

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS
“CHRISTMAS FATIGUE”
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DECEMBER 26, 2010
Matthew 2:13-23
ALL SERVICES**

It is disturbing that, after the beautiful story of Jesus’ birth, we learn of the unthinkable massacre of young children by Herod. So quickly the world returns to its ambiguous mixture of good and evil, life and death. After Christmas we, too, return to the world of light and darkness. But it is the world for which Christ died.

Parents must play a protective role in the life of the family. Joseph models this in his response to Herod’s terrible decree. Had he not, Mary and Jesus would have been at the mercy of the king’s insane massacre.

God shows us the importance of families by having Jesus be born and grow to maturity in a family. Family is the basic community and the prototype of all communal life.

The day after Christmas many of us are suffering from acute Christmas fatigue! The American Christmas is all-consuming in at least two ways. First, we consume all we can of food, festivities, and consumer goods . . . **“gifts.”** Second, we ourselves are so consumed by the expectations and demands of Christmas that we are seriously relieved when it is over. On the other hand, many people live in a world without Christmas, and it is not a good place to be.

On the days after Christmas, shopping continues unabated. Cars still fill the parking lots of malls and shopping centers. Shoppers still shop, but without their earlier Christmas gaiety. In fact, their eagerness is a bit ugly, because they are competing for unsold merchandise in after-Christmas sales. The stores themselves look tattered and tired, and sales clerks have less patience, especially when assisting with exchanges. The atmosphere is not festive but frustrating. Meanwhile, the same downtrodden individuals with homemade signs saying, **“Will**

Work For Food,” still stand on the street corners . . . in their world without Christmas.

A woman sits alone in her home. It is the first time she has not put up decorations for Christmas. Her husband died this past summer and her only child is in prison. All the holidays mean now are painful memories and a sense of hopelessness. Years ago she knew people at church, but years of caring for her husband had changed things. There is nothing to look forward to . . . in a world without Christmas.

Tourists and pilgrims still fill the little streets of Bethlehem. They still crowd around the Church of the Nativity. They still buy souvenirs and trinkets to commemorate a once-in-a-lifetime trip. Meanwhile, an Arab teenager tries to feed his orphaned siblings with money he makes running errands for tourists . . . in a world without Christmas.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Herod was king of the Jews. The only knowledge he had of Jesus' birth came from traveling magi from the East, and all they could tell him was that they had seen a star that indicated a ruler of the Jews had been born in Bethlehem. Herod was powerful but insecure. What if the magi were correct? Since Herod was not Jewish himself, a possible rival from among the Jews was an extremely threatening possibility to him. Herod was so paranoid that he had members of his family, including some of his own children, killed if he thought they were potential rivals to his throne. Herod unscrupulously asked the visitors from the East to let him know if they found the newborn king, so he himself could go and worship him. Taking no chances, however, Herod ordered all of the male children less than two years of age in Bethlehem to be put to death. Not only did Herod live in a world without Christmas, he did his best to assure that his subjects would live in a world without Christmas, too!

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ***“Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you.”*** Egypt at that time was a Roman province outside Herod's authority, but there was a strong Jewish colony there, numbering as many as a million. The holy family lived securely in Egypt and remained there until Herod died. On their return they made their home in Nazareth.

It is understandable that many Christians oppose the commercialization of Christmas. It has in many ways become a cultural holiday, the celebration of good cheer and the exchanging of gifts. It is not difficult to see that such a holiday has

little to do with the Incarnation and the person of Jesus Christ. However, the secular celebration of Christmas is one of the best opportunities we Christians have to affirm and to articulate our faith. We do not need to oppose secular celebrations of Christmas in order to affirm and express the “**true meaning**” of Christmas. The strength of Christmas traditions and celebrations around the world and throughout history bears its own kind of witness to the triumph of the Christmas child.

After Christmas, after the celebrations and feasting, after the Christmas tree is down and the decorations have been put away, and after the world has returned to routines, it is important for the people of Jesus Christ to keep the spirit of Christmas. After the many ways we celebrate Christmas, we may need to remind ourselves what the spirit of Christmas really is. The spirit of overindulgence? The spirit of overspending? The spirit gift-giving? The spirit of kindness? The spirit of joy?

The spirit of Christmas is the spirit of Jesus Christ. But how do we describe it? Well, fortunately, that’s has been done for us. The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians has been called St. Paul’s portrait of Christ. The spirit of Christ is the spirit of self-giving love . . . the spirit of patience and kindness . . . not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting on its own way, not irritable or resentful . . . not rejoicing at wrong but rejoicing in the right . . . bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things. The true spirit of Christmas is the spirit of Christ.

“O Savior, pour upon me thy spirit of meekness and love, annihilate the selfhood in me, be thou all my life. Guide thou my hand which trembles exceedingly upon the rock of ages.” (Wm. Blake)

Jesus said; **“Where your treasure is, there will your hearts be also.”** We are a culture that dotes on children and claims to value them above all things. But how much of our treasure do we invest in their protection and education? Until our society lifts all our children out of poverty and ignorance, and protects all of them from violence and disease, we cannot be called a nation that loves children.

So we close as we began. The family is important. Christian teaching provides a beautiful generational view of family life. ***“Honor thy father and thy mother...”*** Those who honor their own parents will take delight in their own children. The family is the ideal school in which to learn about human love. What we learn from our parents we will pass on to our children.

Children learn love from parents who love each other. Love is the virtue that binds all the other virtues together. Mercy, kindness, honesty, meekness, patience, and forgiveness are founded on love and perfected in love.

If this is what you want for your family, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.