

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 26, 2010**

AFTER CHRISTMAS

Luke 4:14-21

I hope you had a happy and blessed Christmas Day yesterday with family or friends or both. In the midst of all your “Christmasing” – giving, receiving, opening gifts, feasting, whatever your Christmas traditions may be – I hope you remembered to say Happy Birthday to Jesus and to think about the difference His coming to us and our world has made.

Now – the day after Christmas – I’m glad you’re here this morning. I saw a newspaper article that said shopping today would be “frantic” with lot and lots of people rushing to stores to return or exchange gifts they don’t want, to use Christmas gift cards, to take advantage of “after Christmas” sales to buy more stuff. A lot of stores opened early this morning – not as early as on “Black Friday,” the day after Thanksgiving. But early. At least one department store opened at 5 AM. Maybe some of you have already been there! I’m glad you’re here now.

Today is the day after Christmas. But it is important to remember that there is more to “after Christmas” than trash bags filled with torn or crumpled wrappings and empty boxes. There’s more to it than thank you notes to be written. There’s more to it than credit card bills yet to be paid. Just because it is “after Christmas,” it doesn’t mean Christmas is over. Christmas Day may be past for another year, but the work of Christmas goes on.

Years ago I came across a poem by Howard Thurman that touched my heart. It goes like this:

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 sheep,
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 all peoples,
 To make music in the heart.

THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS

The work of Christmas, you see, isn’t over. It may be after Christmas, but that doesn’t mean Christmas is over. It began in the heart of God who loved the whole world and each one of us so much that He sent His Son – His only Son – to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. But the birth of Jesus is just one chapter in the Christmas story. Jesus came for a reason. He was

sent from heaven on a mission. Jesus came to do the work of Christmas. He defined that work in the words we read from Luke 4, words taken from the prophecy of Isaiah, who hundreds of years earlier anticipated the arrival of the Messiah.

As everybody who knows the Christmas story knows, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. His hometown, however, was Nazareth, up north in Galilee. That is where He grew up. That is where He learned His skills as a carpenter. And it was there, in His home territory, in the villages and towns of Galilee, that He began His ministry of preaching and teaching and healing.

Luke says that He won the praise of everyone who heard Him (4:15), and His fame (*pheme* in Greek) spread like wildfire throughout Galilee (4:14). So when He came home to Nazareth, when he went to worship at His hometown synagogue, He was greeted as something of a local hero. And the elders invited Him to preach.

Make sure you don't gloss over what Luke says in verse 16. He says it was Jesus' custom, His habit, to go to the synagogue (the church of His day) for worship on the Sabbath (4:16).

Jesus was a busy man. His days were filled with demands. His hours were long. But He didn't take vacations from worship. He didn't stay home on the Sabbath because it had been a long week. He didn't show up just at the holidays, or when He was facing a crisis in His life. No!

Worship was the normal, regular pattern of His life. He made it His habit, His custom, to be with God's people when they met together for worship. He made it His business to be there on the Sabbath, because He knew it would bring honor and glory to the Father.

I realize I may be "preaching to the choir" today (because you're all here!), but maybe that is not a bad thing every now and then! Maybe even those who are faithful in worship need a reminder to encourage them to stay the course. That encouragement can come from the example of Jesus Himself. What was good enough for Him should be good enough for us. What mattered to Him ought to matter to us. What was important to Him should be important to us.

Jesus was not legalistic. He knew that you don't have to go to church to worship God. Church isn't the only place where you can worship.

He also knew – and He knows – that some people cannot get to church, because their health or other circumstances prevent them. He understands that.

Jesus also knows that going to church doesn't automatically make you a better person or a better Christian. Nor does it automatically make you a Christian. Jesus knows all of that.

But Jesus made it His practice to be in church every week. Why? I think it is because He recognized that when it is at its best, the church is the place where the real action is. It is the place where God's Word is taught. It is the place where families and those who have no

family come together to honor God. It is the place where people of all sizes and shapes and colors and ages and backgrounds and needs can draw nearer to God. It is the place where people who are spiritually hungry can find food for their souls. It is the place where the love of God is made incarnate.

Think about this: When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, how did those who found out about it respond? They worshiped. The angels, for their part, praised God in the heavens. The shepherds came and worshiped. The wise men knelt before Him and brought Him gifts. Simeon and Anna, in the temple, glorified God. The work of Christmas, you see, begins with worship. And there is no substitute for it in the Christian life.

So, here is a question for you: Is Jesus' habit your habit? If not, will you make it your habit in the coming year?

But there is a whole lot more to the work of Christmas than just going to church. That is just a small part of it. There in the company of family and friends and neighbors in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus opened the scroll to Isaiah 61, and He read this prophecy to the people:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

(Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19)

When He finished reading He sat down. And when He had the people's undivided attention, when the people were sitting on the edge of their seats waiting for what He would say, He made an outrageous statement. He said: "Today, right before your very eyes, this scripture is fulfilled. I am the one Isaiah wrote about. That is what I have come to do."

Christmas Day is over. We've celebrated the birth of Jesus. But that is just the beginning. "Now," says Jesus, "is the time for the work of Christmas to be done. Today is the day of salvation. The Kingdom of God has broken in upon you. The moment in history you have been waiting for has arrived. I have come to do the work of Christmas!"

