

THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

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Rev. Lori Fleming

Rev. Lori Fleming: So, there's this elderly gentleman, and the police stop him at 2 o'clock in the morning. The policeman says, "What are you doing out at 2 o'clock in the morning?" He goes, "Oh, I'm going to a lecture about not drinking and not smoking and taking care of yourself." The policeman says, "Who gives that kind of lecture at 2 o'clock in the morning?" The man said, "My wife."

[Congregation laughs and claps]

Rev. Fleming: So, hello to everyone out there watching us on the internet. We are glad you're here this morning. We feel like your presence is in the Sanctuary with us.

Our talk is entitled, "The Reason for the Season." They've been playing Christmas music since before Halloween. How many of you are tired of it? How many of you are wondering how you are going to get everything done in the next two-and-a-half weeks? That's true; there are only two-and-a-half weeks before Christmas. All the shopping, the wrapping, the writing cards, the getting recipes together, the food... You know, all of that stuff!

This morning I'm going to talk about some Christmas practices through the ages, how the Christmas traditions formed with archetypes, and how we can liberate Christmas from the commercialism of Black Friday and the decorations and all of that, and really focus on the reason for the season.

Are you aware that we don't actually know exactly when Jesus was born? In the four Gospels, only Matthew and Luke mention the birth story of Jesus, and you have to put them together like a puzzle to flush out the whole story. In Luke, Chapter 2, Verse 8, it says that the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks at night. Now, the only time they would do that would be in the spring, when the ewes were going to be lambing, having their babies. So, that's kind of curious if they say they were watching the sheep at night, and that's when Jesus was born. So, I don't know. We don't really know the correct date that Jesus was born. I guess it really doesn't matter. The early church mostly focused on Jesus' crucifixion and on the feast days. Jesus lived in this world – this Greco-Roman world – where most of the people were pagans. Now, I say that word not as a pejorative. Pagan means people who believe in more than one god. That's it. Don't make something up. I don't want to hear about it later, okay?

[Congregation laughs]

Thank you. So, in this pagan world, all of the gods had their own holidays. They had their gods of the forest, gods of the hunt, gods of love, gods of the mountain, gods of thunder... And they all had their own holiday. So, this is the world that Jesus was born into. And with all of these competing holidays, the church was trying to figure out how to make themselves stand out.

For example, the Jewish people had already been celebrating Hanukkah since the second century B.C. Hanukkah means dedication. The temple had been taken over by the war with Maccabees in Syria, and the Jewish people were able to get back the temple. You can imagine what that must have been like, because the temple was the focus of their worship. To have that taken away and desecrated was just a terrible, terrible thing. So, they got the temple back. They cleansed the altar. They rededicated the temple, and it was their custom to keep a cruse of oil on the altar burning at all times. Usually, a cruse of

oil, which was a small amount, would burn for 1 day. But this time, miracle of miracles, one cruse of oil lasted eight days. That's how we get the eight days of Hanukkah. It is the festival of lights. You can see we still use light today because it represents the light of God.

The Roman people celebrated this ruckus holiday called Saturnalia. It was celebrated from December 17 through December 24, and it was in honor of the God of Saturn, the God of agriculture. Now, we just had all of our fall festivals. I took my grandson to the McDonald Ranch with the pumpkins and all. He had an absolute blast. So, we still do that today, but this Saturnalia was big. It was like Mardi Gras in New Orleans and Carnivale in Rio, all rolled into one. There was feasting, carousing, gambling, and all kinds of things I can't talk about that go on in church. The slaves would put on their master's clothes and tell the masters what to do, and even the kids would tell their parents what to do. It was a time of role reversal, all done in fun.

On the winter solstice, December 31, there was Juvenalia, which was a feast for Roman children. The Roman military, many of them practiced a religion called Mithraism, where they celebrated the infant God, Mithra, who was a bull. There was a blood sacrifice. I know you all watch NCI and all that. You've seen the morgue. You know what that's about. They would cleanse themselves in the blood of the bull.

So, this is what Jesus' world was like. He was born into this era with all of these festivals marking all of these time periods. Chronographers, who are people who mark different time periods, decided that the world must have been created on the spring equinox, on March 21. And since it says in the Bible that light was created on the fourth day, then light must have been created on March 25. Since Jesus is the light of the world, then he must have been conceived on the day of light, March 25, and therefore, he is born on December 25. That just about explains it all, doesn't it?

[Congregation laughs]

It's as good a day as any right? So, the first recorded Feast of Nativity by the Roman Catholic Church was held in Rome in 336 A.D. That's a long time after Jesus lived! So, in those three centuries, the church fathers were coming up with what the belief system of the church was, and it was the first ladder and counsel that would solidify this date. The Feast of Nativity was just like all the other feasts that they had back then, and that we have today. There was food and drink and people celebrated. They came together with their family and their friends. They shared a special meal with special ingredients that maybe they didn't eat the rest of the year. You know, they saved it for the good times! They might make grandma's favorite mac 'n' cheese, whatever that family recipe was. You have one of those too, right? We have a couple of those in our room. It's a time of coming together, being with friends and family, celebrating together, and a happy joyous time. That's the reason for the season!

