

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, this is a time of great celebration. New life has come into our world, and we observe it with wonder and awe. In this time when the predominant feelings are of joy, we hear your call to be mindful of those whose joy is muted. In this time when we celebrate the presence of family and friends, we remember those who are separated from family through distance, conflict, or loss. We remember those who receive the Christ child but find that the space their in does not promote celebration. For those we remember, for those we do not know, for those who have weighty cares on their shoulders today. For these concerns and for all those named here today, we lift them up to you.

God of love and care, we remember that your coming is above all to celebrate love and salvation from sin, from conflict, from despair. Nevertheless, this season can prompt divisiveness. This season can be a source of disagreement when we find that concepts we have do not necessarily match up against others. Help us, Our Source, to return to what really matters. Give us wonderment and curiosity to see the season through the eyes of a child, for their hearts are fixed upon learning instead of misguided senses of strength. Help us rest in you, for in you and in the incredible gift we find true strength, not through our own action. We pray all these things in the name of the one who comes to give us purpose, who comes to bring us strength, the Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together...

SERMON

Well, now that that part of worship is over, I need to be honest. We're just not having a strong worship experience. Jeff, you mispronounced several words in your reading of the scripture and your rhythm was off. I think you're gonna need to work on that. Connie, I heard a few notes that were wrong. Also, you didn't start at the right time

several times. Please get it together...Wait, does that really promote a worshipful attitude? What is a strong worship experience? Is a strong worship experience enforcing all things exactly or do we instead seek something more holy and authentic? Think about your best Christmas memories. Did they happen when you pushed everything to be just exactly so, or was it an incredible sense of love and family? A holy experience doesn't occur when we are forcibly making things exactly so but when we are well attuned to the Spirit's heart.

Now we are in the season of Christmas. The day may be over, but our celebrations continue throughout these twelve days before Epiphany. Our Savior Christ has come, God is born into the form of a child, and nothing is the same anymore. Our wonderment continues. Continuing with our final hymn for the series, I chose "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" as an observation of the season. It has a much different feel than a lot of the Christmas songs, and yet, it has a very similar feel. If there were one word I would ascribe to this hymn, it would be "strong." In Christmas is peace and strength in one, and yet, when we look at the culture, Christmas is a time of great cultural upheaval, when entrenched opinion tries to be enforced through false strength. This hymn demonstrates true strength. Let us dive into the hymn, "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" as we receive the meaning of the hymn, react to how this hymn counteracts how Christmas can go wayward, and, taking these lessons, seek to live faithfully in this difficult world that often misrepresents strength.

Turn with me, friends, to page 3052 of your green hymnbooks to find the text of the hymn. This is one of my favorite hymns of the Christmas corpus. "God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay, remember Christ our Savior was born upon this day, to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray, O Tidings of Comfort and Joy, Comfort and Joy, O Tidings of Comfort and Joy." So...where am I getting strength? It's a

very old hymn, and many of these words' meaning have changed into our world. I learned, in the book "Stories Behind the Best Loved Songs of Christmas" by Ace Collins, that the first line would be better read as "God keep you mighty, gentlemen." The hymn is a desire that God would keep us strong. This strength is not through arms or words but love. There is no emphasis on any rightness but the comfort and joy of Jesus Christ. The tone is a calling to recognize the true strength of the holiday comes from the tender coming of Christ and the blessed story of that love. In the grand scheme of things, there is nothing that should deeply trouble us, for true strength comes from the one who came most humbly. The moment carries its concerns; each day has its own worries, but when we are abiding in God and seeking to be God's people in faithful action, our joy grows and we find true strength.

Christmas hymns, indeed all hymns, are meant to speak to us today, to draw us back to importance. I hope that is one of the objectives that this series has fulfilled. As we cap it off, I feel this hymn can speak to a culture bent on the false strength of conflict. In a world where so much can easily work us up, this hymn calls us a new sense of strength in God, and with that strength is peace. "Let nothing you dismay." Don't let anything trouble your hearts, for Jesus Christ has come and earthly strength is overturned. "Tidings of comfort and joy." What, friends, what can stand in the way of the love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ? Indeed, nothing. And yet, I feel like they are not the most important focus for many Christians. Peace and joy seem secondary to other objectives. Friends, this ought not be so.

