

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS EVE | DECEMBER 24, 2023

ISAIAH 9:2-7 | PSALM 96 | TITUS 3:4-7 | LUKE 2:1-14

Last May, I went to an event that our friends from Temple Beth Rishon held at the Wyckoff Library. A donor from TBR had given a collection of books about religious tolerance to the library, and Rabbi Waxman invited us to come out to show support. As part of the event, Laura Leonard, our library director, talked a little bit about why libraries matter to our communities. I expected that she would say something about books or reading. But she said something that I wasn't expecting. She said—paraphrasing—that libraries matter because they are one of the few places left in our communities where you're not expected to buy something.

We live in a culture in which we are defined primarily as producers and consumers. First, we produce. We work. Almost as soon as children start talking, we start asking them what they want to be when they grow up. We're not asking what kind of people they want to be, what values will be important to them, what kinds of relationships they want to have. No, we're asking for job titles. Astronaut. Doctor. Project manager.

And for many Americans, especially younger Americans, work is no longer just a way to support ourselves financially but our primary way of building meaning, identity, and community in our lives.¹ Our productivity isn't just a financial necessity to make life possible. It's a moral virtue that makes our lives Good.

And what do we do with all that we produce? We consume. We acquire. We buy. We conflate our sense of worth and value with the sum total of our possessions. Sometimes these are not even things that we need or things that we want but things to make us appear a certain way to those around us. It's not enough to keep up with the Joneses, we need to be one step ahead of them.

Neither of these is inherently bad. The point of this homily is not that you should quit your job, enter a monastery, and take a vow of poverty. But when these activities become ends in and of themselves, they cease to be life giving. And when they become the most important identity in our lives, they lead us only to despair. Because if you measure your life by how much you produce, you could always be doing more. And if you measure your life by how much you consume, you will never have enough.

Beneath all the familiar trappings of the nativity, shepherds, wise men, mangers, etc., the Christmas story is really a story about what it means to be human. For the life of Jesus is nothing other than a human life lived completely open to God's generative and sustaining love. And so Christmas offers us an alternative, truer vision of what it means to be human. It reminds us that what makes us human is not our ability to produce and consume. What makes us human is the invitation to receive and give the love of God.

In today's reading from Titus, the author reminds us that Christ was born among us "not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to [God's] mercy." In other words, Christ was born not among us because of something we produced. Mary was not selected to be the Mother of God because she put together a great application

¹ Derek Thompson calls this "workism." Also see Simone Stolzoff's *The Good Enough Job*.

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and had a killer set of references. Christ is born among us because God wanted to share the fullness of the divine life with us. God loves us not because we're lovable. God loves us because God loves.

And having received this unconditional, no-strings-attached love, we are empowered to share it with those around us. To love people not because of what they can do for us or how they can make us feel or how they can meet our needs but simply because they are loved by God.

The American theologian Kathy Tanner calls these lives of receiving and giving "graced lives."² Graced lives are not enviable lives. Graced lives are not lives that will impress your neighbors. Graced lives are not lives that look great on LinkedIn. Graced lives are not lives that are spared the pain and uncertainty and tedium of being alive. Graced lives are simply lives that participate in God's gift giving. That receive the gifts of God and extend these gifts to others.

This is the meaning not just of Christmas but of life itself. What is life for? Not to achieve. Not to succeed. Not to produce or consume or acquire. But simply to participate in God's unending love, gratefully receiving God's "richly poured out" gifts and generously pouring out our selves for others.

This is the kind of life that we celebrate every Sunday when we gather at Christ's table. A place with no outcasts, no strangers, no unwelcome guests. A place where you do not have to produce anything. A place where you are not expected to buy something. A place where we receive the fullness of God's grace. And are sent to share that love with a hungering world.

Christ's life, graced life, all life, begins and ends at table. Because our life begins and ends in the child born this night.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² Kathy Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 57.