Early Europeans marked the longest day of the year, the winter solstice, as the beginning of the new year, and of longer days and the rebirth of the sun, especially the Northern Europeans. They wouldn't see a lot of sun during the winter, because they are so far north. They would slaughter some of their livestock, because they couldn't keep all the livestock through the winter, and they would have a big feast. Some of it they would prepare for the winter, but they would have this giant feast. The Germans honored the god, Odin, who was a frightening God who flew over the houses at night blessing some people and cursing other people. You know, like you're going to be naughty or nice? The Norse and Scandinavians celebrated Yuletide, where they'd get a gigantic log, they would light it, and they would

party until the thing burned down. Maybe you have seen bakeries that have replicas of the yule log, but there again we have light. The light of God.

Christmas became a full-fledged holiday by the 9th century, and it was always featuring feasting, drinking, caroling, riotous behavior, and carrying candles, because people didn't have electricity back then. But in the 17th century, the Puritans disapproved of all of this ruckus behavior in the name of Jesus, and they said that Christmas was a blasphemous holiday, so they wouldn't allow the people to have it. In Boston from 1659-1681, all of Christmas was completely banned. Oliver Cromwell canceled Christmas in England in 1645. All decorations were forbidden. No one was allowed to go out in the streets and carol or anything like that, and if anyone was caught cooking meat, they were arrested.

By the 18th century, Christmas began to develop as the holiday we know today. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who were German, brought Christmas trees to Windsor Castle in 1846. And they made an engraving of themselves and their children in front of this Christmas tree with the decorations and real live candles on it, sent it out to all their friends, and that started the revolution of people having Christmas trees. The tree had candles on it, which represent the light of spiritual illumination, and evergreen trees and evergreen garlands have been used throughout history by the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Hebrews, and all kinds of nature worshipers. It represents life and vitality and growth being deeply rooted into a firm foundation of spiritualness. So, think about that when you decorate your Christmas tree! Think about the tree being life and vitality and the lights being the light of God. It puts a whole new spin on the Christmas tree, doesn't it? That's the reason for the season.

By Medieval times, the western Germans used fir trees to represent the tree in the Garden of Eden in their mystery plays about Adam and Eve, and they used apples because that's what they had on hand. There were no apples actually in the Garden of Eden, but that's actually where that came from. They decorated the tree of life with candles, of course. Some people have so many lights on their house that you can see them from space! I drove home the other night, and there's a house close to my neighborhood. They had lights on the roof. They had lights on every window, lights all over the yard. I could just see their electric meter spinning so fast they probably could've created electricity from that! Some of us put stars on top of our Christmas tree, representing the star that the Magi saw which guided them to where Jesus was born. A star always represents spiritual illumination, and has its own light, so that's the illumination part. The star from the east always means spiritual. So, the star from the east we think of spiritual illumination, which was exactly what Jesus was trying to teach us all along: a new way of thinking, a new way of coming together in unconditional love.

In the 20th century, Christmas has become way too commercial in my opinion. How many of you participated in Black Friday? I spent about two hours on the Internet yesterday ordering stuff. That's okay; they're gonna bring it to me. It's a good thing. Some neighborhoods have contests for who has the best decorated house. I don't know how you could possibly pick. Some of the ones in my neighborhood are so over the top. We have those blow-up things. We have a Santa, and we have some snowmen and a polar bear with penguins riding on him. It rained last night. When it rains, it flips the circuit breaker off, and they're all lying on the ground dead.

[Congregation laughs]

I'll get in trouble with my homeowner's association if I don't get them back up, but I can't turn it back on until it dries out. Oh well. Do you know that Americans spend \$8 billion on Christmas decorations every single year? Holy cow! Some people like artificial trees. Some people like real trees.

But the idea of the holiday is getting that perfect gift for someone you love, knowing that they're just going to love it and maybe use it all year. European families exchange gifts on Christmas Eve. Most Americans, I think, exchange on Christmas Day. We always did. The kids would come running down the stairs in their pajamas and dive into the presents, throwing paper everywhere. Mom and dad would be there with their camcorder. How many of you have a secret stash of VHS tapes of your children on Christmas morning that you don't even have a VHS player to play it anymore? Yeah, I know. They can fix that for you! Of course, my daughter won't let me show any of those pictures because she was afraid she had bed head. She wants to look good.

Many churches, like our own church, don't even have services on Christmas day anymore. We have ours on Christmas Eve so that we can spend time with our family. Presents represent giving of ourselves, of our love, of our time. I was sitting on the couch last night under an afghan that my sister crocheted for me 30 years ago. Isn't that cool? A present that just keeps on giving. I felt like she was giving me a hug. It's about giving time to our family and friends, about being together. It's about just celebrating the holiday.

