

**+ Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23 + What Happens After Christmas? +
+ 1st Sunday after Christmas + 29 December 2013 +**

Where did Christmas go? It came and it's nearly gone. By the morning of December 26, the first Christmas trees were already out on the street in our neighborhood. Favorite Christmas music stations are back playing light hits or will be in a couple days. In stores, everything remotely related to Christmas is on clearance (think Disney Princess wrapping paper with a few snowflakes scattered on it), while store clerks prep the new Valentine's Day displays. The kids are still on school break, but nerves are starting to get a little frazzled. Have you started wishing they were back in school? Brand new Christmas gifts already have a broken part or can't seem to be found. As a fitting gesture of where Christmas seems to have gone for most of us, trash collectors struggle to haul away all the torn-apart packaging that once fit so nicely in the now-crumpled wrapping paper bagged by the street.

So where did Christmas go? Where did your Christmas go? The Lord blessed us with a beautiful service on Christmas Eve night and a nourishing, though chilly service on Christmas Day morning. For centuries in the Christian church, that was only the beginning of twelve days of celebrating, but like everyone else, we've probably moved on already.

What happens after Christmas? In less than a week, we'll be back to "normal". The New Year celebration will come and go with the change of the calendar. Then it will be time to go back to work, back to school, back to busy everyday life that also happens to happen in the middle of another "bleak" Central New York winter.

At Christmas, we briefly enjoyed a little peace, a little joy, a little hope, but where has it all gone? What happens to your peace and joy and hope after Christmas? We sang of the peace of that silent night in Bethlehem, but has your peace been clearanced out with the return of hard feelings or stress or fear or the daily struggle? We sang of joy at Christ's coming, but has your joy been tossed out with the return of grief or sorrow or guilt or worry? We sang of hope found in little Bethlehem, but has your hope disappeared with reminders of reality for you, your family, or your congregation? What happens after Christmas?

Did you know that it wasn't so easy for Jesus and his family after Christmas either, especially when he was a toddler? As much as we might have the ideal picture of the birth of Christ or of wise men bringing gifts to a toddler on his mother's lap, not all was peaceful and beautiful in the life of little Jesus and his family. In fact, reading through Matthew 1-2 and Luke 2, you might wonder how often Joseph and Mary felt uncertain, sad, or hopeless, even as they held their Savior close. Yet even then, something amazing happened. The Lord provided them with the peace, joy, and hope they needed.

Consider what happened to Jesus and his family after the first Christmas. Eight days after his birth, Joseph and Mary took him to the temple in Jerusalem to be named and circumcised according to the Law of Moses. This demonstrated that he was a member of God's covenant people, yet also that he had come to submit to his own holy Law.

Thirty-three days after Jesus' birth, they brought Mary to the temple to be ceremonially purified. Joseph and Mary didn't have enough money to sacrifice a heifer so they brought two doves. As the family entered the temple, a man named Simeon snatched Jesus right out of Mary's arms yet. His beautiful song of faith calmed their fears as he described Jesus as ***"a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel"*** (Luke 2:32). As he handed Jesus back to Mary, Simeon told her, ***"This child will cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many will be revealed."*** (Luke 2:34-35) They wondered what he meant. They didn't fully realize that Jesus would change lives forever, but to do so he would have to suffer and die to save his people from their sins.

They returned to Bethlehem and lived there for a time as Jesus grew into a baby. About that time, a group of Magi or scholars from the East visited their home in Bethlehem. They had traveled a great distance to worship this promised king. They brought gifts fit for a king—gold, frankincense and myrrh, all very expensive and certainly not toddler toys! They had tracked a star in the sky and had traveled to Jerusalem to King Herod's palace figuring they would find the Child there. Instead the Jewish scholars directed them to Bethlehem—a village only a couple miles away that God had chosen centuries before as the birthplace of our Savior-King.

The Magi had planned to return to Jerusalem to tell King Herod, but the Lord directed them in a dream to return a different way. Danger was coming. Shortly thereafter, the Lord warned Joseph in his own dream. ***"Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."***

You see, King Herod was ruthless. He wasn't above murdering his own children (and anyone else) if they crossed him. He was paranoid and would rather die than give up his puppet throne. Immediately Joseph awoke and without hesitation, he woke up Mary. They had to leave right away to save their child. So they packed everything up, saddled their donkey, and started a long 200-mile trek to Egypt. The Lord in his grace protected them on their journey and allowed them to settle in Egypt for a time. While there, they heard that Herod had slaughtered all the little boys two years old and younger around Bethlehem in an attempt to kill their Son Jesus. While they were thankful for God's protection, they mourned for the families of Bethlehem, whose families and little boys they had come to know.

