

There's Power In Tradition

An Advent sermon by Pr. David Johnson

Today we begin yet another Advent season. This may have been obvious to most of you considering the decorations, the Nativity scene, and the presence of the Advent wreath. But we also have two familiar Scripture readings; the Old Testament provides a view forward, while the New Testament gives us a look behind. Both of them are powerfully Messianic:

Isaiah 61:1-7 The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, Because the Lord has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners; 2 To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, 3 To grant those who mourn in Zion, Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified. 4 Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations; And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. 5 Strangers will stand and pasture your flocks, And foreigners will be your farmers and your vinedressers. 6 But you will be called the priests of the Lord; You will be spoken of as ministers of our God. You will eat the wealth of nations, And in their riches you will boast. 7 Instead of your shame you will have a double portion, And instead of humiliation they will shout for joy over their portion. Therefore they will possess a double portion in their land, Everlasting joy will be theirs.

John 18:33 Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" 35 Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." 37 Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say {correctly} that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

Sadly, at the time, many didn't understand the correlation between who the Messiah would be, in light of the various Old Testament prophecies. Oh, they recognized His uniqueness and value as a leader and teacher; but as the Son of God? Nope, not really.

I once heard a Messianic-Jewish woman describe her childhood, growing up hearing about "God," but there was no talk about a coming Messiah. The concept was completely foreign to her, until she heard someone talking about Jesus in terms of the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. Jewish traditions had been completely gutted for her family, just as they had been in Jesus' day.

Such is the case for many in our culture. Tradition has become an archaic concept, something for a past age or

generation. For some, the idea of *Tradition* brings to mind positive, warm, and happy thoughts. But for many, traditions have become pointless and unnecessary? Even those who once had a polite respect for traditions, find that over time, they lose their sense of fun and purpose. To the second group, traditions are considered redundant, meaningless time wasters, or even stress-inducing obligations. In fact, in recent years, many of the holiday traditions that were once valued and gladly practiced are now mocked and even attacked.

Ecclesiastes 1:10-11 Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new"? Already it has existed for ages Which were before us. 11 There is no remembrance of earlier things; And also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance Among those who will come later still.

So what do you think of when you hear the word, *Tradition*? For those who have positive feelings about traditions, this season of Advent and Christmas is one of the richest sources of treasured memories. What are some of your favorite family Christmas traditions?

* *Baking Christmas cookies* * *Decorating the house / tree*
* *Singing Christmas carols/caroling* * *Going Christmas shopping*
* *Traveling to Grandparents' home* * *Special services/ programs*
* *Opening the Advent Calendar* * *Community service projects*

Tevye, in the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, describes traditions as something very important, even necessary. He states, "*Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years... and because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects Him to do. Without our traditions, our life would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.*"

Now, interestingly enough, that movie was supposed to have taken place way back in the early 1900's. A time we don't usually associate with much stress or change. But it was the era of the Russian revolution, and Tevye understood that there was both value in, and a need for, solid traditions. They remind people of that which is most important and meaningful in life. And they help stabilize that which is shaky in the world around them..

Traditions work like memory prompters; each sound, smell, and action serving a purpose. In fact, some traditions are developed purposely, with a desired event or principle in mind (i.e. Passover, Communion).

Exodus 13:3 Moses said to the people, "Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the Lord brought you out from this place. And nothing leavened shall be eaten.

Luke 22:19 And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

Actually, many of our popular religious traditions have this principle in common; they were established to point people back to some enduring divine truth. Oh, there may be times when fact and fable can get blurred, but the significance of the practice, and the importance of remembering one's heritage remains critical.

Similarly, many of our Christmas traditions work in much the same way. Forms and practices have developed that reinforce certain beliefs or principles connected with the season. In fact, you may or may not know that a Christian candymaker in Indiana built the candy cane for this very purpose.

- The hardness of the candy represents the solid rock of the Christian faith.
- The white represents the sinlessness of Jesus.
- Red stripes symbolize the bloody wounds from Jesus' beating.
- The shape of the candy is that of a shepherd's staff, representing Christ as our Good Shepherd.
- Turned upside down, it forms the letter "J" – for Jesus.

Today, these traditional Christmas treats are sold absolutely everywhere, though few know their meaning.

Sometimes our traditions work to send a message that is not accepted by society at the time. Take for example, the popular Christmas carol, "*The 12 Days of Christmas*." Some have even called it a Christian hymn in disguise. It was written in England at a time when its rulers were staunchly Protestant and it was declared illegal to be a Catholic. A creative priest supposedly created the song to teach basic biblical truth (which ironically traverses denominational barriers).

"My True Love" – God the Father

"gave to me" – Any Believer

"Partridge in a Pear Tree" – Jesus (a partridge will voluntarily substitute its life for its babies)

"Two turtle doves" - Old and New Testament

"Three French Hens" – Faith, Hope, and Love

"Four Calling Birds" – Four Gospels

"Five Golden Rings" – Pentateuch (first 5 books of the Old Testament)

"Six Geese a laying" – Six days of creation

"Seven Swans a-swimming" - 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit

"Eight Maids a-milking" – Eight Beatitudes

"Nine Ladies Dancing" – Nine choirs of Angels

"Ten Lords a-leaping" – Ten Commandments

"Eleven Pipers Piping" – 11 Faithful Apostles

"Twelve Drummers Drumming" – 12 Articles of the Apostles' Creed.

Still other traditions are designed to create a warm and inviting environment that will invoke fond memories and nurture a desire for family and celebration.

My encouragement to you this morning is, reclaim those valued and valuable traditions, especially in this blessed Christmas season. Understand their importance, and make a place for them in your chaotic, hectic schedules. Don't allow their repetition to rob you of their significance and meaning. In fact, work at putting a revived Christian significance into those old religious activities and family traditions which may have waned.

Paul himself tells us to do so in two of his epistles:

1 Cor 11:2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

2 Thess 2:15 So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word {of mouth} or by letter from us.

Parents, set time aside to bring back those old Christmas preparations. Children, maybe you can help your parents come up with some new traditions that can be carried from this Christmas forward. Allow the special meaning of this season, the birth of Jesus, to be your motivation and let your creativity flow.