
What's the point of Christmas?
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Ah - Christmas Eve. Such a special time in the year and in the church, and I'm glad we are all here this evening. Christmas eve only comes once a year, and yet, I feel like I live this evening a few times every year actually, because Christmas eve services always reminds me of weddings.

For one thing, Christmas eve services and weddings both contain a lot of ritual elements, ritual elements that make the celebrations feel complete. Weddings need vows, readings, perhaps singing, and physical rituals like walking down the aisle and signing papers. Christmas eve services need readings, singing, the opportunity to give back to our community, and the chance to connect with friends.

There are differences of course - this little wedding from last May might have cost a little bit more than our service here this evening for example,
[slide: royal wedding]

But the main similarity between Christmas eve services and weddings for me is this. Both Christmas eve services and wedding services point to something that is vastly more important than the actual services themselves. And we can completely miss that if we are not paying attention.

For example, weddings. Don't get me wrong, weddings can be a lot of fun. They can be great opportunities for family and friends to come together to celebrate love. I'm not opposed to weddings. But at the same time, weddings are simply not very important when compared with what comes after the wedding - marriage. Weddings are usually little bubbles of "perfection" - the perfect dress, the perfect table-centres, the perfect minister of course. But marriage is the long-term, slow-burn living life in imperfect reality in partnership with another person. Marriage is about ups and downs, highs and lows, making mistakes and creating forgiveness in our midst. Marriage is about living in actual imperfect reality that includes love, joy, fear, pain, sorrow, grief, and everything else we bundle under the label "the human condition".

Weddings are great, but marriage is much more important. And you could attend 100 weddings and learn nothing at all about marriage.

Similarly, Christmas eve services can be a lot of fun. They can be great opportunities for family and friends to come together to sing and to celebrate love. I'm not opposed to Christmas eve services. But at the same time, Christmas eve services are simply not very important when compared to Christianity, which is about how we live our lives. How we become better human beings. How we live, cope, and thrive with the ups and downs of life, while making mistakes and creating forgiveness in our midst. How we live in community with others in actual imperfect reality that includes love, joy, fear, pain, sorrow, grief, and everything else we bundle under the label "the human condition".

The irony is that we talk about those important aspects of life and faith, healing and wholeness 51 weeks a year in this church. But tonight, we don't do that. Tonight we celebrate in ritual form the birth of Jesus. And I hope we all enjoy it. But the truth is you could participate in 100 Christmas eve services and learn absolutely nothing important about Christianity.

I like singing Christmas carols as much as anybody, but the essence of Christian faith is not just believing in a bunch of miracles. The essence of Christian faith is about healing and wholeness, both for individuals and for communities. The point of faith is how we deal with real life.

It does not matter whether or not we believe in these stories we are reading and singing tonight of shepherds, magi, angels, and all the rest of it. What matters is how we treat each other and ourselves the rest of the year. Theologically, Christmas is not even important. What matters is how we live our lives after Christmas.

Amen.