

...from your area churches

The mystery and the gift

The weeks of Advent are almost over. These have been weeks of hustle and bustle. They have been weeks of shopping, getting decorations for the big day, and preparations for family and friends to come home. On a spiritual level, churches have also been guiding us to prepare. This has been a very different preparation.

This has been recalling the preparation of more than 2000 years ago for the coming of the Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells how John the Baptist prepared people for that Savior. He told people to reform their lives, to repent of sinfulness, a message that is as important today as it was then.

The coming of the Savior is a mystery and a gift.

He is a mystery.

We will never understand his infinite love, which caused him to take upon himself a human nature, to live and to die for us. Yet that is what he did. In so doing, he became the source of hope, encouragement and inspiration. For all who struggle with the hardships of life, he is there for them.

"Come to me," he said, "all you who labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you."

When the difficulties are overwhelming, he is there on the Cross, crying out "I thirst."

When we have fallen back into sinfulness, he can say: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

And when we have been faithful to him, he can say: "This day you will be with me in paradise."

He is a gift.

What a savior we have in Jesus. But for now, we celebrate his birth. We don't need to go to the ends of the earth to find our God. We don't need to find our way through profound theology. He is with us.

How easy it is for us to open our hearts to him. We can promise to live his principles. And we can love him, the gift of the Heavenly Father.

When the Christmas shopping is finished, and the colored lights have gone dark, He, the "Light of the world," will still shine brightly. And when the emotion of The Birthday has worn away, he will still be there to comfort and to console, to encourage and to inspire. Those who mentally and emotionally relived the Manger Scene can go forth into the future with joy in their hearts and peace in their souls.

Such is the Christmas I wish for each person.

Fr. Gerry Condon

St. Patrick's and St. William's Catholic churches

Don't 'miss' Christmas

This Christmas I would like to relate a couple of stories. The first is about a young man I will call "Johnny."

It had always been Johnny's dream to see a circus. Finally, the circus was going to be in a neighboring town. Johnny had just enough money in his piggy bank for a ticket to the circus. He took his money and set off for the neighboring town. Johnny returned home that afternoon but he still had all of his money.

Johnny's Dad asked Johnny, "I thought you were going to the circus; didn't you go?"

Johnny told his Dad that he had been to the circus. He said, "Dad you will never believe it; I was on the corner and the whole circus came right past me and, Dad, no one even asked me for my money."

Dad explained to Johnny, "Son you didn't see the circus, you saw the parade. Son, you missed the main event."

The other story is about a young couple and their daughter. It was the baby's first Christmas. Like all parents, Mom and Dad wanted it to be special. They bought several gifts for the baby, but the biggest was a baby doll.

On Christmas morning Mom, Dad and baby gathered at the Christmas tree. The parents gave the baby the package with the doll, sure that this would be the "Gift of the Year."

The baby opened the package and took the doll out of the box. A couple hours later, the parents noticed the doll lying over near the wall off to the side. The baby was excitedly playing with the wrapping paper and box the gift came in. I suspect every parent has experienced something similar to this story.

I share these two stories as examples of real-life situations and people because, all too often, people "miss" Christmas. I am not talking about missing the day; that would be virtually impossible with all the hype. I am talking about missing the true celebration of Christmas.

All too often, we are like this baby; we get excited about Christmas but we spend our time playing with the wrappings, and the Baby gets left off to the side and is ignored.

The other danger is that we become like little Johnny; we are distracted or satisfied with the parade but we miss the main event. We tend to put huge emphasis on the shopping and the decorating and all the trappings but we tend to leave the Baby off to the side.

Recently, I went on our annual quest for just the right gift for the family. As I walked the aisles past gadgets, electronics, clothes and animated toys, one thought kept coming to my mind: The gifts we long for, the ones we ask for, save for, shop for and wrap up in shiny paper with bows will disappoint eventually. They will age, wear, scratch, stain, fade or break. They may even get lost or stolen. Not long after the shiny newness wears off, the realization sets in that these objects don't provide the lasting happiness we'd hoped they would.

