

God's Gift to You this CHRISTmas: Purpose (2012)

Χριστος εν υμιν η ελπις της δοξης
Colossians 1:24-27 ¹

Well, here we are, at Advent once again. It hardly seems possible that another year has gone by, and the pre-Christmas whirlpool is in motion once more. So what's your purpose for these next four weeks?

Is your purpose for these next four weeks just to get all the socially obligatory errands and gifts and parties accomplished? Are you already looking forward to it all just being over? Somehow I can't escape the thought that there ought to be more to this annual pilgrimage than that.

To make the question more challenging, what if I asked you, not about your purpose for the next four weeks, but about your purpose for your life? What then? How would you answer if I asked you to complete this sentence: "The purpose of my life is _____?"

And once you had written something down, how would your husband, your wife, your best friend, your children, or your parents respond to what you'd written? Would they agree with what you wrote, or would they tell you that you're just fooling yourself, that what you're really doing with your life is pursuing some goal other than what your comfortable rationalizations lead you to believe?

And how about the purpose of our life together in the Church? As Advent comes once more and the Christian year begins again, I find myself asking, "So what is the relevance of what we're about in the church these days? Are we maintaining an institution that has lost its relevance for modern life? How does the existence of the church fit with the workaday world of buying and selling, harvesting, manufacturing and governing? Does what we do here really matter?"

These questions seem to cry out more loudly in the seasons of our great religious festivals. Suddenly, particularly at Christmas, the whole world seems to be feeling "religious." We send Christmas cards to each other, put up nativity scenes, sing Christmas carols, and read the Christmas story. We have parties and family reunions, give gifts that are often unneeded and too expensive, and we act very jolly indeed.

But then on December 26th, suddenly it's all over. Stores are crammed with people trying to exchange things that didn't fit, were the wrong color, or just didn't look right in the living room. We busily work and play with the things that did fit, work, or look right. Thoughts are turned toward New Year's Eve parties and football games. Bills begin to arrive.

Maybe this "Christmas thing" is similar to our remembering of Pearl Harbor. A few aging veterans will gather again this week over the *USS Arizona* to pay respect to their buddies entombed below. But the rest of the world hardly knows—or cares—what meaning December 7th has on our calendar. In a similar way, much of the world wonders what all the fuss is about over this helpless little baby in a world where real power is measured in warships, megatons, stock options, and political influence.

We'd all agree, no doubt, that the birth of a baby is a pretty neat thing. It has been my privilege and joy to be present at the birth of both of our children, and those were memorable moments, beautiful beyond all description. But as marvelous and mysterious as the birth of any baby is, the birth that is the center of attention at Christmas is even more astounding.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on December 2, 2012, the First Sunday of Advent.

It defies all human explanation. The point is not the virgin birth of this baby, though that description is true to the way it happened. How difficult is it, after all, for the Creator of the universe to change one cell?

The importance of this birth lies in the fact that in the person of Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter, from Nazareth in Israel, the Mind of God was revealed. Jesus did not merely convey that Mind, as the Hebrew prophets did. Jesus is to be identified with it. Jesus' human life made God's Mind and Purpose real to us in an unprecedented and unparalleled manner: "*He was with God, and he was God*" (John 1:1).

Christian faith isn't something we use only at Christmas and Easter. Christian faith isn't something we "do" at church at 10 o'clock on Sundays. Christian faith isn't something we do with our eyes closed and our hands properly positioned. Christian faith isn't soft music and magic words, something that has nothing to do with the rest of life.

Christian faith is simply the recognition that in Jesus of Nazareth we see the true foundation of the universe. Timelessness has invaded time. **God exists, and God is not silent. God has spoken to us, IS speaking to us, and life can never be the same.**

God came into our world to conquer Satan, to deal with our Sin, to make righteousness possible, to bring human persons into a harmonious relationship with their Creator, and to reveal that knowledge of God without which you and I cannot truly live. God acted with eternal purpose, and because of God's action, our lives can have purpose, too.

You've heard me say that God has two purposes in our world. God's first purpose is to so transform our lives through faith in Jesus that we become willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him. God's second purpose is that God intends for us to willingly join our lives together in a faith community that only God can build. Jesus mentioned both of these purposes in His final prayer in the upper room: "*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message [that's the first purpose], that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me [that's the second purpose]*" (John 17:20-21).

Being clear about our purpose as followers of Jesus changes the way we get up in the morning. We feel a peace, an inner contentment, an expectancy that gives each day a sparkle all its own. Such commitment changes the way we go to sleep at night. Fear and worry can be removed from our minds by the transforming power of Jesus, and we can sleep in peace.

Beyond this, the commitment of our lives to Jesus changes the way we look at our work and at our money. Work begins to be something that we try to do with skill and pride, as an offering to God, rather than as an unpleasant experience to be endured until we can retire. Money is no longer seen as the key to happiness, but we are able to see that what we do with our money does make a difference, and we try to honor God by wise and generous use of it.

Believing in Jesus changes the way we vote. We're no longer concerned so much about how laws affect us as we are about whether our laws are accomplishing things that please God and that encourage moral living. Believing in Jesus changes the way we raise our children. Believing in Jesus changes everything.

I began by asking whether or not the life of the church, the family of God, has any relevance for life as it goes on outside the church building, and I hope you're beginning to see that believing in Jesus is not something that is restricted to 10 o'clock on Sunday morning.

Believing in Jesus is a quality of mind and heart that, if it exists at all, begins to transform our entire lives—even our Christmasing.

When you and I think about the religious meaning of Christmas, we probably think of angels and trumpets, of wise men and kings, of gold and frankincense and myrrh. We're likely to be dazzled by God's power and majesty, and to be impressed by images of thrones and splendor. But the characteristic of God's nature that is really at center stage at Christmas is really none of these.

God's love for us in Bethlehem embodies a humility that stoops far lower than you and I would ever stoop. God's Bethlehem-Love involves a patient kindness that lasts far past the point when every human heart would have been filled with bitterness and anger. God's Bethlehem-Love includes an unselfishness so huge that we have no categories for it. That realm where God's purposes are accomplished is, to our eyes, a topsy-turvy place, where the least is the greatest and the greatest is the least, and the King is the servant of all.

Sometimes you and I may think of God as holy and stern and avenging, and we may think that something that Jesus did changed God's anger into love. But the New Testament knows nothing of such an idea. The message of the New Testament is that God has always been like Jesus. What Jesus did was to open a window in time so that we might see—and experience—the eternal and unchanging love of God.

Does the Presence of God that we celebrate at Christmas make any real difference in life? Yes, it does; it does indeed. And if you and I ever really recognize our deepest need, and begin to grasp God's ability and intent to meet it, gratefully committing our lives to God's purposes in response, then God's Spirit uses that faith to begin to change everything about us, and that transformation enables us to be persons who can then change the world!

And so it is that this Christmas, this Advent, this very day, you and I echo again the eager cry of the ages, "*Come, Come, Lord Jesus!*"