

I should admit that I can’t remember when (or if) I have used the lectionary reading from Titus during a Christmas Eve service! Quite frankly, most years I tend to use only two of the four scripture readings in the lectionary for Christmas Eve. The reason being that it helps to keep the service moving along when kids and grandkids are squirming around; parents are trying not to fall asleep in their seats; and there is a general ‘buzz’ going throughout the sanctuary because it is packed with people. . . . But this year there’s less than ten people here in the sanctuary with me right now – and the same is probably true for you at your house. So if things are going to be more than a little different this Christmas Eve, let’s veer away from Luke, and the psalm, to hear what Titus has to say about Jesus.

You probably noticed that Titus doesn’t talk about how, or where, Jesus was born. Titus talks about what has happened BECAUSE Jesus was born: the grace of God appeared in Jesus as he brought salvation to all; and how Jesus trains us to turn away from sin in order to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives while we wait for Jesus’ second advent – his second coming. What Titus talks about is *where we are at* because Jesus was born. And *how Jesus redeemed us* from all iniquity and purified us *to be his own people* – a people zealous for good deeds. Titus reminds us this Christmas that who Jesus is, and what Jesus has done, determines who we are, and what we will do, as followers of Jesus. And it’s up to us to not lose sight of what we’ve been given in Jesus.

I was reminded of this when I read the Christmas letter from Bev and Lowell Bartel. Their letter says:

We’d like you to reflect on the difference between “honoring” Jesus’ birth, versus “celebrating” it in the context of all the accumulated trappings and myths, both religious and secular.

It is our hope that through increasing our focus on “honoring” this birth, we might grow, and inspire others to grow as well. The power of this Jesus event is in what he said – not what someone said about him; the power is in what he did in his world – not from the example of the paths his followers took through the millennia; and the power is in what he told others to do – not in what we, with our biased beliefs and understandings, might tell others to do. Honoring and celebrating, indeed, there is holiness in both, unless we forget one, while doing the other!

With honesty and openness, let’s all take a step forward into new understanding of the magnificent awe in truly “honoring” Jesus’ birth.

How are we honoring Jesus’ birth in our lives – particularly in this year of 2020? How has the appearance of the grace of God in Jesus, and through Jesus in us, shaped our

response to the difficulties and changes we have encountered this year? How has it shaped the way that we have waited? How will it shape the way that we continue to “wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ”? Are we living with gratitude for the grace that we have already experienced? Are we “zealous for good deeds” that share our gratitude to God and God’s grace with other people and with God’s creation all around us? How are we honoring Jesus’ birth in our lives each day?

While I’ve been pondering how I’m honoring Jesus’ birth in my life, I began wondering if honoring Jesus’ birth is something that we have to *consciously* think about doing, or does it naturally flow and happen as part of who we are? Or is it a combination? Do I have to consciously be aware of how often I am more zealous about fulfilling my own wants, instead of engaging in good deeds that meet real needs? Do I need to regularly remind myself to look past my own self-interests to see what is happening in the world beyond me? And when I am able to see the suffering and pain that others are bearing – does my compassion kick in, and do I respond with generosity? Do I honor Jesus in how I respond? I think most of the time I try to, but there are times when I don’t. And perhaps what I really need to be conscious of is the gap between my *desire* to honor Jesus, and whether I’m *actually* honoring Jesus. Maybe you are aware of a similar gap in your life.

While Jesus has called us to be his own people, I think that’s truly a “work in progress.” Throughout our lives we’re always going to be working at fully becoming Jesus’ people. Almost everyone is a little squishy on being 100% committed to being Jesus’ people and honoring him in ALL that we do, and say, and think, and are. I have no doubt that we will *always* be learning anew what Jesus has to teach us about turning away from greed, pride, and violence so that we can live together in peace in the kingdom of God. . . . And maybe what Jesus really trains us to do is not give up. To not give up when we do fall short of honoring Jesus. To not give up on moving toward the future that God’s grace opens up. To not give up on being honest with ourselves as we stand in need of forgiveness, of love, of mercy, of new life. To not give up believing that Jesus lives with us when we serve one another in loving kindness; when we protect the vulnerable; when we seek justice for the oppressed; when we ensure the common good with equitable access to sufficient food, safe housing, clean water, affordable healthcare, good education, and sustainable employment.

May we not give up growing as people who honor Jesus’ birth by actively waiting with hope and joyous anticipation of his coming again in glory.

Amen.