Am I a Christmas scrooge? Not at all! Beneath the tree are several lovely gifts I look forward to giving my family. I'm hoping one will appear there for me before Christmas Eve. But this thought, this realistic view of the contents of those packages, helps me keep the material aspects of this holiday in eternal perspective.

It's so easy to get caught up in the commercial aspects of Christmas. It's easy to think we must show our love through gifts we buy, but often a warm hug and some hospitality, time spent together, or a letter detailing your appreciation would mean so much more than another coffee mug or gift basket.

If I could give you one gift today, I'd cause us both to travel back in time some 33 years after the birth of Christ. We'd sit together on the hillside and listen to Jesus teach the Sermon on the Mount. We would hear our Savior say, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19 NIV).

Perhaps hearing it from the Savior's lips would help us believe that it's important what we treasure. It's important where our heart is. And to remember that the objects we ask for, give, and receive are temporary, just like the pleasure they bring.

God, however, gives gifts that are eternal. They never age, fade, deteriorate or fail to delight. He gave the gift of love with a baby in a manger. He gave the gift of truth through the teaching of Jesus. He gave the gift of eternal life in the form of the crucified and risen Christ. God gives the best gifts.

In the days of the Bible, times of great joy were frequently accompanied by the giving of gifts. This ancient custom was practiced in all nations throughout history; it finds its greatest expression today at Christmas. As we participate in gift-giving this year, let's follow God's lead and look for ways to also share love. My prayer is that none of you would "miss" Christmas this year.

Kevin L. Hodges

Lexington Community Bible Church

The ugliness of Christmas

"God proved His love on the cross. When Christ hung, and bled, and died, it was God saying to the world, 'I love you.'" -Billy Graham

Our society attempts to hide a hideous truth of Christmas, which, if left hidden, diminishes the beauty of what we celebrate. How often do we stop to ask the sobering question, "Why did God come to earth as a man?" Can we truly understand the beauty of Christmas if we neglect to understand its ugliness? Could the "why" be its ugliness?

I used to believe that, so long as I believed in God and was a good person, I would make it to heaven. Then I met the God of the Bible and realized my definition of good was not God's definition of good. For Jesus said, "No one is good but One, that is, God" (Matt. 19:17). This God was good, loving, merciful, and patient, yet He was also just. I began contemplating how He could allow me into heaven if He was truly just. Justice demands payment for wrongdoing, and I had done many "wrongdoings." God called my "wrongdoings" sin, for, "sin is lawlessness" (1 Jn 3:4). I had broken God's Law (The Ten Commandments, Exodus 20). Therefore, I had become an object of God's wrath, not His mercy (Eph. 2:3). I had sinned against a holy God, and justice demanded God's wrath upon my sin. I had fallen fatally short of God's perfect standard. I was not a good person, and, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

I then read how, "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Thus, there was no second chance. My decisions in this life would dictate my eternity. I claimed to be a "Christian," yet I found I was living a life in complete opposition to God. God, "... commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). I realized I had not truly repented. I claimed Jesus as Savior (called myself a Christian), yet denied Him as Lord (did not do what He commanded). What did all this mean? If I died that day and had to stand before the Judge of the universe, I was guilty and deserving of hell. Like Charles Spurgeon said so pointedly, "If you do not have death unto sin, you shall have sin unto death." As harsh as all that sounded, I realized it was about His glory, not mine (Isaiah 42:8). I had no authority to create a god that fit my lifestyle (which God calls idolatry—second commandment)—it was either accept the God of the Bible or perish, repent or remain dead in my sins (Luke 13:3).

This is all crucial to understand if we are to understand the true beauty of Christmas. You see, sin is like cancer, in that it steals life from its victims, and is a disease in which all of humanity has been diagnosed (Rom. 3:23). Sin separates us from a Holy God. If God does not unleash His wrath on our sin, He would be unjust... He would be a "bad Judge." Do you see the dilemma? God loves us and wants to forgive us, yet His holiness and just nature demand punishment for our sin. Our sin and God's justice prevented God forgiving us.

