

Christmas 1 2013. John 1: 1-18 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Wow! It seems like we were just here! Wait! We WERE just here! Well, most of us were just here!

So how was your Christmas? Did you do what you always do? Family, big meal? Overeat?!

My Christmases have a familiar pattern to them: after the Christmas Day service I go home and collapse! For Rachel and I our Christmas is what the English – and Canadians – call “Boxing Day” – December 26. That’s when we do the sort of stuff most of everyone does: gather around the tree and open presents, eat a big meal, relax and enjoy! In England – with no Thanksgiving Day to celebrate, the Christmas meal is always turkey with all the fixin’s. If you ask anyone why they only eat turkey at Christmas they’ll say, “well, it’s traditional”!

We all have Christmas Traditions, don’t we?! Watching “A Christmas Story”, where Ralphie is on his seemingly eternal quest for a Red Rider BB gun, seems to be finding it’s way into our Christmas tradition – some of you have said you watch it too.

Traditions aren’t always what they seem. By that I mean that most people, when they talk about tradition, think of something that’s unchanging, fixed, almost eternal. They’re not. For example, turkey hasn’t always been the “main event” at Christmas – it only appeared in the 17th century. Before that it was either Peacock or Boar. And the turkey took over in spite of the fact that it was introduced by French Jesuits! Two strikes (“French”, and “Roman Catholic”) against the likelihood of that tradition catching on in very Protestant England, yet it did!

You all know about Santa Claus, right? The jolly red suited, rosy cheeked man who evolved from....what? Anyone know? He was an elf on a 1934 Coca Cola Christmas tray. The following year he was the chief elf. Eventually he stopped being an elf (see what overeating can do for you at Christmas?!). Before that? Well, you can trace him back to St. Nicholas of Myra, who became the patron saint of children (and seafarers).

Today (or, actually, for a couple of months prior to December 25) Jolly Saint Nick – Santa Claus – is, among other things, a secular icon for corporate profit. And we need him – it’s in no way far fetched to say that our economy would collapse if we stopped spending money at Christmas!

For us, gathered here today, though, I suspect we have somewhat mixed emotions about all this. We love the festivities, we genuinely believe that gift-giving is important, and a sign of how we regard those we love, but we also want to be connected to the real reason we’re here, the story of a faithful God who became human for us.

During the reformation many of the reformers proposed a new approach to festivals like Christmas. Some simply abandoned the liturgical calendar and refused to celebrate any festival. Others were more nuanced. Martin Luther was one of this latter class.

Luther proposed a new tradition – or, rather he proposed changing what was becoming a new

tradition in the early 16th Century, so as to get back to the original meaning of Christmas. Luther said we should give gifts to the Christ Child, the “Christkind” (from which we get “Kris Kringle”!) as a way of focusing on what – or rather, ‘who’ – it is we have to be thankful for.

That’s not a bad idea, is it?! Giving gifts to God. Perhaps, in the more contemporary language of stewardship, it would be giving back to God that which belongs to God anyway, which is, of course, everything.

Some acknowledgment, in other words, of the fact that we are stewards of all that is, and stewards, furthermore, who are passing through the moment, who bring nothing with us into the world, and can take nothing out.

This is certainly NOT how most people today think about this festive season. Most of our secularized brothers and sisters have moved on from the celebration of Christ’s birth”; now they celebrate “solstice”, the “holiday season”, Kwanzaa, what ever they want to call this end-of-year moment.

Maybe this is a good thing for Christians! Now, perhaps, now we can have Christmas back! Perhaps now we can spend some time figuring out what it means to us and for us – figuring out how the gift-giving at this time of year can reflect our fundamental belief that this time and this season is about the start of something radically new, something about belonging, and forgiveness, and coming home, and celebrating life, and each other, and God’s gifts – and doing so for the whole year, not just a few, short days at the turning of the year, when most of the world is unnaturally switched on to joy (even if they’re not quite sure why).

So we’re here. We decided to come back after The Big Day. That means something – it means we’re making a commitment to stay on the pilgrim’s path way – together.

Let the journey begin again!