do it on our own*.

Without a community of support, without an external moral compass of compassion to guide us in the living of our lives, without a narrative to point us in the direction of the common good, and without the integration of ancient wisdom and modern knowledge, without all of these and so much more that the life of faith offers, we are left to our own devices. When I say left to our own devices, what I hint at is personal confession. When I live the way that I want to live, it is a disaster. I make wrong decision, after wrong decision, after wrong decision and my life becomes a mess, and Jesus Christ has saved my ass, again and again. Jesus says, "You've got to love people! You've got to be for other people! If you live according to your own agenda, you are going to die! That's what Jesus was telling those first century people who lived under incredible situations of pain, and sorrow, and oppression. He said there is a different way to live. There is a way that is going to bring life in the midst of death. There is a way to live that's going to bring love in the midst of hate. There is a way that is going to bring healing in the midst of all the woundedness that we have experienced.

Ronald Wright has written a book, and it is called *A Short History of Progress*. In this book, *A Short History of Progress* (Don't be confused by the title.), it is about five historic communities and cultures of history, all of which collapsed. His argument in this book is that the great societies of history all collapse because they get fooled by their own power, and Jesus came to give us that message. He came to say the Roman Empire is not where you find life. The Roman Empire, like all the great empires, will die, and when it dies, where are you going to be? What will sustain you? Where will you find hope?

So, the challenge for us as we go forward into this new year is to move beyond sentimental feelings and historic "feel good" memories of what has been. The challenge of the church is to rediscover why we need a Messiah, and how, in fact, Jesus is, for us, the Messiah who has come to save us. If we are able to grapple honestly with that question, the renewal of the church and the renewal of our lives will fall into place. With that falling into place, the promise of Christmas becomes a reality.

So, as we go forward into this new year together, my hope is that we will struggle, and talk about, and pray about, and visualize a new future based on the fact that we truly believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that we need Jesus and the promises of newness, resurrection, healing and growth. That is the promise of Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen.