

A Pandemic Christmas? Covid-19 and the Festival of the Incarnation of Our Lord

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you?" – Hebrews 1:5

With so many beloved aspects of our Christmas celebration denied to us this year, we are searching for a context to make sense of it all. That context can not be "pandemic response," neither pro- nor con, for the simple reason that the pandemic can not be both the cause of our distress and the source of our comfort. Nor does "technology" provide us with the context we need for our celebrations, because technology is merely a means of delivery across time and space. At a deeper level, neither of these can provide the context we need for our Christmas celebrations because they are both aspects of the idolatry of modern times—Humanity as its own God—and its version of the Gnostic heresy—the disembodiment of spirit as the goal of existence. Secular global culture has been able to accommodate Christmas to both its idolatry and its heresy—that's partly why we are feeling so bereft. God however has spoken: the restrictions make it impossible to celebrate Christmas that way this year—it becomes either an act of accommodation that supports the cultural Christmas in some minimally unsatisfying way, or an act of defiance remote from the true meaning or spirit of the festival. Neither course holds much promise for the Church as we seek to celebrate Christmas this year.

As always, as Lutheran Christians, we turn to the Word of God to find context for our faith. Covid-19 has brought our accommodations into the light of day; our frustrations expose how far we have moved from celebrating the Incarnation of Our Lord toward participating in the "Christmas season." But it has also created a new space for us, a space in which we can meet many who have been long shut out of the festivities of "the Christmas season:" the alone who can not access it, the poor who can not afford it, the sick and dying who can not attend it, the wounded and grieving who cannot abide it, the single-minded who can not accommodate it, the persecuted who can not accept it, the doubter who can not adapt it, and the atheist who can not appropriate it. In this space we are invited to join "the whole Church in heaven and on earth" in celebrating the Incarnation of Our Lord, which Hebrews 1:5 so succinctly expresses: the day marked in the cycle of time to mark the day when The Son of God entered time by the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem all times from the bondage to decay in the love of the Father. In the context of the Incarnation of Our Lord, our celebration is not bound by the times, as though these influences from COVID-19 are merely "temporary" and our adjustment is just "contemporary reality." Rather in celebrating the Incarnation of Our Lord time itself is fulfilled despite the spirit of the times! We are drawn therefore into the End of Times, just as Hebrews 1:1-5 says:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the Name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you?"

In the context of COVID-19, the celebration of the Incarnation of Our Lord not only makes sense, but even testifies: The Saviour has come! the time is fulfilled! The times are shortened! Christ is coming soon! May we all be prepared as the Spirit of God prepares the celebration! Amen