

John Sampson  
“Celebrating Correctly”  
Text: Luke 2:1 - 20  
Preached at KVCC  
December 24, 2019 – 5 PM Service

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Merry Christmas!

Tonight we celebrate the birth of Emmanuel, of God with us.

Tonight we celebrate the coming of love born once again into our hearts, and into our world.

And there's a lot of pressure that comes along with this celebration isn't there? There's a lot of pressure not only to celebrate Christmas, but to celebrate it correctly.

You know this from your lives, and I know it from leading this church.

Here are just a couple of examples:

Ok, do we have the crèche set up? Yes! Is it in the right place. Yes! Uh oh, where's the figure of Mary. Make sure she doesn't get put in the crèche too early, and make sure the animals don't show up too late!

OK, it's still Advent. We can only sing Advent hymns and carols. No Christmas carols until Christmas, and then only in Christmas! Then

we move immediately to the Epiphany hymns. I confess I am personally very uptight about this one.

We've got an Advent wreath! That is so good. We're a great church.

We've got it going on. But there's a sequence to the lighting of the candles that has to be obeyed. Purple candle on the first Sunday, purple candle on the second Sunday, then the pink candle and then the final purple candle on the fourth Sunday. Whatever you do, don't light the white candle in the middle of the wreath until Christmas Eve!

This is some of how Christmas is celebrated correctly in a church like this one.

But we also have these same kinds of hang-ups at home, don't we?

To celebrate Christmas means we always have ham, we don't do turkey because that's for Thanksgiving. Or maybe it is roast beef and never ham, because ham is only for Easter!

Or maybe our Christmas OCD shows up around the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree always goes up the day after Thanksgiving, or never before Christmas Eve. It's always a Douglas fir! It's always a balsam! It's never a white pine.

Or maybe we celebrate Christmas correctly by going to my family's house for Christmas Eve, and your family's house for Christmas day. But ugh, Aunt Rhoda can't make it because of her knee surgery so we have to switch it up this year, and that means we won't get to see your sister because she always has to go to her inlaw's house on Christmas day.

What a mess!

And it's all real.

These kinds of compulsions we have around how to correctly celebrate the birth of Jesus, the one we will come to call the Christ, are filled with our emotions, and our desires, and our expectations, and assumptions. They are filled with us; they are centered around what we want. And they can make our celebrations seem anything, but celebratory. And I bet there are some here right now who know exactly what I am talking about. There are probably a couple of people here tonight who are in the thick of the pain of celebrating Christmas *correctly*.

But on this night when we welcome God's light being born in the darkness I am going to tell you a secret that's really not such a secret, but something we need none-the-less to hear again and

again. Because if we don't hear it here, we may not hear it somewhere else.

And here it is. God doesn't really care about any of the things we get so worked up about at Christmas time.

God's love for all of us will still be born again in our world, even if the wrong Advent candle is lit.

God will come and commit to us again, even if we have tacos instead of ham for our Christmas dinner.

God still wants us to see that she has not forgotten the poor, and the outcast, and the lowly in her dream for humanity, even if we accidentally got the wrong kind of Christmas tree that looks really beautiful, but just doesn't have that Christmas tree smell to it.

Because what we mark tonight on this Christmas Eve is beyond all of these holiday purity tests that we impose on ourselves, and on each other.

I am reminded of a quotation from the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which I want to share with you tonight, because it contains God's call to clarity for all of us who find ourselves in the fog of the modern American Christmas holiday apocalypse. He writes:

“Who will celebrate Christmas correctly?

Whoever finally lays down all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism beside the manger.”

I am thankful for Bonhoeffer reminding us that Christmas is not about the candles, and hams, and Christmas trees that may have

overtaken our minds and hearts at this moment in our lives, and in this moment of our holiday season.

I am thankful for Bonhoeffer reminding us that Christmas is about our commitment to our own self-emptying. Christmas, the celebration of God with us, is about letting go of all of the things that crowd our hearts and our minds and our lives so that a space can open up inside of us, a space no bigger than a womb, a space where God's love can grow, and be born again.

And this can only happen when we let go of ourselves, and say yes, just like Mary did all those years ago, to the spirit of God showing us a different path forward, a different future that wants so desperately to be delivered.

Tonight we remember the events of the past, of the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, of the birth of Jesus in a manger because



there was no room in the inn, of the angels proclaiming the birth of Love to the shepherds in the fields. But we share these stories again in this church, on this night, so that the truth of God's dream may come to pass again in the present, in us, in our world, which lives in a profound and real darkness.

We share these stories tonight so that we might even say yes to God's invitation to become co-creators of a new world, based on love, and light, and peace arising from justice.

So on this Christmas Eve, it is my prayer that you will not get so hung up with all of the correct ways you're supposed to celebrate this most meaningful of holidays. Don't worry yourselves over hams, or colored candles, or different types of Christmas trees.

Remember that tonight is about the birth of God's love for all of us, and God's invitation for you to play your part in this most beautiful and wonderful of all stories.

Merry Christmas!

God is with us!

Amen.