

# God Returns to Us

A sermon in the 2020 Advent Sermon Series “Christmas Basics”

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- Hebrews 10:22-24 Good News Translation <sup>22</sup>So let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, with hearts that have been purified from a guilty conscience and with bodies washed with clean water. <sup>23</sup>Let us hold on firmly to the hope we profess, because we can trust God to keep his promise. <sup>24</sup>Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good.
- Zechariah 1:2-3 (Good News Translation) <sup>2</sup>The Lord Almighty told Zechariah to say to the people, “I, the Lord, was very angry with your ancestors, <sup>3</sup>but now I say to you, ‘Return to me, and I will return to you.’”

Everyone starts somewhere. There’s a first time for everything. Perhaps this is your baby’s first Christmas. Maybe this is the first Christmas shared by high school sweethearts or by newlyweds. Certainly there are some new Christians for whom this is the first time they’ve experienced Christmas “from the inside,” as part of the religious culture that understands and embraces the meaning of the holy day. And even for Christian pastors, after preparing for ministry through seminary and internships, there comes that time when, for the first time in your life and career, you’re the one called upon to lead a congregation’s observance of Advent and Christmas.

There’s always a first time.

So imagine that we all are approaching this opportunity to celebrate the Nativity of Jesus Christ for the first time. What are the basics of Christmas that we should notice? What message should we take from the Nativity and what message should we share because of it?

We have so many holiday traditions associated with Christmas, so many layers upon layers that have built up over the decades and centuries.

- Each household has its own customs, and then borrows and adapts customs they see elsewhere.
- Congregations have traditions about how and when they decorate the church, how they light candles, the favorite Christmas carols of that particular faith community.
- Small shop owners and corporate giants alike, all hoping to turn a profit from this religious holy day, ramp up their merchandising and advertising to the point that even commercials and ads can feel like they are essential to the full experience of Christmas.

But what if we were to imagine we were Advent archaeologists. What if we were to carefully remove layer after layer of the trappings of Christmas observances in our society? What would we find if we got beneath the exchanging of gifts? What would we find if we stripped away the manger scenes and Christmas trees, wreaths and roping,

sleighs and reindeer, antlers on puppies and ugly sweaters, avalanches of cards, Santas selling soft drinks and sport utility vehicles? What would be the essential messages of Christmas?

That's what I invite us to consider during these next four weeks in the church season called Advent.

The charm of the Christmas holidays, our familiar Christmas practices in the church, our cherished family traditions all have as their foundation this simple statement of truth: God has not given up on us. That's a message that was proclaimed to people in ancient times that is equally valid today: "God has not given up on us." Where do we hear that message?

As Christians, our roots are in the Jewish religion. A prominent feature in ancient Judaism was what is called the prophetic tradition. From a religious perspective, prophets were not fortune tellers predicting the future; they were truth-tellers helping people see themselves the way God sees them. Prophets devoted their lives to being conduits of divine inspiration. They were able to read the signs of the times in their midst, and proclaim God's perspective on what was going on. Then as now, the way we live our lives often falls short of what God desires. That's when prophets would issue stern warnings to shape up, to return to faithfulness to God.

So biblical prophets functioned as spokesmen for God holding the people accountable for their behavior, their actions or inaction. Prophets would declare that there were consequences for failing to embody God's will. But... prophets would also pronounce God's mercy, God's forgiveness, God's encouragement. They would offer the assurance that God doesn't give up on us.

About 500 years before the time of Jesus there was a prophet named Zechariah, another in the Bible's long line of prophets. Zechariah chastised the Israelites for turning their backs on God in favor of focusing on their lives and livelihoods. Their place of worship, the Jerusalem Temple, had been destroyed by invaders some fifty years earlier. But now that the invaders were gone and the Israelites were able to resume their customary way of life, they had continued to allow the Temple to lay in ruins. Zechariah proclaimed that disarray of the temple was symbolic of state of the people's spiritual lives: they had allowed their trust in God to deteriorate.

But Zechariah presented God's gracious, merciful, hope-filled promise: "The Lord Almighty told Zechariah to say to the people, 'I, the Lord, was very angry with your ancestors, <sup>3</sup>but now I say to you, "Return to me, and I will return to you."'"<sup>1</sup>  
*"...Return to me, and I will return to you."*

Doesn't that sound like one extending an olive branch? "*...Return to me, and I will return to you*" is God's offer to restore a broken relationship. God our Creator seeks to reach across the chasm that we have allowed to separate us from God. By God's grace God seeks to reconcile with us even though the cause of the broken relationship was not God but rather our less-than-faithful living.

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<sup>1</sup> Zechariah 1:2-3 Good News Translation

“...Return to me, and I will return to you....” That’s an invitation from God spoken through the words of a prophet. It’s an assurance that it’s not too late – it’s never too late – for us to make a place for God in our lives. God forgives our failures, our shortcomings, our selfishness, our sin; God accepts our repentance. God welcomes us as beloved children.

And in a spot in eternity, at a point in the timeline of human history, God did return to us. Born in Jesus, God has come among us to share our lives. In Jesus of Nazareth, born in humble Bethlehem, God took on *our* image so our living might more closely reflect *God’s* image.

So let’s not rush to the cattle stall to see “the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.” First let’s remember that one of the basic messages of the Nativity is that God hasn’t given up on us. Despite our shortcomings and misdeeds, God reaches out to us in love and mercy, in effect saying, “Return to me, and I will return to you.”

As we begin this journey through Advent to arrive manger-side at Christmas, the words of the ancient hymn truly become our prayer: “O Come, O come Emmanuel (God-With-Us).” May we return to you, Dear God, for in Jesus Christ you have returned to us.

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