

“Are Those Demanding It Be Said Putting It Into Practice?”

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’” (Luke 2:15, ESV)

For some years the use of the expression “Merry Christmas” has been an annual point of discussion during the month of December. Some people feel like they are being discouraged or prohibited from saying or hearing this expression. While I can understand why Christians could take offense at efforts to ban the use of “Merry Christmas,” yet I can’t say that I’ve ever experienced opposition much less ostracization for wishing someone a “Merry Christmas.” And I’ve also not been offended if someone has failed to acknowledge (or return) my Christmas greeting. I’ve never felt that someone providing a service to me, be it a retail store clerk or a waitress, is obligated to say “Merry Christmas” to be me as a customer.

But I don’t doubt that my expectations and experiences differ from those of other people. Yet, one thing that I have wondered about amid the exchanges (sometimes heated exchanges) regarding the expression “Merry Christmas” is if those insisting that these words be said are also zealous about putting them into practice. For while there is a certain and pronounced push among some people to require that our culture recognize Christian celebrations (especially Christmas), yet at the same time worship attendance at Christian celebrations (including Christmas) has been visibly declining over the years. Along with other pastors and laymen, I’ve also noticed this decline throughout our own church body.

And a correlation between decreased interest in Christian celebrations throughout our culture and decreased attendance at worship services makes sense. But hopefully those who are most emphatic about “Merry Christmas” being said and heard “on the street” are also taking the time to put the word Christmas into practice on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. For the word “Christmas” is made up of the words “Christ” and “mass.” And Christ, a Greek word which means “Anointed One” and is the equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah, is the title for God’s promised Savior. And as the Bible tells us, the name of God’s Christ is Jesus. He is God’s Son who became one of us and was born to a virgin named Mary. He came to rescue mankind from Satan, sin, and death. And that He did – eventually sacrificing His life into death in our place (an event we remember in particular on a day called Good Friday) and bodily rising again in victory three days later (on a day we call Easter). And while the word “mass” is defined in different ways, in the church it’s commonly been associated with worship (and, in particular, worship involving the celebration of the Lord’s Supper). So, “Christmas” is the worship of Jesus the Christ who was born in Bethlehem.

My friends, the most merry Christmas that one could ever have is to worship Jesus – to receive the saving gifts that only He has earned for us and that only He can offer to us. But as I said earlier, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day worship attendance has been declining throughout the past generation. When I was a child, these two services typically were ones where you could easily not find a place to sit if you arrived late. Things have changed quite a bit – even over the quarter century plus that I’ve been a pastor. And sometimes even churches have contributed to the problem by downplaying the significance of gathering for worship at Christmas. You may remember that some years back a handful of congregations made the news when they had decided

to not hold Christmas services so that their church workers could spend the time at home with their families. The backlash was well deserved, and I haven't heard of any congregations doing this since. Such a thing should never even be hinted at in the church. For the true focus of Christmas is the worship of Jesus who came into the world to reconcile us with God.

See, Christmas is about the worship of Jesus the Savior who is God's best gift to the world. Other Christmas traditions, even some that have taken on a distinctly secular flavor, aren't wrong in and of themselves for us to practice. But they do become a problem if they obfuscate the real meaning of Christmas or distract us from worshipping the Christ child. So, let us Christians be faithful witnesses this month (and year around). Let us wish others a wonderful Christmas and be thankful when others wish us the same. And let us also respond like the shepherds when they heard that Jesus was born that first Christmas. ***"The shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'"*** And that they did. For ***"they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them"*** (Luke 2:16-18, ESV).

My brothers and sisters in Christ, may our celebration this Christmas be more than just festive greetings and family traditions and joyous get-togethers. For Christmas is about God's gift of His promised Savior. And the worship of Jesus is at the heart and center of Christmas. So, let us follow the example of the shepherds by attending worship. For the One born in Bethlehem and visited by shepherds is the same Savior who is present among His people today in Word and Sacrament. Let us put our wishes for a "Merry Christmas" into practice. And like those shepherds, may we also tell others about our Savior. For believe me when I tell you that there are people in the world around us who don't know who Jesus is, and therefore don't really understand what Christmas is truly about. A mere greeting of "Merry Christmas" said in passing isn't going to cut it with them. They need catechesis.

Therefore, confessing and worshipping the Savior born in Bethlehem, and teaching others about Him, is what we Christians do year around. For Jesus is our true Savior from sin and our true source of peace, hope, joy, and unending life. For remember that ***"the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them"*** (Luke 2:20, ESV). Such is what Jesus the Christ works in the lives of human beings.

Shay and I wish each of you a blessed Christmas and look forward to seeing you at church this Christmas as we gather together to worship the Savior who was born for us. Just a reminder, candlelight worship on Christmas Eve begins at 7PM at St. John's and at 9PM at St. Paul's, and our joint Christmas Day worship service will be at St. John's starting at 10AM.

Merry Christmas,
Pastor

