

SERMON TITLE: “Jesus Has Come—Now What?”

TEXT: Colossians 3:12-17

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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INTRODUCTION: THE POST-CHRISTMAS BLUES

I came across a quote from humourist Kin Hubbard (1868-1930) this week in the MBBS Advent Reader: *"Next to a circus there ain't nothing that packs up and tears out faster than the Christmas spirit."*

When I was a kid, I never looked forward to the time after Christmas. It always felt like such a letdown. All of the hype, all of the anticipation... no sooner had the object of my longing come than it was gone!

All of the good food, the relatives I hadn't seen for a while, the opportunities to stay up way later than usual... gone. All of the presents that had been mysteriously calling my name for weeks... no longer mysterious. By mid-January, the toys seemed commonplace and familiar. The Christmas cards were outdated and seemed only to be cluttering up the house. The newness and excitement was gone. The prospect of six more months of school and a cold prairie winter loomed on the horizon.

Christmas was gone, and the immediate future looked and felt somewhat dreary and commonplace.

My sentiments were expressed well in the opening lines of a poem called “For the Time Being” by W.H. Auden:

*Well, so that is that.
Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers.*

Well as I've gotten older I've discovered that a *lot* of people have trouble “coming back down to earth” after Christmas. Numerous studies show that depression, anxiety, and stress are more prevalent at this time of year than any other.

Some have spent too much and there is a mountain of debt to climb out of. Others have to say goodbye to friends and family that they get to see far too rarely. For others, the fact that Christmas comes during the darkest time of the year adds to problems that come from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

For others, there isn't even a "Christmas high" to come down from. Christmas, for them, was something to dread rather than look forward to. The malls are insanely busy, people are grouchy, everyone's madly rushing around to the next thing in what seems like one giant superficial month-long obligation where everyone smiles and pretends to like each other.

I read many articles from around the world this season that were almost anti-Christmas. People were simply deciding not to "do Christmas" this year. They were tired of the stress and commercialism and greed, and weren't going to do it. Instead of getting together with family and friends they went hiking, or to the movies, or for a drive.

Others don't like Christmas because they are lonely, and seeing everyone gather with family and friends for celebrations is simply one more reminder of what they're missing.

Others are cynical, and think we have no business proclaiming our words of "peace on earth and goodwill to men" in a world where both peace and goodwill seem absent at least as often as not.

Whether we like Christmas and are sad to see it go, or we don't have much use for it to begin with, Christmas seems to set up impossible expectations that cannot be met in the months to come!

I'm not sure if any of this describes your experience of Christmas. But even if the Christmas season perfectly lived up to your expectations this year, and it was a glorious time of celebrating all that is good and right about the holidays, Christmas always ends, and we always have to go back to our regular, everyday lives.

THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS: GOD WITH US

So perhaps one of the questions that occurs to us as we sift through the credit card bills and the wrapping paper and the recycled boxes and as we look ahead to another spin around the sun is, "what was all *that* about?"

Well on one level, the answers are familiar enough. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus. On Friday, my kids decided they were going to sing happy birthday to Jesus. When they were done, Naomi asked them "why is Jesus' birthday important?" There were a few moments of silence, and then the familiar answers like "well, Jesus came to save us."

That's good, but words like these can become too familiar... sometimes they roll off the tongue a bit too easily. What did Jesus save us from? What did he save us for?

Those of you who were here on Christmas Eve will remember that we heard the story of “The Promise”—we saw how the arrival of Jesus represented an important part of God fulfilling a promise made all the way back in Genesis 3:

*And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel."*

Scholars refer to Gen 3:15 as the “Protoevangelium” which is a fancy word that means something like the first presentation of the gospel. This is the first announcement of the good news that the enemy of humanity will be defeated by a descendent of Adam and Eve.

So we know that Jesus comes to fulfill the promise and that the Jesus whom we meet in the manger at Christmas will one day hang on a cross and rise from the dead to accomplish our salvation.

