

John 6:33-35, 41-51

The Bread of Life

Christmas Eve December 24th, 2015

A movie came out last year called “Saving Christmas” and in it the Kirk Cameron character was laying out all the history and symbolism behind the trappings of Christmas. What seems like just a gigantic commercial spending spree with the songs and decorations and lights and food designed to part you from your money can actually have great spiritual significance if you can see behind the tinsel, Santa and 6 flying reindeer.

I know some in their minds are correcting me now saying there are 9 flying reindeer, the point being I want you to know about the Christian symbols of Christmas as clearly as you know the story of Santa and his 9 reindeer. I want you to know the story behind the symbols of Christmas so that you can see the story of Jesus’ life death and resurrection in all the splendor and excess of the season.

Now the season itself, with December 25th being picked as the date of Jesus’ birth, some will say that day and time was once a Pagan holiday for the ancient Roman god Saturn. They are right. We as Christians simply took it over. We decided if there were going to be a worldwide party every year in the Roman Empire it ought to honor The Word become flesh, Jesus the Christ the One through whom the whole universe came into being. So we took it over.

Some bring up the Pagan origins of the celebration on December 25th to in some way diminish the Christian Holy Day of Christmas, but we can say, “Nay, we won.” In just 300 years the Christian faith took over the Roman Empire and banished the old gods.

And that day, December 25th, it was picked because it is the day that the daylight hours start to lengthen after the solstice on Dec. 21 or 22nd, which reminds us always that Jesus is the Light of the World. We took an old pagan symbol and boldly gave it new meaning!!

Now for Christians the biggest most religious symbol at Christmas is the Nativity. In our lifetimes we have seen 1000s of them. In fact for a while at First UMC of Mesa we would lay out 1000 different types of Bibles and a Live Nativity and our Mormon neighbors across the street would lay out 1000 different nativities. It was an M & M event.

Well let's look at the symbolism of the Nativity. Here is our Nativity that sits in front of our Pulpit.



This first picture has the basics as it would have been that first Christmas Eve so long ago. We have Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in a manger wrapped in "swaddling clothes" which no one knows anymore what "swaddling clothes" are. We have a donkey that Mary probable road on for 90 miles to get to Bethlehem. We have sheep and a shepherd.

This nativity is portrayed as being in a barn like wooden structure. The original stable was most probably a cave, which you see on the cover of your bulletin.



When I was in Israel two years ago I was impressed that much of the land was limestone. Limestone has many caves. Caves are great things to turn into stables.

You can see this in the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem which is built over the cave that they believe Jesus was born in. They really remodeled the cave with marble etc. so it is hard to imagine what it originally looked like.

But here is a picture of that place as it looks today.



Now near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is a cave that actually was used as a stable. We visited it. To this day in Israel they are using caves as stables. Here is a picture of one. Notice the house on top and the stable cave beneath.



And the manger, often it was a trough cut into the stone. Here is a stone feeding trough, a manger.



In the Grotto of the church of the Nativity you can see a similar trough cut into the side of the cave. This blows a lot of our images of the manger as we see it in most nativities. It is not made out of wood. It was stone and carved into the side of the cave.

But it reminds me of the mangers I remember the horses being fed out of when I was a little boy living on a forest service ranch. The manger was simply a square wooden box like that on the altar on which our communion bread sits.



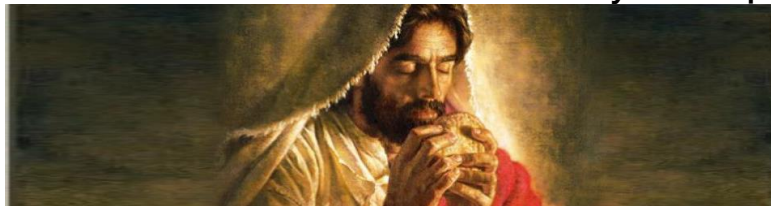
Here is what is built over the spot where it is believed Jesus was born. You can reach in that hole and touch the spot, which we did when we visited.



Now I was so impressed when I thought about it, that Jesus was laid in a manger, a feeding trough because I know who Jesus is: **“He is the bread of life.”**



If you believe in him you will never hunger or thirst eternally for he is the bread of life. He was born in Bethlehem which means, “The City of Bread.” His placement in a manger foreshadowed the time in which he declared, “I am the bread of life.” Many aspects of his birth prophesized his teaching and death on our behalf which is my main point today.



In the Luke passage this allusion to the future is so strong the manger is mentioned three times and why not? Jesus said, **“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”**

And yes his sacrifice, his death on the cross is also symbolized, or foreshadowed in a couple of ways. When Jesus the Christ entered the world he was wrapped in cloth (swaddling clothes) and laid in a manger in a cave.



