

Christmas Day • December 25, 2008
St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA
Rev. Braun Campbell
John 1:1-14
"Truth"

I like Christmas cards. And when I say "Christmas cards," I mean *Christmas* cards – I'm not talking about generic "Happy holidays" cards, though those abound this time of year. But with the sheer number of options out there, it's so hard to pick out just the right Christmas card to send to family and friends. Some Christmas cards are elegant, made with fine paper and beautiful graphical design. Others are humorous, brightly colored greetings. Yet others are just plain cheesy or saccharine. But in my opinion, the best Christmas cards are those that clearly express the central truth of the Christmas story: **God has given the world the gift of His Son**, the truth that we hear in our Gospel text today. When I go out hunting for Christmas cards, one of my first stops is the Hallmark store.

Unfortunately, though, the cards that I often see have taken to what we in the nation's capital might call "enhancing the truth." Even though I call the version of the Christmas story that we see presented on Christmas cards the "Hallmark Christmas," I don't think it's fair to blame Hallmark for their truth enhancement, because we in the church are the ones who did it first! Consider not just Christmas cards but the Christmas carols we sing and the Christmas pageants we present in our congregations. Take, for example, the scenes of the Holy Family travelling from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. What does that picture look like? We see Mary, riding a donkey, some eight-plus months pregnant, and Joseph dutifully walking alongside. Trouble is, there's nothing in Scripture that might even lead us to think that was the case – it's more likely that they would have headed to Bethlehem well in advance of the time for Mary to give birth. When we depict the nativity – even in the crèche scene that we have in our sanctuary here at St. John's – we see it set inside a barn or stable, Joseph and the very-pregnant Mary having been turned away from the Bethlehem Inn and made to stay with the farm animals. But here again we've "enhanced" the truth. All Luke tells us is that "while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." For us in the Western world, "inn" probably brings to mind images of a Motel 6 or Holiday Inn Express; however, that word in the Greek would be better translated here as "guest room." In the time and place of this first Christmas, it'd be unthinkable that the people of the town would turn away visiting family – especially when a woman was expecting a child! But if guests were already living in that guest room, Mary and Joseph would have stayed with the family in the main room of their home. In the Hallmark Christmas story, we assume that because Mary laid the newborn baby Jesus in a manger that they must have been staying in a barn or stable; yet most homes would likely have had built-in mangers for when the family would bring in the animals at night. And the wise men – they don't arrive until Epiphany, so we'll learn more about them then. But despite all this, the Hallmark Christmas *can* still tell the essential truth of Christmas: **God has given the world the gift of His Son.**

There are those in this world who have a radically different understanding of the truth. Several weeks ago, the American Humanist Association spent some \$40,000 on a holiday ad campaign in D.C. newspapers, billboards, and buses. You might have seen these ads yourself or seen news reports about them. The signs read, "Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness' sake." A spokesman for the humanist group said that the ads intend to reach out to "agnostics, atheists and other types of nontheists who feel a little alone during the holidays because of its association with traditional religion." He goes on to say that they "are trying to plant a seed of rational thought and

critical thinking and questioning in people's minds." We live in a time and culture where, for many years, the concept of an objective truth is seen as outdated. Everything is subjective: what's true for one person might not be as true for another, if at all. This kind of thinking abounds in the world of spirituality and religion, even among Christians. We fail to see the importance of that central truth of Christmas – that **God has given the world the gift of His Son** – because we're fooled into thinking that the Jesus who we celebrate today is just one truth among many, just *a* way to God, if there even *is* a God.

Recently, someone forwarded me a fictional but humorous story. In it, an atheist takes issue with the public celebration of religious holidays while atheists lacked any such day. The atheist goes out and finds a lawyer willing to plead his case. When the case comes before the judge, the lawyer makes a skilled, detailed, and passionate presentation; however, when the lawyer concludes his argument, the judge bangs his gavel, saying "Case dismissed!" Immediately standing and objecting to this ruling, the lawyer calls out, "Your Honor, how can you dismiss this case? Christians have Christmas and Easter, among many other days. The Jews celebrate Hanukkah and Yom Kippur and Passover, to name a few holidays. My client and other atheists have no such day!" The judge raised an eyebrow and replied, "Obviously your client is too confused to know about, or for that matter, even celebrate the atheists' holiday." The lawyer (now looking a bit confused, himself) responded, "We are aware of no such holiday for atheists. Just when might that be, Your Honor?" The judge answered, "April 1st, of course. Psalm 14:1: 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God.'"

The truth of Christmas, the truth that John proclaims to us today, is that there is indeed a God – *the* God, Creator of All – and that **He has given us the gift of His Son**, whose birth among us we celebrate in joy today. God is a God of full of mercy and full of grace. To understand that, think of it this way: mercy means *not* getting what we *do* deserve. Grace is getting what we *do not* deserve. And God has demonstrated this by becoming human. His steadfast love, so often proclaimed in books of Scripture we call the Old Testament, is visibly expressed in the form of a little baby. God's glory came to live among us, to dwell with us, as Jesus, born in Bethlehem. He came to die for us on the cross: we *do not* get death and separation from God as we deserve, because He takes that on Himself. We *do get* forgiveness of sin and life with God – now, and into eternity. **Truth be told, if we want to know God, we must know Jesus.**

Jesus is the glory of God, full of grace and truth. Through Jesus, we know and see God's love for us. Without him, we might as well be "good for goodness sake," because we'd be on our own, we'd have no hope. But because of that first Christmas, because of that baby who the angels proclaimed, who the shepherds saw wrapped in cloths and laying in a manger (just like in the Hallmark version of Christmas), God's grace has been revealed to the world. Because of that first Christmas, the angels' chorus of joy can echo throughout our lives.

Glory be to God, for He has given us the gift of His Son, full of grace and truth. Hey – come to think of it, that might make a good Christmas card!

Amen.