The Christmas Eve service showed us something else as well. In one of the last readings, Russell spoke about how Christmas is God coming to us in our skin, our clothes. Christmas is “God with us.”

So when God comes to be with us, what does he do? Well, he saves us, certainly. We all know that the manger leads to the cross. And that is crucially important. We must never leave this out of our understanding of Christmas.

But Jesus also shows us what a human being is supposed to be and do. He shows us what a life lived to the glory of God actually looks like.

Christmas is about the God who comes to us to show us how to be human!

MISANTHROPIC TIMES

Like any other period in history, ours has many different understandings of what it means to be human. Some of ours come from the big screen.

Some of you may have already seen James Cameron’s latest blockbuster film called *Avatar*. I have not seen it yet, but I have read many reviews of the film and talked to several people who have seen it and I think I have a decent sense of the basic idea.

Now before I go on, I should be clear that I am not anti-Avatar! I plan on seeing the film myself next week. Aside from just liking interesting stories, I think that films like these are excellent ways to take the pulse of our culture and have conversations with people about some of their ideas.)

I'm not going to give away too much here, but here's the basic idea: The film takes place in the year 2154 and focuses on Pandora, a fictional moon in another planetary system. Human beings are there and are mining Pandora's reserves of a precious mineral, while the Na'vi—the blue creatures who live there—resist the colonists' expansion, which threatens their existence and the destruction of the Pandoran ecosystem.

By all accounts, the film is an amazing spectacle (it had better be—it cost \$300 million to make!).

BUT THERE IS AN INTERESTING UNDERSTANDING OF HUMANITY AT WORK IN THE STORY.

One of my friends who saw the film had this to say: “It’s kind of weird to be watching a movie where the humans are the enemies and you’re cheering for the aliens.”

Most of us who watch films are familiar with the *opposite* experience: most of the time, we are cheering for the humans against the nasty aliens.

Now, the tables have turned. It is we who are the enemy. It is the humans that are destroying the pristine environment of Pandora—humans and their greed, lust for power and status and adventure, trampling all over what is pure and innocent and good.

Based on what I've read and on conversations I've had, the film has a bit of an “anti-human” feel to it. The fancy word for this is “misanthropic” (from the Greek *anthropos*). Humans are the enemy. They are the problem. Nature is good and pure and human beings are an acceptable part of the picture so long as we don't interfere too much with the system.

We don't just see this in popular films. We see examples of it in some of the rhetoric coming out of the UN Climate Change Conference that wrapped up last week in Copenhagen. One of the ideas, rarely stated quite this bluntly, but present nonetheless is that fewer humans would be good for the environment. The environment is the important thing.

I should be clear about something else. Human greed and irresponsible use of creation is not acceptable. It is sin. God made us to be grateful and humble stewards of his beautiful world. We are to be wise in our approach to the world we live in. As I understand it, even in *Avatar*, it could be argued that it is human *behaviour* rather than human beings *per se* that is the main problem.

But at the same time, the pendulum seems to have swung hard in the other direction.

HUMAN BEINGS ARE SOMETIMES SEEN AS WHAT IS WRONG *WITH* THE WORLD.

Obviously, this understanding of human beings is a long way from the opening chapters of Genesis where the man and the woman were seen as the crowning glory of God's creation—the ones who bore God's image and who God entrusted his world to care for.

So, what does *Avatar* or the Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change have to do with Christmas? What does it have to do with the “Christmas spirit packing up and tearing out of here” once Christmas has come and gone?

At Christmas, the birth of Jesus reminds us that human beings can be and were intended to be part of what is *right* with the world. More importantly, for us as Christians, our salvation comes from a human being! Jesus shows us that human beings in and of themselves aren't the problem. God made us, after all, and he called our creation “very good!” *Sin* is the problem.

THE ANSWER TO THE PROBLEMS FACED BY OUR PLANET ISN'T *LESS* HUMANS BUT *BETTER* HUMANS!