You know, when I moved from Cincinnati to Florida, I had to get used to the idea of lights on palm trees and warm weather in the winter. It's warmer where I lived in Florida than it is here in the winter. But, I really liked when they would wrap the white and the red lights around the palm trees, and they looked like candy canes. I thought that was pretty cool. In Australia, it's summertime at Christmas time, so all the locals go to Bondi Beach, where they have a barbeque. They put ribs and steaks on the barbie, they share it all, and they go swimming, have Frisbee. And Santa wears shorts. Then, the people go, in Melbourne – tens of thousands of people – go into the city center, and they sing Christmas carols and have candles. You know how pretty it is in here on Christmas Eve when we have all our candles? Imagine 10,000 people with candles. That's the light of God, my friends! Candles represent the light of spiritual illumination.

In Bangladesh, which is Eastern Pakistan, they cut down banana trees and they have big leaves, so they make them an arch, down both sides of the sidewalk into the church. They take a piece of bamboo, and they tie it across. They drill little holes in it and put oil and wicks in it and light them. They're luminaria. Doesn't that sound pretty? To light the lights into the way to the church?

In Labrador, Canada, they save turnips which are purple and white, and they give them to the children. They cut a little hole in it and put a candle in there, and the children hold the turnips with the candles in them while they sing Christmas carols. I can't think of anything sweeter than that.

In the Czech Republic, you've heard the Christmas carol about King Wenceslas? Well, King Wenceslas was a wonderful, wonderful king. He was a really good man and was a devout Christian, but his mother hated Christianity. His brother actually killed the king on the church steps. As the king lie there dying, he said, *"God, please forgive my brother for what he has done."* Just like Jesus on the cross said, *"Please God, forgive them. They know not what they do."* So, what if we were to add forgiveness to our practice at Christmas time? What if we were to let go of those petty squabbles that we have with our siblings or our neighbors? A couple of people this last week have counseled with me, because Thanksgiving dinner

wasn't the loving, open family they expected it to be. Because little Johnny still thinks that mom likes Suzie better than him. Can we let go of that? Can we forgive all of that? Can we just look for the good in our family, friends, and the people who are driving on the 101? Can we be compassionate?

[Congregation laughs]

That's a hard one, isn't it? You know, wouldn't it be great to have a Christmas where everybody just had fun, and nobody minded if they lost the game of Monopoly or whatever? I think that's the reason for the season.

In the Czech Republic, Svatý Mikuláš, who was Santa Clause, is believed to have climbed down from heaven on a golden rope, and he brings with him an angel and a devil with a switch. The gold represents purity. Gold is an inert metal, and it is very valuable, so it represents prosperity. He comes down with the angel, who is the messenger of God. So, if you've been good, the angel blesses you, and if you haven't been good, the devil switches you. It's that naughty or nice thing again!

All over Europe, people go to midnight mass and, on Christmas Day, the church is filled with Christmas trees and wreaths and candles all representing life and vitality and the light of God. In England, the day after Christmas is called Boxing Day, and young boys go out with little clay boxes and they collect money. In Bethlehem, the town where Jesus is said to have been born, there is a Church of the Nativity. On Christmas, it has flags, candles and lights, and the doors are wide open, welcoming people in. People come from all around the world. They crowd all on the sidewalk, in the yard, and up on the roof, and there is a procession. Galloping horsemen come down the road, and behind them are police mounted on Arabian horses. Behind them, there's a solitary horseman on a black horse with a cross who comes behind them. Behind them are all the church officials, all the politicians, and they all come into the Church of the Nativity. The visitors get to go down the winding stairs into the grotto, where there's a silver star in the floor, because they believe that's the place where Jesus was born. All of the houses in Bethlehem are marked with a cross over their door and home-made manger scenes. There is a star set up on a pole in the village square, like the star from the east that represents spiritual illumination.

So, I've been rushing around trying to get things ready for Christmas. I know you have been, too. I went shopping the other day, and I ran out of time before I got everything done. Christmas music is starting to get old, but in all this craziness, what's the reason for the season? It's not necessarily about the presents and the decorations. It's not about spending too much money. It's about spending time with your family and your friends. It's about seeing the good in them. It's about letting go of all those petty things you've been holding, to lift each of us up into a higher consciousness. It's about laughing and creating memories. When you see the Christmas tree, remember it represents growth, vitality and being firmly planted in spiritual principle, and that the lights on the tree and the candles represent the light of God that's in you. Open your hearts. Shine out that light this Christmas season. Begin practicing forgiveness as a spiritual practice. It will bring more good into your life, I promise. Jesus said, *"You are the light of the world."* So, we are here to shine that light, and that's the reason for the season. Namaste.

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