

The hustle and bustle of the season, the last-minute shopping, waiting in line for the next register, putting up the decorations, preparing the home for visitors, getting the food on the table, opening gifts, reacting to gifts, shuttling people to and from the airport; now its over. All the trappings of a Merry Christmas, gone for another year. Except in the Church, the gloriously old-fashioned, out-of-step Church. Here, the trees are still up, the Christ Candle still glows, the readings and hymns are still Christmas-y. What gives?

Well, what if I told you that the good, old-fashioned, out-of-step, behind-the-times Church was sending a deliberate message by prolonging our Christmas celebration? It’s a completely intentional choice, a counter-cultural decision, to keep celebrating Christmas, while the rest of the world has moved on to other things. And in this case, the action is the message. The world says, “Box it up. Christmas is over.” God’s people beg to differ, saying, “Christmas is never over.” I’m not suggesting we leave trees in the chancel all year. What I am suggesting is that the awe, the wonder, the marveling at the meekness and majesty of Jesus, the creative God come down as vulnerable baby, is something worth hanging onto.

In today’s Old Testament Lesson, which presents us with words we heard a couple weeks ago in worship, we hear of joy in the Lord, compared to the rejoicing and anticipation of a couple about to be married. “...I will greatly rejoice in the Lord...for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation...as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest...and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” There’s a bit of a parallel here, don’t you think, between Christmas and a wedding? Everyone involved can hardly wait for the wedding day to arrive, and I’m not even going to get into all the preparation involved, so that, just like Christmas, when the event has happened, and the show’s over, so to speak, there’s a letdown. Parents of the couple, guests, the bride and groom themselves, all have to adjust to life after the Big Day—after the party.

The difficulty of this adjustment is compounded by the fact that troubles never take a holiday. Even great days can make you weary and worn out; the bad days can knock the wind right out of you. The pain we tried to paper over with the right gift bag is still there. Our hurts and grudges haven’t changed since late November. The goodwill seems to have been boxed up with the other decorations. On Christmas, we sang, “Joy to the World!” But is the world joyful? Or is it all back to being the way it was before? Are you starting to see why the Church tries to extend the amount of time we spend thinking about Jesus? Not the external trappings of Christmas, but the Child at the center of it all. The person who is God, Jesus, our Savior. It is so incredibly easy to let Jesus slip through your fingers, to put him away like a manger scene figure. I urge you not to do that. That’s what this message is about today. Life with Christ is the celebration we’re looking for—a celebration that does not depend on a day on a calendar, but a deed that has been done. And action taken, the consequences of which still change people.

Listen again to Isaiah: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” This is not just saying “Christmas-is-coming.” This is saying: “Christmas

happened, and this is why you should care.” Since Jesus was born in deep humility; died in perfect innocence, and resurrected in death-defying power, God has done something to you. You have been clothed with the garments of salvation. The robe of Jesus’ righteousness covers you. This clothing happened when the gift of faith became yours, by the means of Word and Spirit, with baptismal water. Because you are clothed with all that is right about Jesus, you can know that your sins will not destroy you—He has paid for them. You can know that you are fully loved—first, because God said so. At Jesus’ baptism, His Father declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Which means that all those baptized into Jesus get to hear the same thing said of them. Because it’s true of Jesus, it’s true of you. “You are my beloved child,” says God the Father. “I am well pleased with you.” Well pleased, perfectly loved, right now, true of you, in Christ, without you doing or not doing anything. You can know you are fully loved—first, because God said so—but also because He proved it with His actions.

Again, from Galatians 4: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His own Son, born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law, that we might receive adoption as sons.” That redemption came at the highest possible price for Jesus. He lived a perfect life under the Law, but instead of receiving a trophy, he was treated as if he broke every rule, letting his perfect record pass to you and me. Therefore you can know your sins are removed, and God loves you fully, because when the time was absolutely right, Jesus let divine justice fall on him instead of you. Now, God regards you as one who wears His Son’s perfection. That’s how He sees you. The celebration could not really start until the fullness of time had come, but it has come, and the result is adoption. The result is belonging to God as a child, thanks to Jesus. Life with Him is the celebration we’re looking for. Do you see why the Church pushes Christmas out just a little...bit...further?

Dear old Simeon had waited all his life for Christmas. And then today in our Gospel Lesson, it’s the “fullness of time.” Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus to the Temple. Simeon has been anticipating this Christmas for years. He takes the Christ Child in his arms, and praises God, and there’s no letdown in his praise. In fact, he says, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your Word, just as you promised, for my eyes have seen your salvation.” For where Jesus is, there is salvation. Where Jesus is, there is celebration. Don’t put Him away. Take Him with you into this new year.