More than any of the things that our culture associates with this time of year, Christmas reminds us of *God's* view of human beings. Christmas reminds us that God thinks we are a good idea—that he considers us worth saving. Christmas reminds us that God comes to live among us, to *be* one of us.

This is a Christmas reminder we need in our misanthropic times!

A NEW KIND OF HUMAN BEING

Throughout the Advent season, we heard the language of how Jesus is “coming.”

So, December 25 has come and gone. The questions I find myself asking as we move toward a new year are these: “Has Jesus come to us, this Christmas? Has he come to you? To me? To Neighbourhood Church?”

And these questions make us take one more step back and ask another question: *How would we tell if Jesus had come?*

I think that one of the answers to these questions finally brings us to our text this morning.

READ COLOSSIANS 3:12-17.

WE CAN TELL IF GOD REALLY HAS COME TO BE AMONG US IF WE BEGIN TO LIVE MORE LIKE GOD SHOWED US IN JESUS.

The way a world will tell if Jesus has come to us this Christmas—or any Christmas, or, indeed, *any* day of the year—is if we live as people who have met him, been captivated by him, and are being transformed and conformed into his image.

If we put on a new set of clothes, to borrow the metaphor from Paul.

What does this new set of clothes look like? It is a list that is as familiar as it is difficult to put into practice. We are to be people of:

- Compassion
- Kindness
- Humility (as James spoke about with the example of Mary last week)
- Gentleness
- Patience
- Above all, LOVE

We are to be people who let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts:

- Thankfulness
- Gratitude
- Looking out for one another—teaching and admonishing one another

This is the model of humanity that Jesus showed us throughout his life. These are the clothes we are supposed to wear. The world Jesus lived in had every bit as much stress and conflict and chaos and confusion as ours does—probably more! Jesus knows the challenges we face.

Hebrews 4:15 sums it up for us:

¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.

Is it easy to live like a new human being? No, it isn't. It wasn't for Jesus and it certainly isn't for us! We must pray. We must practice. It is a skill that must be learned, like any other.

But because of Christmas, we have Jesus as our example. And we have the Holy Spirit of Christ living within us, to guide and to convict and to inspire us. We have brothers and sisters to lean on for support and encouragements. We are not alone! We are meant to do this together.

This is good news—after Christmas and throughout the year!

CONCLUSION

The title of this morning's sermon is "Jesus Has Come... Now What?" Every year, the world looks largely the same on December 26 and beyond as it does on December 25.

On a personal level, we go out into a New Year that will have joys and triumphs, but will likely contain many of the same challenges and frustrations as we experienced in 2009, with a few new ones thrown in as well.

On a global level, we walk into 2010 in a world where “peace on earth and goodwill to men” still seems like a long way away. We see war and poverty and greed and injustice and the familiar evils that our world has always known.

How does Jesus’ coming to us this Christmas make any difference?

2 Corinthians 5:17 says this:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

I think that Jesus’ coming can and does make a difference if those of us who follow him walk out into 2010 with a renewed conviction that, contrary to some of the views out there, God thinks that you and I are a good idea and that we have something unique to contribute to the world, and that the world needs better from us as God’s image-bearers.

I think Jesus’ coming can and does make a difference if we walk out into 2010 as people that are gradually becoming more and more like those described in Colossians 3—people who are putting off the old humanity and putting on the new humanity—the humanity we see in Jesus—like a new set of clothes.

This is the answer to the “now what” that comes after Christmas has come and gone: we are to live out the meaning of Christmas for the rest of the year and for the rest of our lives.

And the meaning of Christmas is this:

GOD IS ON OUR SIDE!

And we are to live like those who are on God’s side.

If we do this to the best of our ability, relying on God and each other for strength, asking for forgiveness when we stumble, through the ups and downs of the coming year, the world will know that God has come to be with us this Christmas and throughout the coming year.

Thanks be to God.