You see, the reason God visited us at Christmas, the reason the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us, the reason Jesus came, was to do the work of Christmas. What is the work He came to do?

1. GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR

Notice first that He came to bring good news to the poor. Proverbs 25:25 says that "good news from a distant land is like cold water to a thirsty soul." You know how good it tastes and how refreshing a drink of cold water is when you are really thirsty!

Christmas, the angel said, is about good news of a great joy that is meant for everybody. And that is why Jesus came. To tell everybody who knows they are sinners who need a Savior,

everybody who knows in the poverty of their souls that they need God and His saving grace, that the door has been opened. Salvation is here. And it is available to anyone who will take hold of it by faith. That is good news! Forgiveness and peace with God have come.

2. FREEDOM FOR PRISONERS OF SIN

Second, Jesus came to set people free – free from the powerful grip of sin that holds so many captive. He came not to enable us in our sin, not to make us comfortable with our sin, not to make us feel good about ourselves in spite of our sin. He came to liberate us from it. He came to set us free. Not free to do whatever we want. Not free to define right and wrong for ourselves. Not free to continue in a life of sin. But free to live life His way. Free to experience the joy that comes from doing His will.

He came to reconcile us to God and to one another and to ourselves. He came to break down the walls that separate us from God and from each other, to bring us to God and to bring us together. That is the work of Christmas. And, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, He has given this message and ministry of reconciliation to us.

3. SIGHT FOR THE BLIND

He came, third, to give sight to the blind. Both physical and spiritual sight.

Isaiah (9:2) spoke of a time when people living in darkness would see a great light. And Jesus came as a light shining in a dark and desperate world. When He came, He opened the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. He strengthened the feet of the lame. He brought warmth and hope to those whose hearts were cold.

John Newton spoke for all of us who have found Christ and experienced His amazing grace when he wrote:

I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Jesus came to open sin-blinded eyes, to dispel the darkness in our hearts, and to deliver us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom where, as Lord, He gives light and life to all. That is the work of Christmas.

4. RELEASE FOR THE OPPRESSED

Jesus also came “to release the oppressed.”

People can be oppressed in all kinds of ways by all kinds of things. People *are* oppressed in all kinds of ways by all kinds of things. You can be oppressed by fear. You can be oppressed by worry. Or doubt. Or debt. Or guilt. Or poverty. You can be oppressed by another person or persons. By an unhealthy relationship with your husband or wife, with your parents or children. Millions of people – millions of Christians around the world – are living in

oppression because of their faith. Discriminated against or subjected to violence because of their faith.

Jesus came not to bring oppression but to bring an end to oppression. To bring an end to the spiritual oppression of souls. To bring an end to every and all forms of oppression. And He will.

5. HEALING FOR THE BROKENHEARTED

It is not in the passage in Luke, but in Isaiah 61:1 it says: “He (the LORD) has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.” That is awfully good news, because the number of brokenhearted people in the world is just staggering.

Jesus came to bind up broken hearts. He came to bring hope and healing to hurting hearts, to people who are worn down by the heartaches and hardships of life. He came to show just how much God loves each and every one of us. Including you. And me.

6. THE LORD’S FAVOR

Finally, Jesus came to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. He came to announce that grace and salvation are available here and now. He came to declare that now is the time to get right with God, because now, in His coming, “the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all people” (Titus 2:11).

The year of the Lord’s favor will not last forever. There will come a time when it is too late and the door of opportunity is closed.

Tomorrow may be too late. We don’t know what it will bring. But it is not too late today to embrace Christ and to receive by faith in Him the Lord’s favor.

That is why He came. That is the work of Christmas.

NOT YET DONE

But the work is not finished yet. In His great love, God the Father sent Jesus the Son on an incredible journey into the world to do the work of Christmas. And Jesus did what the Father sent Him to do. He accomplished His mission. Now Jesus sends us – His people, His church, His followers – into the world to continue the work of Christmas in His name.

And He has given us the same Holy Spirit – the “Spirit of the Lord” – so that we can do it. Not in our strength or wisdom, but in His. He hasn’t left us alone to do it on our own. He has given us the power. He has given us what we need to do the work of Christmas in our world.

You and I are Christ’s arms and legs. We are His hands and feet. His ears and voice. He has chosen to use us, weak and imperfect and prone to sin as we are, to be His instruments of

peace and healing, of truth and grace, of compassion and conviction, of reconciliation and love, of hope and holiness right where we are. In this world. At such a time as this.

The work of Christmas –

To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among all peoples
To make music in the heart
To shine like stars in a world so full of darkness
To point others to Jesus
To reveal in word and deed and attitude the character of Christ –

belongs to us.

The work of Christmas isn't just for the Christmas season. It is not just at Christmas that we should have the "Christmas spirit." It is not just at Christmas that we should be sensitive to the hurts and needs of others, or generous in giving to charitable causes.

It is the day *after* Christmas, but the Lord of Christmas is still calling. And the work of Christmas isn't finished yet.

Until Jesus comes again, let's give ourselves to do His work in this world. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.