Advent 2017: “Christmas Happened, and It Matters”
1 John 1:1-10

Our text for this evening is 1 John 1:1-10. Let’s stand and read the Word of God together.

One of my staff members brought me an article this week that I think you’ll find interesting. The article was entitled, “Americans see more jingle, less Jesus in Christmas celebrations.” The survey was conducted by the Pew Research Center who interviewed over 1500 American adults by phone just a few weeks ago. Here is what they found.

Nine in ten US adults still celebrate the holiday called “Christmas.” When asked if they celebrated Christmas as a religious or a secular holiday, here’s what they found. Three years ago 51% of those adults surveyed said that they celebrated Christmas as a religious holiday. In 2017, just three years later, that number dropped to 46%.

In terms of believing the basic biblical narrative of Christmas, the numbers dropped from 65% of American adults surveyed to 57%...in just three years. Even within the church, there has been “slippage” in regards to the Christmas narrative. In the mainline denominational churches, those believing in the virgin birth dropped from 83% to 71%, and the Catholics surveyed dropped from 90% to 82%...in three years. That’s how quickly the religious landscape of our culture is changing right now.

Christmas…the celebration of Christ’s birth…would appear to be losing ground to the secular shopping spree and the “winter holidays” according to these numbers. And there would also appear to be a trend among those calling themselves “Christians” to dismiss the historical claim that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, conceived of the Holy Spirit, born to the Virgin Mary, the Word of God made Flesh who dwelt among us.

But make no mistake…that is what Christmas historically is actually about, amen? We don’t take a few days off work and buy presents and have the family over to celebrate the fact that it’s cold outside and the days are shorter. To the best of my knowledge, there is no “holiday” that celebrates WINTER! Christmas is the celebration of Jesus’ birth, because Jesus in the Savior of the world. The word “Christmas” comes from the words “Christ and Mass”…in other words, Christmas is a worship service, partaking of Holy Communion, with the sole intent of celebrating Christ.

So what should we make of this Pew survey? I would say only this: in a culture where “truth” is limited to “my feelings” or “my opinion,” I don’t think we should be surprised to see these kinds of statistics. After all, we would never “intuit” or “feel” inclined to believe something so remarkable as this notion that the God of the universe came down into the baseness of human
misery, taking on our flesh, in order to redeem us from the darkness that is in us by becoming one of us. The only way you come to know and/or believe such a claim is by reading the Bible and accepting that there is an authority greater than ourselves to which we must yield when it comes to learning and understanding truth.

“But why should we believe that Jesus was born of a virgin? Why should we believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God? Why should we hold on to this celebration of Christmas as “the good news that is for all the people…that a Savior has been born to us”?

I will attempt to address those questions and speak to why it matters for the next few minutes. My message then will fall under three subheadings: 1) Why we should believe Christmas happened; 2) Why it matters; 3) and What that means to me.

I. Why We Should Believe Christmas Happened

In the text that we read this evening, the Apostle John begins with these words, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you…”

The language used here by John is that which would have been used to bear witness in a public trial in the ancient world. “That which we have seen with our eyes, which we have heard, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands…” These are the words of an eyewitness who is not in doubt about what he saw, heard, felt, and experienced. Such an eyewitness is to this day the strongest kind of evidence in the court of law.

You see, the Apostle John understands that, for whoever is reading this letter, the claims that Jesus was the Son of God who took on flesh to save us all was anything but easy to accept. So he employs the strongest cultural language possible…the language of an eyewitness in a court trial…to emphasize that they…the disciples…are not in doubt about what they saw, heard, and even touched with their hands. And here’s what he says concerning the Word of Life—the “life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the Eternal Life…”

Who is the Word of Life…Who is it that is Eternal Life? John already covered that ground in his gospel account, chapter 1. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and with Him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The Word became flesh
and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Clearly for John, Jesus Christ is the Word of Life…the Word made flesh…He is Eternal Life…and once again, here is his testimony: “We have seen!” The reason we should believe that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin is because of the eyewitness testimonies of those who claim to have seen, heard, and touched with their hands this man, Jesus of Nazareth. Not just as a man who lived a great and influential life, but as the one who was publicly crucified and then rose again on the third day.