I have found some traditions recognize this for they make “Baby Jesus bread” at Christmas. We tried it this week.



When Jesus was crucified he was wrapped in a cloth for a little while and laid in a man-made cave.



Both the swaddling clothes and the burial cloth contained Jesus for only a little while for what can contain the Word become flesh through which “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being through him was life and that life was the light of all people.” John 1:3-4

Beginning in the Renaissance many depictions of Jesus had him as the source of light. The baby Jesus glowed and that was a way of saying he is the Light of the World.



The sheep and the shepherds were a foreshadowing of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the One who knows us and we know him.

As he said in John 10:11 “I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep know my voice and I call them and they come to me.” The shepherds gathered at the angels bidding sent by God the Father and the Son.



We remember this as we see the sheep and the shepherds and are reminded that Jesus loves each of us, and knows each of us, as a shepherd knows his sheep.

Now what has been missing so far is the three wise men and their gifts. They are referred to as “wise men”, or astronomers, or astrologers, or even kings and the inference is that there were three of them. Not because the Bible says there were three, but that there were three gifts, and so the inference is that 3 different people brought them. Not 2, or six but 3.



Now I started out with a Nativity without the 3 wise men because they really weren't there that first night. They showed up 2 years after Jesus was born and this is figured because of the “Slaughter of the Innocents”, all male children under the age of 2, so it is assumed Jesus was about 2 when they showed up.

When I first heard the 3 wise men weren't at the Nativity that first Night, I thought, such heresy! What historical revisionism is this? But no, when you study it they didn't show up until later, but they look good in the pictures and we are sorta worn out by celebrating when we get to the Epiphany, which is when we in the church actually celebrate the appearance of Jesus and the star.

So what happens is the two stories get conflated into one. Could we actually endure 12 more days of buying and selling and parties and gifting? Not me, I couldn't afford it.



But their gifts foreshadow, or prefigure, or prophecy Jesus' life and death. Gold was the sign and symbol of royalty. And Jesus would reign

forever. Frankincense and myrrh are burial spices. This was part of the “spices and ointments.” the women prepared for Jesus’ body.

And Myrrh was the spice mixed with vinegar to deaden the pain when Jesus hung on the cross.

The Star above the manger is often in the form of a cross. It has one arm pointed up to God, one arm down to earth and two stretching out to receive the outstretched arms of Jesus: Jesus the light of the world.

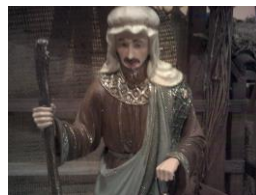


Finally for tonight there are Mary and Joseph. Mary is often portrayed with her hand or hands over her heart as in our church’s nativity.



This is a reminder of the scripture that says, “**But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart**” and also the prophecy of Simeon who said to Mary and Joseph, “**and a sword will pierce your own soul too.**”

Joseph, silent steadfast Joseph, his loyalty and commitment and love for his adopted son Jesus was a model for Jesus referring to God as Abba, Daddy, Father: as in “Our Father in heaven...”



There are many more symbols and meaning in just the simplest of Nativities, but these are enough to let you go home and think as you look at your nativity and remember.

And the colors of Christmas are all around us and this bold, riotous, garish clashing of colors also tells us much of our Savior and his life and sacrifice. Purple is the color of kings and is mostly used in churches.



The silver and gold of decorations speak to us of the gifts brought to the King, King Jesus.



The greens of Christmas trees and wreathes and elves speak of eternal life in Jesus. Often the green is matched with white to remind us of Jesus' sinless nature that grants us eternal life like on our Christmas tree.



And when red is matched with white like on Santa suits,



Berries, and Christmas tree balls



it reminds us that it was through Jesus' sinless nature and his blood our salvation was bought and we have life, life abundantly.

And wreaths, like those on our walls, being a circle of green reminds us of the eternal nature of God who has no beginning or end.



And the lights the Christmas lights, that is easy; they remind us that Jesus is the light of the world.



So in all the excess of Christmas, the lights, the colors, the carols, the symbols of the Nativity all of creation seems to shout, “Jesus is the bread of life. He is the light of the world. He is our Shepherd and we are his sheep.”

Let us take great joy in symbols and colors of this season.

Indeed it is a night to remember and celebrate in word and song and Holy Communion what Jesus, (and his name means Savior) did for us.

So now let’s join together in the Holy Sacrament of Communion. Let us get ready to partake of the Bread of Life. **Please turn to page 13 in your hymnals.**

It will also be on the screen. I have a special consecration for Christmas Eve; so watch carefully for your part to read as we prepare to receive the Bread of life.

In Jesus’ name amen