Christianity can be divisive in this age. Christmas should be a time of peace on earth and goodwill to all people, but in the greater world, it ends up becoming a battle. I struggle with this a great deal. As a pastor, I must confess that I am disturbed by talk every season that speaks of Christians warring in the name of Christmas. True, it can be bothersome

when traditions are changed and we begin something new. Yet, it seems that many, in the name of Christmas, argue about things based in a sense of human strength. Some revolt against the term "Happy Holidays," as if it spits in the face of Jesus. Some think that the term "X-Mas" is a perversion against Christianity. Some feel that in our nation that Christians are being persecuted for their beliefs. I feel these things are taken too seriously and become more about us. God is not so easily mocked; these are not insults to God. I cannot abide by any of these arguments when I seek to live in the strength of this hymn.

"Let nothing you dismay, remember Christ our Savior was born upon this day." That is the most important thing, but we lose it. I actually appreciate when someone says "Happy Holidays." The point is wishing you well. But it really is deeper. The original root of "Holiday" happens to be a shortened version of "Holy Day." It is essentially calling Christmas a Holy Day, which should be our attitude. At the same time, we have strayed from the original meaning of "X-Mas." Has anyone seen this picture before? It's called the Chi-Rho, which are the first two Greek letters of "Christ" or "Christos." To our eyes, they are XP. Often it is merely the Chi, the "X" which demonstrates Christ. The Chi-Rho and simply the Chi were some of the first symbols used to demonstrate Jesus Christ, even before the cross! When we say "X-Mas," we are using the Chi, not a mere X. As my father-in-law said, maybe we should call it Chi-mas instead, but either way, it is honoring the name of the Christ just as much, perhaps in a less obvious way. When I hear about persecution toward Christians in the United States, I am really bothered. Our second scripture lesson today spoke of honest persecution when Herod heard of the Christ child and killed, brutally murdered children, who stood in his way. Today, we in the United States do not fear death; we do not fear torture for our beliefs. There are places where that

is still the case. In respect of Christians killed in the past and for our brothers and sisters around the world who still face persecution, we minimize them when we use “persecution” inappropriately. We have no idea what persecution truly is.

So, how now should we live? Christ calls us at all times to be a light to the world, especially those who do not know him. What bothers me is how these arguments, although well intentioned, put Christianity into a negative light to those who do not follow Christ. Our definitions of strength and how we wield it can get in the way of the message. Some Christians think that we will be stronger when we push these opinions to the fore, but we are wielding our human strength instead of God’s strength. What is that? I believe we are most faithful when we live in the shape of the classic hymn: “They will know we are Christians by our love.” Love can be tough sometimes, but it is ultimately supportive. When we argue about Christmas, the rest of the world sees Christianity as arguing about small words when there is so much else to worry about. Indeed, I can see that point. There is hunger, war, pain; Christmas should be the alternative that brings people together, but it doesn’t. They think they are demonstrating strength, but in light of Christ, it isn’t. There is no sense of family and care, what makes us strong. Unfortunately, this version of the hymn does not give the final verse; let me share it: “Now to the Lord sing praises, All you within this place, And with true love and brotherhood, Each other now embrace; this holy tide of Christmas, All other doth deface, O Tidings of Comfort and Joy.” The final verse shows strength in embracing each other in true brother and sisterhood; this is Christmas. We lose our center, we lose our strength, when we forget our nature as family and our mission to care for all people and demonstrate God’s love. This is how others take notice.

We abide in God's strength when we evangelize well. We talked about in our Evangelism series what true evangelism is and is not. It begins with friendship. It's not about results. We share our story and ourselves. How would you share your best Christmas memories? I doubt many of us would say, "My best Christmas was when I didn't hear anyone say 'Happy Holidays' and I didn't see any place marked with 'X-Mas.'" That's like me yelling at Connie and Jeff trying to make a holy experience through enforcement. Instead, we experience Christmas the best when we are with our loved ones, when we share in our stories and love with one another. Many of these arguments are not based in friendship or any sense of love. We must always return to the example of Christ when we find an issue in our world that troubles us. I believe he would not say "Defend the name of the Christmas" but "Defend the meaning of Christmas." That defense is made when we love one another as Jesus loved us. Is that not the second part of the Greatest Commandment?

"God rest ye merry, gentlemen." Indeed, "God keep you mighty, gentlemen." We demonstrate God's mightiness when we take up the calling to be a light to the world, the light of Christ, to be a loving and caring presence to a world in need. This is the strength of Christ, and that's not manifested when we are focused on our own preferences. What matters at the end of the day? It's fine to have an opinion about these matters, but in the true loving Christian spirit, it must not become the focus of Christmas. Christ, above all, came to show true strength in God's love through his coming and guide us to what really matters. This child overturned worldly strength with love. When language becomes the most important thing, we have lost that course and focused on the detail. Take in, friends, the Christmas season, and "Let nothing you dismay." Thanks be to God, for God is certainly mighty and gives us true strength through love at our greatest need. Amen and Amen.