Now, keep in mind who is giving this testimony. For the most part, every person like John in the New Testament who bears witness to Jesus as the Son of God, fully God and fully human, the Word made flesh…is a Jew. Here’s what you have to know about the ancient Jews. No one in the entire ancient world had more reason to resist the claim that God appeared as a man than the Jews did. For the Jews, there was no room in their theology for a God-Man…God lived in unapproachable light, and God was completely other than God’s creation…His name was not even to be uttered. No one in the ancient world would have a harder time saying, “We have seen his glory” than the Jews who believed that the glory of God would utterly kill a man. No one was more unlikely to write these words, “He is the image of the invisible God” than a Jewish Pharisee, and yet that is what the former Jewish Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, wrote of Jesus of Nazareth in Colossians 1:15..

You see, it’s not just that the “Bible” tells us this story about Jesus…it’s who it is that is writing these accounts in the Bible that validates these claims. Those who gave testimony, like the Apostle John, Peter, and Paul, were the least likely people to believe such claims based on their religious training and loyalties, and they had everything to lose and nothing to gain among their friends, family, and former religion by saying what they did. Those who bore testimony to Jesus were tortured, exiled, and/or martyred for their testimonies…so it makes no sense whatsoever that these men gave these testimonies…unless, of course, their claims were true.

When you read the first few verses of 1 John, you can’t help but get the intensity of their eyewitness account. Four times in the first three verses John says, “We have seen” or “looked upon”; twice he ways, “We heard”; and once he even says, “We touched with our hands.” Three times in the book of Acts Paul gives his testimony of encountering the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:16, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne form heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.”
The eyewitness accounts as found in the New Testament bear witness that Jesus was the Son of God, the God/Man, the one who rose again on the third day. Which, in every regard, is consistent with a Savior who comes into the world as one conceived of the Holy Spirit, and born to a virgin…just as the prophet Isaiah had prophesied 800 years earlier in Isaiah 7:14, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” The child will be named, “God is with us.” A man will be born…who will be God with us. The unified witness of the Bible is that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is exactly that man.

II. Why It Matters

There are a lot of reasons that the historical veracity of Christmas matters. I will just highlight a few.

When we look at the Pew Survey, aside from the growing numbers of “irreligious people” is the surprising tendency for those who call themselves Christians to dismiss the veracity of the virgin birth and/or other components of the historical claims of Christmas. Having once been a semi-liberal Christian in a very liberal seminary, I think I can interpret what we see happening among those Christians who no longer believe in the Virgin Birth.

For many people who grew up in Christian homes, the hard work of defending the miraculous, supernatural story of a child born to a virgin seems like a useless waste of energy. “After all,” they say, “who cares if Jesus was born of a virgin or if Mary and Joseph just happened to get pregnant before they got married? It doesn’t matter, does it? All that matters is that Jesus set an amazing example for what it means to live a good, generous, and compassionate life on earth, and we should follow his example. Right?”

Let me show you where liberal “Christianity” goes.

You see, the primary claim of Christmas, and Christianity for that matter, is what we find proclaimed by the angel to the shepherds there in Luke 2, “For unto you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” John the Baptist calls this Savior, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” When the angel Gabriel comes to tell Joseph about the child in Mary’s womb he says, “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

When the prophet Isaiah writes, “those who walk in darkness have seen a great Light”, the great light is described this way, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given…and he will be called Mighty God…” This Messiah (according to Isaiah 53)...this Savior...will be one who “bears the iniquity of us all”…by “his stripes we are healed.”
So here’s the problem…if Jesus is just a good man…if Jesus is just a good man who is no more than a man who sets a good example, then there is no forgiveness of sin, there is no Savior, there is no healing, because there is no Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. There is only a good man who made crazy claims about himself, then died a tragic death, but who tends to inspire people to do good works in winter.