Yet they still feared Herod and wondered if they would ever be able to go back home, but no matter how ruthless Herod was, he couldn't prevent the holy God from ending his life. Joseph found out through yet another dream. **"Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."** The Lord brought peace and joy to their hearts. The very next day, they packed up and began the long journey back to Judea. When they arrived in Judea, however, they heard that Herod's son, Archelaus, had taken his father's throne and was just as ruthless. Again their peace and joy and hope were shaken, but once more the Lord warned Joseph in a dream. They weren't going to stay in Judea, but instead moved back to Nazareth, where Jesus would grow up. Soon God in his grace restored their peace, joy, and hope in their Savior growing up in their home. God had saved his Son to save them...and us.

Now what happens after your Christmas celebrations? Do you find yourself falling in with everyone else wondering where Christmas has gone because it came and went so quickly? Are you simply moving on to the next holiday, getting ready to weather another Syracuse winter before Easter? Now that the holidays in general and Christmas in particular have come and gone, do you find yourself returning to the sadness, the guilt, the grief, the fear, the worry, the darkness that you had temporarily put off before Thanksgiving?

Where has your peace gone? Why has your joy disappeared? What remains of your hope? Have the effects and consequences of selfish decisions or hurtful words or loveless actions crept back into your life? Have grief or sadness or sorrow taken the joy out of your final celebrations as you recall a loved one who isn't around anymore or get another reminder that life is changing very rapidly around you in your family, at work, at school? Mix in a few lake effect snow squalls and you wonder what's happened to Christmas.

...But take a closer look at the account before us. A quick glance at the events in the year or so after Jesus' birth doesn't look peaceful or joyful or hopeful at all. We see Jesus, but he's helpless. He allowed himself to be born of a woman as a human being, and therefore he doesn't speak. He's weak. We see his life threatened again and again. We see adversity and need and sorrow and suffering and death. We see attempts on his life and the slaughter of little boys like him, and we wonder how Joseph and Mary could have had any peace, any joy, any hope in Jesus' first year.

...But then we see how God saved his Son to save us! We see how God used Joseph to protect his Son, to rescue him and his mother from Herod's violence and murder. We give thanks because we see how Joseph didn't hesitate, but immediately did what God commanded. Why? Because he and his wife Mary knew that Jesus was their peace, their joy, their hope.

They knew what we need to know about Jesus. He is our peace. Yes, Christmas Eve and Day have passed and we're not singing "Silent Night" by candlelight anymore, but the Christ Child brings peace to our hearts in the midst of all the busyness and the stress and the change and the challenge and the fear of your daily life. After all, God sent his Son **"to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons"** (Galatians 4:5), to ransom you from the guilt of all your sins, to bring peace to your troubled heart, to reconcile you with God. Jesus came to bring peace and brought that peace even though Satan tried to rob us of that peace with Herod's vain attempts. So now we have peace in Jesus as we sang earlier, **"O Jesus Christ, your manger is my paradise where my soul is reclining. For there, O Lord, we find the Word made flesh for us—your grace is brightly shining."** (Christian Worship 40:1)

Jesus is our joy. Yes, we grieve, and for quite a few of us this year, that grief is much closer to the surface than usual. Yes, we have sadness and disappointment, frustration and worry, but yet we have real joy in Jesus. The Christ Child comes to bring the comfort of his own resurrection to our grieving hearts. He comes to dry our tears with his gentle forgiveness and grace and the reminder that he is in control of all things. He is our joy because he loves us as we sang. **"Dear Christian friend, on him depend; be of good cheer and let no sorrow move you. For God's own child in mercy mild joins you to him—how greatly God must love you."** (CW 40:3)

Finally, Jesus is our hope. Think about what God accomplished in rescuing Jesus from Herod's terrorism. The Savior was saved to save us! The Savior was saved so the rest of the story after Christmas could be told—the story that took Jesus to the cross, to the tomb, and to the glories of heaven for us. In that Christ Child, we find forgiveness and new life and eternity—all that gives us hope founded on the reality of what will come through Jesus.

Just because you get rid of your tree and put away your decorations and listen to other music and go back to daily life, your Christmas celebrations don't have to end. In Jesus, you have peace. You have joy. You have hope, and will have them long after this Christmas has been forgotten. May our prayer, then, this Christmas and always be, ***“The world may hold her wealth and gold; but you, my heart, keep Christ as your true treasure. To him hold fast until at last a crown is yours and honor in full measure.”*** (CW 40:5) In Jesus, that's what happens after Christmas. Amen.