

The Manger and the Cross

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christmas Day, December 25, 1994: Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-14.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Many years ago, when I was a minister in Buffalo, New York, Norm Brown and his son in law, Charles Jeffries, built a nativity scene - a little wooden stable, hand carved angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. It was a beautiful piece of art and workmanship made lovingly by an expert craftsmen.

We wanted to display the nativity scene but we weren't sure where to put it. We finally decided to put it on the Communion Table where everybody could see it. But when we put it on the Table the Nativity scene had a tendency to obscure the cross on the back of the Table. You couldn't see the cross with the Nativity scene on the Table. The cattle shed almost completely hid the cross.

So we all got into an argument as to what to do. Some said, "Let's just do away with the cross until after Christmas." Others felt strongly that the Nativity scene had no business being on the Communion Table at all. The discussion got quite heated. What were we going to do? Well, we ended up appointing a committee composed of representatives of the various points of view expressed. The committee came up with a great suggestion that satisfied everybody. The Nativity scene could be placed on the Communion Table but we would elevate the cross so that it could be seen clearly above and behind the manger and the stable. We discovered that when we did this it created a very strange effect. The chancel light shining on the elevated cross cast a shadow over the Nativity scene.

That got me thinking. Our Christian faith requires both manger and cross.

The very word "Christmas" contains the shadow of the cross. Christmas is short for Christ Mass. The Mass is what some Christians call the Sacrament of Holy Communion. ^{Holy Communion or the Mass as R.C. & call it celebrates the death of R for our sins.} The Christ Mass or Holy Communion celebrates the death of Christ for our sins on the day set aside to celebrate Christ's birth. So on this day we celebrate both Christ's birth and his death. ^{in memory of the Virgin Mary, we celebrate the message... the shepherds... the baby in a manger} On this day we celebrate the Word made flesh. We celebrate the time when God became a human being and was born to the Virgin Mary. ^{We celebrate also his death.} We come forward to take the bread and cup. We receive his broken body and shed blood. We remember how this baby grew up and died on the cross so that we could have our sins forgiven - so that we might be reconciled to God and our neighbors

~~I'm glad we're celebrating Holy Communion this Sunday. We don't usually celebrate Holy Communion on Christmas Day because Christmas day doesn't usually fall on a Sunday. We usually celebrate the Sacrament on the first Sunday of Advent and on the first Sunday of the year. But it's altogether appropriate to celebrate the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ on the day we celebrate the Word become flesh.~~

Let our celebration of Christ's birth and death remind us that true Christian faith requires both manger and cross. For some people, Christian faith is all Christmas and no cross. ^{All fun, bright lights, joy etc} There's a kind of Christianity that glorifies the manger but doesn't have anything to do with the cross or with sacrifice or with our desperate need to have our sins forgiven and be put right with God or with fighting ^{Nothing to do with the darkness of pain & loss sometimes in which we} against injustice and oppression. ~~There's a kind of Christianity that wants nothing~~ ^{sometimes walk ... the feeling of abandonment & loneliness & god forsakenness}

to do with controversy. There's a kind of Christianity that reduces the faith to sentimentalism. This kind of faith doesn't know what to do with pain and struggle and doubt and failure and controversy. There's no place for those kinds of things in their faith. It's all joy and happiness and smiles. That's an inadequate faith for a Christian.

For other people, the Christian faith is all cross and no Christmas. It's all sacrifice and duty and obligation and trying real hard to be good and struggling with sin and injustice. It's constant controversy and turmoil. There's no Christmas joy or happiness or the experience of God's amazing, unearned, free gift of grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ. In one of C.S. Lewis's children's books he tells about a wicked witch who has cast an evil spell over the land of Narnia so that it's always winter but never Christmas. That's the description of the Christian faith of a good many people. Always struggling, always feeling like a failure, always trying to please a God who will never be satisfied with our efforts.

~~But Today, we celebrate this Christmas day as a true Christian congregation.~~
~~We come to celebrate with joy our Savior's birth. We come to celebrate with joy our Savior's death. We come to celebrate birth and death. We come to celebrate the extremes of our faith.~~
~~We come to the Table for the food we need to give us strength to fight with sin and evil in our lives and in the world. We come to the Table in joyful gratitude to God who has come to us clothed in our flesh in the person of Jesus. We come to celebrate Christ's birth and Christ's death. Thanks be to God.~~

birth & death: the manger where Christ was placed as a baby - the wooden cross to which Christ was nailed when he died... we celebrate the joy of the angels message... we celebrate the city of desolation
we celebrate joy & we feel bitterness... joy (family, friends, Christ)... bitterness (family, friends, Christ's death)