Do you see how we have driven right off the road and departed from Christianity all together? However, if God became flesh and dwelt among us…if Jesus is the son born to a virgin in the city of David as was predicted by the prophets hundreds of years prior to his birth, if Jesus is both God and Man, then when Jesus suffers the cross, He is qualified to bear the iniquities of us all and to satisfy God’s justice…which means that the forgiveness of sins has been accomplished…we have, in fact, been saved by the only one who could save us.

I’ll give you one more quick reason that the virgin birth and the historical, biblical Christmas narrative matters.

The Jesus we meet in the Bible clearly believes that He is something other than an ordinary man. Jesus says of himself in John 14:6, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He goes on to say a few verses later, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him.”

In John 15 Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Here’s my point: if Jesus was just an illegitimate child born to some unwed teenagers…if he was just a good teacher and nothing more, the vast majority of what Jesus said about himself makes no sense at all…we could only conclude that Jesus was delusional at best or particularly evil at worst. However, if Jesus is the son born of a virgin…conceived by the Holy Spirit and the Messiah of God…than everything He said about Himself makes perfect sense. Jesus, fully God and fully human, has come to save us all.

III. What that means to me

Now…what does that mean to me? It means a lot…it’s a game changer. You see, if Christmas happened as we read here in the New Testament, it means that God understands me. God came down and experienced what it means to be a human being on planet earth. He understands my pain, my temptations, my battle with the darkness that is real …he understands me better than I understand me.
It means that I can have a powerful and accurate picture of who God is and how God is when I read the New Testament and learn about Jesus…which means I can have a personal relationship with a personal God. It also means that I am not at liberty to make up a god of my choosing…I must yield to the God who became flesh and died for me.

It means that I have been saved by grace. That truth is so central in my life that it is the guiding principle, the literal foundation of my very existence and identity. John says it this way in our text from 1 John 1:2, “…the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.” Jesus is Eternal Life…and He came to us freely. He gave up His life for us…freely. We have been saved by grace.

Because my sins have been forgiven by what Jesus accomplished on my behalf, I have an assurance and a joy that runs deep, no matter the circumstances of this life. Because of Christmas and the Empty Tomb, I know who my Redeemer is…He is Christ the Lord…the Savior born unto me…the One who died for me and rose again. My identity, therefore, is not what I do, it is not how I look or how much money I make…my identity is this: I am a child of God, I am forgiven, I am redeemed, I am loved, and I am going home to be with my Father. All of that was given to me…it was a gift that I did not deserve.

Such is why we exchange gifts friends…to remind ourselves of the joy that comes in receiving a gift that we did not deserve. We give gifts to remind ourselves of the costliness that comes with giving gifts…it is an act of personal sacrifice that is motivated out of love. We give and receive gifts at Christmas because it reminds us of Jesus.

Finally, Christmas means that the gift we were given in Christ is then a gift we can extend to others. How many of you know that the vast majority of the world’s greatest pain could be resolved if we extended the free gift of grace and forgiveness to others in the same way that Jesus Christ extended grace and forgiveness to us? Ask any counselor…forgiveness heals hearts and relationships. Consider then, the social consequences of a culture that increasingly rejects the child born unto the virgin: No baby Jesus…no forgiveness. No forgiveness extended to humanity from God, no forgiveness extended from one human to another. Now we’re talking about the disintegration of society, for what becomes of human relationships without forgiveness? I pray we never find out.

So, how do we receive the gift of forgiveness that Jesus was born and then died to bring us?

We must only confess our sins, repent, and call upon his name in faith, and we will be forgiven. John describes that response as choosing to walk in the light. Towards the conclusion of our scripture passage he writes, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship...
with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I invite you friends, come and walk in the light of Christ. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Let’s pray.