
Is Christmas Over?
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Revelation 21:1-6a and John 1:1-18

I love the fact that Martin Grove UC is right on the approach to runway 23 at Pearson airport. Particularly today, because Christmas holidays always make me think of air travel. For many years, I lived in Saskatoon and my parents lived in Toronto, and I used to travel home for Christmas. In those days, Air Canada used DC-9 aircraft on that route - the aircraft with the jet engines mounted right on the back of the fuselage - right near where I usually sat. I loved those trips. But I particularly remember the feeling I had when the aircraft came to a stop at the gate in Toronto, and the pilots cut the throttles and the engines spooled down. As the engines spooled down the high-pitched whine which had been my constant companion for three and a half hours dissipated. It was only then that I realized that the whine had actually been irritating. I had been too distracted to notice it. I think it was because of the anticipation of the trip itself, the anticipation of the flight, the distractions of the in-flight service, and my own fears that the aircraft would not land where it was intended. I was not afraid of flying. I never worried about mechanical failure. But I often wondered - particularly in the winter - if the aircraft would be diverted due to weather conditions. I wondered if my trip would end on schedule.

So, when the engines spooled down at the gate - that was my sign that the trip was over. My body and my brain relaxed, free from that constant drone. In a way, the spooling down signalled the end of my journey. But of course, in another way, it signalled the beginning of my journey - because I had arrived at my destination and I could now look forward to seeing friends and family. The transportation part of my journey was over, but there was more to come - family gatherings and festivities were still to come. The whole point of the journey was yet to come. And yet, it always felt to me in some ways as if the trip was already over.

Sometimes, our whole Christmas journey feels a bit like that. Ever since Halloween the stores have been trying to make us start preparing - that is, trying to make us buy things - to get ready for Christmas. And in church, during Advent we were anticipating the coming of Christmas. There are many things that we like about Christmas, so we put a lot of effort into getting ready. We plan, we shop, we eat, we bake, we decorate, we eat, we cook, we invite, we eat, we sing, we worship, we eat. Then, when the actual day comes - Christmas day - as all our planning becomes real, we sometimes feel like the event is over. In some families, when the turkey dinner is finished, someone says, "Well, I guess Christmas is over". All that lead-up was of course leading somewhere. And that "somewhere" is now in the past.

But if Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, is it an ending, or is it a beginning? Is a birth an ending, or a beginning?

I remember when my first son, Gareth was born. When my wife, Marjorie, and I decided to have children, we prepared. After she became pregnant I read at least a metre worth of library books on childbirth. Marjorie and I attended a pre-natal class that lasted for a number of weeks. I researched many of the issues that came up in class - just to be prepared, you know. In our pre-natal class most of the fathers-to-be also did research, and we challenged the instructor every week with all sorts of things. Happy days! Marjorie and I prepared a room for our baby. We bought a car seat and lots of other things. On the morning when Gareth was born, we were as prepared as we could possibly be.

And when that miracle we simply call "birth" happened, things went very well. While we were in hospital, things were very straight-forward. Medical professionals were either telling us what we were supposed to be doing, or what they were doing, or what they were going to be doing. What was happening, or what would be happening, and when. If we wanted to know something, there was always someone we could ask.

But when we left the hospital and went home, it was different. There was no real plan, just a baby. There was no one to tell us what to do. From a medical point of view, the event was over. All the planning and preparations were done, and Marjorie and I

wondered - "What's Next?" - Just a little thing called life.

Christmas Day 2015 is now in the past. Did anything change? What's different today? Was it worth the wait? Did the anniversary of the birth of Jesus make any difference? Surely, as Christians, we have to believe that there is a difference. And yet, I'm pretty sure that if I picked up the newspaper today, there would still be stories of tragedy, horror, and war. There would still be stories of waste, greed, and corruption. There would still be stories of both over-consumption and malnutrition. I doubt that the doomsday clock budged at all with the passing of Christmas day this year.

Our reading from Revelation speaks about the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. That all our fears and pain will pass away. That we will all be transformed. It's a wonderful image. But I must confess that I don't actually see it when I look out my window.

Does that mean that nothing was transformed while we were having our Christmas celebrations? Or is it just that we didn't notice. Perhaps we didn't notice any change because we were looking for the wrong thing. Perhaps we didn't notice any change because we were not actually looking at all - we were busy after all. Perhaps like our Christmas presents, reality just can not compete with our *anticipation* of what was hidden under the wrapping paper. Perhaps we don't even know what to look for.

Jesus the baby came. From a medical point of view, the event is over. What about from the point of view of our own faith? Is the event over? Perhaps we didn't notice any change with the celebration of the birth of Jesus because the real event for us is still in our future.

I think of John's words. "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." That seems simple enough. In Genesis, God creates by speaking words. Words have power. Words are pure, simple. Words can be written down, transmitted, archived. God can be word. God as word makes it easy to create nice, consistent theologies. God as word allows us to create wonderful liturgies. We can take the word and put it in a book. We can call it "holy". We can ensure that it stays pure - unpolluted. We can control it.

But no - John says more. With the birth of Jesus the word became flesh. Flesh! Flesh is fragile. Flesh is weak. Flesh is uncontrollable. Flesh is messy. Flesh is something we humans have in common with animals. People do not talk about flesh in good company. Flesh is subject to decay - to disease - even to death. As our own bodies fail us as we age, our own flesh can be disturbing. As our own bodies fail us, we sometimes fear our own flesh. We cover up our own flesh with clothing and with fragrance. Flesh is you. Flesh is me.

And yet, John tells us that God became flesh and moved into our neighbourhood. I think that's because God as *just* word simply isn't enough. God as *just* word is too rigid, too static, too remote. John said, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." The word might be "perfect", but if so it is only perfect because of its sterility.

But God as flesh is as varied as we are. God as flesh is creative, and creating, as we say in our Creed. God as flesh is feeling. God as flesh is loving. God as flesh is healing. God as flesh is living. God as flesh is dying.

For me, it boils down to one question. Is Christmas over? Is the birth of baby Jesus the end of the story - or is it in fact the beginning of the story? Do we want to embrace God only as word in static form, or God as flesh with the potential and life found in Jesus the baby and in our own selves?

Accepting God as flesh means that our journey is not over. Just imagine this sanctuary as a DC-9 aircraft fuselage. The Christmas services and the organ have spooled down. The trip called "Advent" - is now over. But the whole point of the journey of Advent is still before us. The birth of a baby is a beginning. We have the cries of a new stranger in our midst. We have new potential. We have new flesh. We have new life.

Amen.