

Christmas Eve
Text: Luke 2:1-20
Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.
December 24, 2008

“Even Atheists Observe Christmas”

A friend of mine is the music teacher at an Elementary School in Newtown. She has always had a difficult time finding an accompanist for her school concerts, so for the past 12 years I have played piano for the School Assemblies and evening concerts. This year I arrive at the school and noticed in the lobby the Candles of Kwanza, a Menorah for Chanukah, but no Manger Scene - instead there was a Christmas Tree. When I sit at the piano to play for the rehearsal, not for the Christmas Concert, but for the “Winter Festival,” there are songs about snow, bells, sleigh rides, and the miracle of Chanukah. One year my friend did include “Away in a Manger,” figuring as long as they mention all of the holidays, she was covered. Nope! She was pulled into the Principal’s Office and told that there was to be no mention of Jesus.

I’ve come to accept this mindset within a public arena. You either mention all the different observances, or ignore all of them. It’s getting easier to ignore, rather than observe. I do commend one town that was shown on the news. In their town Square they had the Manger Scene, the Menorah, The Kwanza Candles, and a monument to Peace placed there by the Atheists.

I usually find comfort in knowing that in the personal lives of Christians, the observance of the Birth of Christ is alive and well. After a morning rehearsal for the “Winter Festival” I have an hour and a half to kill before the Assembly Program. I went into the village of Newtown to a quaint little shop called Starbucks to get some tea. The line was long. But I had time. So I waited. A 20-something man and woman got in line behind me. From over-hearing their conversation I could tell they were co-workers. As I “over-heard” them talking, she began to say that her Jewish Finacee’s family was expecting her to convert to Judaism. It was obvious by her tone that she was troubled by this. I was feeling encouraged that her faith in Jesus Christ was something she would have a hard time giving up. Then she made a comment to her co-worker saying: “I don’t know how I could give up being a Christian. I would miss the Christmas Tree and the presents.”

Is that what Christmas is? The Christmas Tree and the Presents. No mention of Jesus Christ - God’s Son - being sent to earth to tell us of God’s love - and eventually show us of that love on Good Friday. So I took my cup of tea and left that conversation by the non-Christian Christian, as I went back to the school to play the piano for a non-religious Christmas Concert which had to avoid mentioning Jesus.

I use to find it very frustrating to sit back and watch, while Jesus is getting pushed farther and farther out of Christmas. But I read about what Charles Schultz, the creator and writer of

the Peanuts Comic Strip did to CBS approached him with an idea of an animated television Christmas Special featuring Charlie, Lucy, Linus, Snoopy and the whole gang. Schultz agreed, wrote the script, and submitted it to CBS. He titled it: *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. CBS approved the title.

Most of us have seen this Christmas special. The opening scene placed Charlie on this tiptoes peeking into his snow-covered mailbox hoping to find a Christmas Card - to no avail - again. Feeling dejected, he stopped by Lucy's psychiatric booth to mourn the commercialism of Christmas. Lucy agreed adding her own lament: "Christmas is nothing but a lot of stupid toys. What I *really* want is Real Estate!" CBS LOVED IT!

In the next scene Charlie Brown became further disillusioned as Snoopy was busy decorating his doghouse with an endless string of lights and gaudy decorations, in hopes of winning the neighborhood contest. "Good Grief!" says Charlie. "Yeah, yeah, that's it!" thought the CBS executives.

Even Sally, Charlie's baby sister, was caught up in the trappings. She recruited him to take dictation for a letter to Santa. "Dear Santa, Just send money, preferably tens and twenties." More laughter from the CBS team.

As the story progressed, Lucy sent Charlie to pick out a Christmas Tree for their neighborhood pageant. "A big shiny aluminum tree... maybe painted PINK!" But Charlie couldn't do it. Instead he brought back a real - although small, pathetic, lifeless tree... And the kids hated it. "You Blockhead Charlie Brown!" In frustration, Charlie Screamed, "What is Christmas all about ANYWAY?!?!?" "That's really good! REALLY good!" CBS drooled.

Then Linus steps into the spotlight and answers Charlie's question. *"And there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were sore afraid. But the angel said to them, 'Fear not; for behold - -I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Christ, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.'" And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"*

"Hold everything" demanded CBS. "You can't recite Bible verses on national television, and especially the King James Version! You'll alienate our viewers and chase away our advertisers. The tree can stay, but the Bible has to go." Charles Schultz stood firm. "If I can't tell the Christmas story, you can't have the Peanuts cast. If the Christmas reading goes - so do they." CBS looked at the fast approaching deadline . . . and gulped. "Okay. It stays. But

we're going to have to pay a terrible price for this.”

And sure enough, on the night of the Christmas Special, the CBS switchboard was flooded with calls from around the country, all asking the same question, “When can we have more Peanuts Christmas Specials?” “Soon” CBS promised, “very, very soon.”

50% of America tuned into the show that night. It won an Emmy and a Peabody award. TV Guide claimed Linus' Biblical recitation was one of the top 35 moments in television history. And it became the longest running Christmas special on CBS.

Charles Schultz knew that Christmas was about more than a Christmas Tree and Presents. “If I can't tell the Christmas story, you can't have the Peanuts cast. If the Christmas reading goes - so do they.” People throughout the world - Christians, Jews, Muslims and Atheists have seen “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” The message is told. ‘For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior - which is Christ the Lord.’ Christmas claims ALL OF US!

Those who never step inside a church will still gather with family and friends tomorrow and if not proclaim the Birth of Christ their Lord, they will share love with family and friends. That's what God intended to have people do to commemorate the birth of his son. The self-professed Atheist may not want to admit that there is a God, but he will still take off from work on December 25th - CHRISTMAS Day. We may call them “Winter Festivals” but we really know they are Christmas Concerts. What kind of tree is it? It's a CHRISTMAS Tree. What kind of presents will we give? CHRISTMAS Presents. Christ came to earth to be present among us. Christ *IS* present in everything that is Christmas! Present in the office parties, in the gift shopping, in the baking, in the “Happy Holiday” greetings. They can call it what they like but were it not for the birth of that baby on that first Christmas Day, none of it would exist.

So I can't be frustrated at Christmas. It's not something that can be ignored. Christ is Present. Even the Atheists observe Christmas. And they should, because God's message applies to even to them.

The message that the Angels gave when they sang: “Glory to God in the highest - and Peace to his people - - - ALL of God's people - on Earth.” Amen