And so begins the Christmas story! "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). That is the, "reason for the season." If there was no sin, there would be no need for Christmas. "Why" did Jesus come? Sin! If cancer did not exist, no cure would be needed. But how much more beautiful is the cure when we know the ugliness of the disease. And so it is with Christmas; until we truly understand our own sinfulness (the way God sees it), we will never understand the true beauty of the Christmas message. Sin is the cause of all the hurt, suffering, disease and injustice in the world. It is responsible for every divorce, crime, pain, abuse and death. But above all, it separates us from God. Like a flower on the surface of the sea is our sin in the presence of a Holy God.

The answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article (why did God come to earth as a man?) is this, "...to demonstrate His righteousness (just nature)..." (Rom. 3:25). The genius of the cross is that it can solve the seemingly impossible dilemma. Christ's work on the cross allows God to forgive a sinful mankind while maintaining His holy and just nature. The wrath we deserve was poured out onto His Son, thus allowing Him the ability to legally dismiss our case and declare us, "Not Guilty." The cross was that one place in history where love, mercy, forgiveness, wrath and justice collided. It was pure genius. Because of this remarkable event, God extends forgiveness and eternal life on a conditional basis. If any man repents (turns away from sin and towards God) and puts His trust in Jesus Christ (makes Jesus his boss and obeys Him, John 15:14), God will forgive Him and grant him eternal life in heaven (free of sin). This is why Jesus came. He came to suffer, be persecuted, be tortured and die for our sins...to save us from hell. The Christmas message is about justice being displayed, beauty being exalted, love conquering sin and God being glorified.

Let this be a time for us all to be mindful of the reason why the Child in the manger had to be born. Let us understand the "why," thus allowing us to celebrate Christmas with the proper reverence it deserves. Let us take time to understand why Christmas truly is the most beautiful of all the seasons!

Eric Schonbachler

Heppner First Christian Church

FBLA to hold Christmas candy bake sale

The Heppner High School Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) will be having a Christmas candy bake sale this Thursday, Dec. 20, beginning at 10 a.m. in front of Heppner Family Foods.

The kids will be selling homemade Almond Roca, chocolate-covered peanut butter balls, chocolate-covered Oreo balls, peanut

brittle, rocky road, fudge with or without walnuts, hand-dipped pretzels, and more.

The FBLA kids are raising money for their regional competition in La Grande on Feb. 7. If the kids place in the top 10 in regionals, they qualify to compete at the state competition in Portland in April.

WISH LISTS!
We have a gift registry.
 Come fill out yours or ask to see who we have on file!
Try our sugar cookies!

We have Poinsettias & Centerpieces
 Visit or call our floral department 541-676-9426

LOTS OF STOCKING STUFFERS!
FREE GIFT WRAPPING!!

We will be open Sundays in December:

Dec. 23rd 10am - 4pm
 Dec. 24th- Closing at 5pm
 Dec. 25- CLOSED Merry Christmas
 Dec. 26- Open at 8:00 am

Wedding Tables
Spencer Alan Palmer & Krystal Marie Wagner
 December 28, 2012

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Christmas worship schedules

St. Patrick's Catholic Church:
 Christmas Eve, Dec. 24
 8:30 p.m.: Christmas Mass
 carols

9:00 p.m.: Candlelight procession, blessing of the nativity scene and vigil
 Mass
 Christmas Day, Dec. 25:

11 a.m.: Christmas carols and Christmas Mass
St. William's Catholic Church
 Christmas Day, Dec. 25

7 p.m. at Hope: A service with carols, communion and candlelight
 Sunday, Dec. 30,
 10 a.m. at All Saints:

8:45 a.m.: Blessing of the nativity scene, Christmas Mass and Christmas carols
Shared Ministry (Hope Lutheran/All Saints Episcopal)
 Sunday, Dec. 23,
 10 a.m. at All Saints:

Morning Prayer with lessons and carols
First Christian Church
 Christmas Eve, Dec. 24
 6 p.m.: Christmas Eve service
United Methodist Church
 Christmas Eve, Dec. 24
 7 p.m.: Christmas Eve service

Holy Eucharist for the Fourth Sunday of Advent
 Christmas Eve, Dec. 24,

Morrow County Clerk's Office will be closed December 24-26