
Is Christmas over?
Chapel in the Park United Church
December 29, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

Christmas always make me think of air travel. When I was an undergraduate student I moved to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. My parents stayed in the family home in Toronto. And I used to travel home for Christmas.

[image: AC DC-9]

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 because I always had a cheap ticket. I loved those trips. But I particularly remember the feeling I had when the aircraft came to a stop at the gate at the Toronto Airport. The pilots cut the engines and the engines spooled down. As they 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 (this was in the 1980's). And my own concerns 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 sometimes wondered if my trip would end as planned.

[image: AC DC-9 at gate]

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 trip - even though I was at the back to the airplane and had to wait awhile before I could actually walk into the terminal. Even the word "terminal" suggests the end of a trip. "Terminal" meaning final. The trip was over. But of course, in other ways, the spooling down of the engines 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 trip was over, but there was more to come. Family gatherings and festivities were still to come. The whole point of the trip was still to come. The trip was over. But the journey was about to begin.

[image: black friday]

Sometimes, the lead up to Christmas 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 have been waiting eagerly for the coming of Christmas.

[image: cookie tree]

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.

[image: Christmas tree discarded]

In some families, when the turkey dinner is finished, someone says, “Well, I guess Christmas is over”. All that lead-up during Advent was of course leading somewhere. And that “somewhere” is now in the past, right?

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

I remember when our first son, Gareth was born. When Marjorie, and I decided to have children, we prepared. After Marjorie 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 single 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.

[image: new year, old me]

Christmas Day 2024 is now in the past. Did anything change? What is 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 checked the news, 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 both of over-consumption and of malnutrition. I doubt that the doomsday clock moved at all with the passing of Christmas day this year.

[image: new earth]

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 did not actually see it when I looked out my window this morning.

Does that mean that nothing was transformed while we were having our Christmas celebrations? Or is it just that we did not 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 for anything. 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 do not even know what we are looking 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? Here's my idea. Perhaps we did not notice any change with the celebration of the birth of Jesus because the real event

for us is still in our future. But I mean, our fairly immediate future.

[image: wedding]

Celebrating Christmas is ... as I said on Christmas Eve, a bit like a wedding. Weddings can be lots of fun. Weddings take a lot of advance planning. And all that planning culminates in an event that happens usually in a single day. And yet, the point of a wedding is not what happened on a single day. The point of a wedding is for a couple to begin - or to continue - to share the gifts of life, with all the joys and sorrows, and taking that journey of life together. In other words, the point of a wedding - which is only 1 day, is marriage, which lasts much longer.

I've been involved in enough weddings to know that on the day of the wedding, people can actually get very stressed about making sure that everything is perfect. I know that. And let's be honest - that is part of the fun. But the point isn't the perfect day. The point is the cementing of a nurturing relationship that goes into the future. Or to extend the analogy to air travel. A wedding is like a trip. A marriage is like a journey. And it's the same thing with Christmas. Advent is the trip. And starting today, we are invited into a new journey together.

[image: bible]

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 word and put it in a book. We can call word "holy". We can ensure that word stays pure - unpolluted. We can control word.

But John says, "No". 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 other 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.

[image: our neighbourhood]

And yet, John tells us that God became flesh and moved into our neighbourhood. I think that's because God as only word just is not enough. God as only word is too rigid, too static, too remote. The word might be "perfect", but if so it is only perfect because of its sterility.

But God as flesh is life itself. 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.

[image: So - is Christmas over?]

For me, this all 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 our next story? Do we want to embrace God only as word in static form? Or do we want to embrace God also as flesh in dynamic form. With the potential and life found in Jesus the baby and in our own lives?

Accepting God as flesh means that our journey is not over. The trip of Advent is over. But our journey is just beginning for us.

[image: imagine landing in the sanctuary]

Just imagine you are on an airplane and it has just landed in the sanctuary. The Advent programming, the Christmas services and the music 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.

What are we going to do with that new life right here, right now? This is a journey that we are all on together. As individuals, and as a congregation. What will God as flesh look like here at Chapel in the Park United Church in 2025? What will God as flesh look like in your neighbourhood? I look forward to us finding out together this coming year with all of you.

Advent is over. Our real journey of life, love, healing and forgiveness continues. And I want to thank you all for being part of my own journey.

Amen.