

Christmas is just plain weird. What other time of the year do you sit in front of a dead tree in your living room eating candy and snacks out of your socks?

I think almost everything about Christmas is tied up in traditions - or at least in some actions that carry meaning for us. Not doing the actions means missing something of the holiday. This year for the first time my mother decided not to put up a Christmas tree. It was just too much bother and she wasn't feeling all that great. She's never failed to put up a tree before, and thus a big part of Christmas feels like its missing for her.

If you were here on Christmas Eve you might remember I spoke about similar things - actions at Christmas that speak deeply to who we are and who we understand ourselves to be. Christmas shapes us in significant ways. Today's sermon continues on in that same vein.

The gospel reading for today might make you wonder why it is in there. I mean, it's a nice story and all, and it's good to know a little bit about Jesus' childhood, but in the grand scheme of things is it all that important? Does it really impact our faith to know that Jesus was circumcised in the temple when he was eight days old? Does it matter that two old codgers named Simeon and Anna came out with their canes and walkers to meet this Jesus boy? If you dare to have such questions of the Bible you find yourself asking, "Who really cares?"

No one really knows what was going on in our gospel writer Luke's mind when he decided to include this information, or perhaps exactly what the Holy Spirit intended with these stories, but they do give us something to carefully consider. Joseph and Mary were observant Jews, following the religious laws for their life. Following religious laws and regulations has fallen on hard times these days. Most people consider religious practices to be pointless, silly, leftovers from the past. We think we are enlightened and above such petty ritual. We reinforce the idea with our theology of justification by faith alone and not by religious rituals and actions. And yet if we do that we miss essential aspects of a life of faith.

Essential to Jews of Jesus' day was the praise of God in all of life. The Jewish law taught that God was to be honored in one's rising up and one's lying down, in going out and in coming in, in how one dressed and what one ate. The danger of course is that strict adherence to these things could mask a cruel and hateful spirit, a greed, and a pride in self-righteousness for those who could do it. You'll remember well that Jesus often attacked such false piety - cleansing the outside of the cup while the inside remained filthy. But don't forget that Jesus never actually criticized the practices themselves, only the false use of them.

Religious disciplines, rules and practices are important in a life of faith. R. Alan Culpepper in his commentary in the New Interpreter's Bible says this (and this is a long paragraph), "The pressures of secularism and modern life have again reduced the significance of ritual observances in the lives of most Christians. Busy schedules, dual-career marriages, and after school activities mean that families eat fewer meals together. Prayer before meals and family Bible study are observed in fewer homes today than just a generation ago. For many, religious rituals are reduced to church attendance at Christmas and Easter

and to socially required ceremonies at births, weddings, and funerals. The marking of both daily and special events with rituals that recognize the sacredness of life and the presence of God in the everyday is practically extinct. In the minds of many it is associated either with superstitions and cultic practices of the past or the peculiar excesses of religious fanatics. The result has been that God has receded from the awareness and experience of everyday life. Many assume that God is found only in certain places, in sacred buildings, in holy books, or in observances led by holy persons. Their lives, on the other hand, move in a secular realm devoid of the presence of the holy. Daily experiences are reduced and impoverished. They have no meaning beyond themselves, no opening to transcendence. Little room for mystery remains the everyday as it becomes increasingly subject to secularism and technology. What have we lost by removing ritual observances from our daily experience?"

He goes on with something for us to think about, "The challenge to modern Christians, therefore, is to find effective rituals for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary. We need to learn to greet the morning with gratitude; to celebrate the goodness of food, family, and friendship at meals; to

recognize mystery in beauty; and to mark rites of passage - like a sixteenth birthday and the freedom and responsibility that come with a driver's license. Rituals are not restrictive; they celebrate the goodness and mystery of life." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9, Pg. 74-5)

Perhaps you have many faith practices in place already. The fact that you're here worshipping on the Sunday after Christmas suggests that I'm probably 'preaching to the choir' on this; but it is vitally important to have faith rituals in daily life. Reconnecting with the God who created you, sustains you, and keeps you always helps you to grow in confidence and strength.

Daily faith rituals need not be complex. I know many of you use the Christ in Our Home devotional booklets. They can be great. I don't know why we didn't receive the next issue and I have to look into that. Also the Small Catechism that Martin Luther wrote gives little prayers and observances for getting out of bed, going to bed and at mealtimes. Each need only take a few seconds and they can easily be done individually. Luther's suggestions are as simple as asking God for good sleep

and safety through the night, thanking God for ordinary things like food and shelter. And asking God for guidance through the day.

Performing such daily rituals may seem pointlessly simple, yet in time they deeply nurture faith greatly.

Joseph and Mary were observant Jews. They appear to have lived their faith for all the right reasons - because it brought them into right relationship with God. May we do the same, and although we may not have God incarnate growing up as a part of our household the way they did, we will know God's presence just as surely and confidently live every day by faith. Amen