

Well, we've made it to the day after Christmas. Which means we survived Christmas Eve and Christmas Day - and hopefully had good celebrations. I don't know how each of you spent your holiday. Some were probably part of large family get-togethers, - or maybe multiple family get-togethers. Others may have spent a more relaxed time with just immediate family. Some may have spent Christmas day with neighbors, -or friends, -and some may have spent it alone. Most of us probably spent some time on the phone - in long distance calls with family. Perhaps some even used SKYPE - and visited via the computer.

And now it's over. Whether we did a lot or a little for the holiday, -- whether we were with a large group of people, or spent the day alone, --- it's hard not to feel at least a bit of a let down today. Another Christmas has come and gone.

Family has been visited with; presents have been opened --wrapping paper and boxes are in the trash; the Christmas goodies have been mostly eaten. Within this next week or so, we'll be taking down the decorations and the lights, boxing them up - and putting them back in the garage --where they'll sit and wait for another year.

Another Christmas has come and gone.

It's now back to the real world; -- after the momentary break of holiday preparation and celebration, we get back to regular life.

Thinking about this -reminded me of that John Lennon song, 'Happy Xmas.'

*"So this is Christmas, and what have you done?  
Another year over, - a new one just begun."*

So, this is Christmas. I hope it was a good one.  
--And I hope this next year will be a good year.

But the truth is, -Christmas comes right into the midst of real life --- some of which is good, ---and some of which is not so good . . . .

Thinking about our real life - makes it tempting to sing the lyrics with a bit of resignation: so, this is Christmas. --  
--Another year over. Now, how do we pay for everything? We charged and borrowed our way through, and now we have to face real life. *Perhaps we're even still paying off last year's Christmas.*

So, this is Christmas. Another year over. Now back to real life. Real life with its fears about a heart condition or cancer spreading.

So, this is Christmas. Another year over. And now another year - to worry about that loved one serving

overseas --- or about that child or grandchild who can't stay out of trouble.

So, this is Christmas. Another year over, and now another year alone, -- grieving a loved one, or struggling after a divorce or a break-up.

Christmas comes right into the midst of real life -- some of which is good, and some of which is not so good.

But you know what, that very first Christmas wasn't so different. It too, came right into the midst of real life, --- some of which was good, and a lot of which was not so good.

A family has to make a long journey with a very pregnant wife ---because of the taxation census, ---just so they could be taxed even further by an oppressive regime. So, this is Christmas.

A newborn baby has to be put to bed in the animal's feeding trough, out in a cold stable. If the family hadn't been just poor peasants, they could have pulled some strings, -and secured a place to stay. So, this is Christmas.

A paranoid King Herod --- who fears the birth of a tiny child; --- who, after realizing he's been 'tricked' by the wise men, - orders all the children in Bethlehem to be killed; ----- prompting an angel to again appear to

Joseph in a dream, telling him to take his family and flee as refugees. So, this is Christmas.

Yes, this is Christmas. Christmas comes right into the midst of real life. Our world --- the Biblical world, --- the human world ---- is a broken world. And the reality of our current situation doesn't magically change when we wake up on Christmas morning ---or on the day after Christmas.

So, ----- where is the joy and the hope --- if Christmas comes and goes -year after year after year, -and life is still difficult -- and the world is still such a troubled place?

Well, I think it's precisely because Christmas comes into the midst of the real world, -- precisely because Jesus was born into hardship and tyranny, that Christmas is indeed a time of hope. The Biblical story of the birth of Christ -is not just some feel-good Pollyanna story --that is celebrated once a year with pretty decorations & happy songs, -- but is out of touch with what we're going through.

It's a real story - about real life that's a mixture of some good and some not-so-good.

It's a real story about a real Messiah, - God's gift to humanity, - a rescuer, -a deliverer, --- the hope of the world. This is Christmas.

It's a real story - about a clash of kingdoms. But the good news is ---Herod's kingdom doesn't last. The kingdoms of tyrants will never ultimately prevail. We celebrate the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords --- whose Kingdom has begun on earth -and will last forever. This is Christmas.

It's a real story about real peace. Not the *Pax Romana* --- -- a "peace" that was maintained through force by the Roman army. -- Not the illusive peace that the modern world chases after -in between wars and conflicts and economic collapse. --But the peace that was announced by angels and the heavenly host: 'Peace on earth, good will to all;' -----the Peace of Christ which passes all understanding and is at work in hearts and minds, -- restoring wholeness, healing brokenness, making all things new. This is Christmas.

It's a real story about a real Savior, --- who comes into our real world - where we sometimes hurt the ones we love, where we act in ways we know we shouldn't, where we divide people up - into good and bad, friends and enemies. It's about our real Savior - who comes to bring forgiveness, who comes to lead us into righteousness, who comes to show us how to love all people. This is Christmas.

It's a real story about a real Lord --- who came into the real world to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to seek out the lost, to care for the lonely, to console the grieving, -- and ultimately, -- to conquer death itself. This is Christmas.

And perhaps most of all, it's a real story about a real Gift - --- not just the gifts that were under our Christmas trees, not even just the gifts that the wise men brought, -- but the real Gift and the real Giver. About a God who loved the world so much he gave his only begotten Son. About a God who chose to enter our earthly world, --who shed the glorious garments of heaven --to be wrapped and swaddled in bands of cloth - and laid down in itchy hay. This is the ultimate gift. So, this is Christmas. Yes, this is Christmas.

I heard of a story about a missionary teacher who was teaching in a small village. The children had limited English, and she trying hard to teach them the story of Christmas. One young boy was listening intently as she told about God's gracious gift of Jesus. She explained that many people give gifts at Christmas in response to God's great gift to us.

When Christmas Day arrived, the boy surprised the teacher by giving her a shell -a seashell of exquisite beauty. She was deeply touched, and asked the boy where we had gotten such a beautiful shell. He told her had walked to the beach, and found it for her.

When the teacher realized that the nearest beach was over 20 miles away, she told him, “It’s a beautiful shell, but you shouldn’t have walked all that way to get a gift for me.” -To which the boy responded, -- his eyes sparkling, “Long walk - part of gift.”

Today we celebrate that long walk that God took to journey to us, -- to be with us - and for us, ---- to be born into our world. This is Christmas. *{There is no better gift.}*

In the first verse of “Joy To The World,” we sing, ‘Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing.’

So, how are we to open our hearts and prepare him room? Well, first off, --- we have to have room --- which means getting rid of some of the stuff and clutter, --- those idolatrous things that take up space and demand our

attention. And then we make room -for Christ to take up residence within us --- allowing Christ to change us and transform us --- into being like him; ---that we might become the hands and feet of Christ for the world; --that we, too, might freely give and compassionately love; -- that we, too, might heal the sick, feed the hungry, seek out the lost, care for the lonely, and console the grieving. This is Christmas.

And this is more than Christmas. This is the work of Christmas. This is the work of Christmas in the midst of real life. This is the work of Christmas that goes on ----- past the yearly celebration --- and on into the coming year. This is the work of loving hearts - who have prepared him room --- and who want to offer that loving gift of God through Jesus Christ ----- to the real world.

I want to close with that wonderful poem by Howard Thurman, entitled, the Work of Christmas:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
Then the work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers,  
To make music in the heart.

May we celebrate the 'long walk' taken by our loving and  
compassionate God ---to be with us in Jesus Christ, and,  
-- may we be willing to take a long walk for others - as we  
become the hands and feet of Christ, and share God's gift  
with the world. Amen.