

**“God Wants to Be a Priority”**  
**From “Lies We Believe About God” by Wm. Paul Young**

**December 29, 2019**

by Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander

Scripture: Matthew 22:34-40

Reading: “Everything Is Waiting for You” by David Whyte

**I. Priority and Balance**

It’s that time of year again... the Sunday after Christmas... and here we are, the wholehearted Christians! Thank you for joining us this morning to celebrate the actual 12 days of Christmas.

The church calendar year begins with the season of Advent, the preparation of our hearts and our minds for the coming, once again, of the Christ child in our midst. God with us, Emmanuel. Then we get a brief hour on Christmas Eve to celebrate the actual event, and then, often, you don’t see anyone from our community again until the full 12 days of Christmas are over and we come together to celebrate Epiphany, the season following Christmas in the church calendar.

But here we are, gathered to take in the fullness of Christmas on Day 5 of the 12. How has this event of the Christ child changed your life so far in this new age? You have had 5 days of paying particular attention to the love that permeated creation at the birth of Jesus, and how this activity of God dwelling with us, transforms us. Have you noticed any changes in your behaviors and living patterns this week? How have you spent your time? Has this been a “normal” week, or have you spent more time visiting with friends and family than usual? Have you given and received more hugs than usual? And if things seem different, how has this different-than-normal behavior felt? Is it something you wish you would feel more often?

I gotta say, If I could get two days in a row off every week, and spend that time cooking, eating, playing, and being in conversation with my friends and family, as I have been this past week, my overall life experience would improve considerably, which I believe would translate into a far more frequent sense of joy and wonder in my life. This is why I love Christmas so much. Every year I experience a fuller version of the way I live, and realize that it is possible to intentionally live this way on an ongoing basis.

In the glow of my Christmas joy and wonder, I sit and try to figure out what I can adjust in my schedule and in my intention to reach out more to people in order to experience these same feelings throughout the year. Some of you might name these calls for adjustments “resolutions,” and often these thoughts pass through your head just before the New Year rolls in. What a perfect time to make a fresh start, we think, and we sit down to make a list of things that we want to prioritize in our lives for the next 12 months, so that our lives may become fuller and more meaningful for us by year’s end. How many of you have done this in past years? And how have those adjustments and resolutions worked for you? Are you able to stick with them? And, if so, are these adjustments providing you the same sense of joy and wonder throughout the year that you had hoped for?

In my experience, I stick to my resolve for about 2-3 weeks of the new year, and then all the details of life start to build up again and the momentum of those demands push us forward in ways that we had not intended. We find ourselves completely off our well-intended resolutions, all over again, and we give up on changing things, in order just to keep our heads above the waterline for one more year.

Prioritizing is a good idea. Setting goals and being intentional about moving toward them are helpful ways to organize ourselves and accomplish the things we have set our minds on. But what happens to the joy in this process? Where is the wonder in it all? Those warm fuzzies you felt just sitting and watching the lights sparkle on the Christmas tree, are harder to find in our everyday ordinary patterns and routines. And "Balance?" I'm not sure this is even a real thing. I've never been able to "Balance" my life into manageable categories and periods of equally distributed energy levels. In my life, it's always, do the next thing that is needed, whatever amount of energy and resources it takes. That is demand and supply... it is nowhere near balanced.

After 50 years of this New Years' experience, I have stopped setting resolutions. And I have realized that instead of Christmas changing my everyday life, I have allowed my everyday life to change my experience of Christmas. It's harder to fully trust in the joy and wonder during Christmas when your experience tells you it won't last.

Wow! "Merry Christmas," right? Aren't you glad you got up to come here this morning? What is so Merry about all of this?

Last summer we took a few weeks to talk about the book "Lies We Believe About God," by Wm. Paul Young in preparation for his visit with us here in September. In his book, Paul talks about some assumptions we make about who God is and how God relates to us. Rather than being helpful insights, often these assumptions we make get in the way of us truly experiencing the actual activity of God among us, and keeps us from fully participating with God in that activity. One of the "lies" Paul writes about is this whole understanding of "priorities" and how we often fall for the false premise that God *wants* to be a priority in our lives.

It is the word priority itself that Paul says is the problem with this idea about God. The term priority works out in our lives in the form of check lists and hierarchical power concepts, rather than mimicking the way God continually creates in the world. I wouldn't say God is random in creating all that is, but I don't believe there is an order of importance implied in that creating. Imagination and creativity don't really work through lists and inflexible structure. So, if we believe God is creative and imaginative (just look at the platypus!), why would we ever say that God wishes us to make God our priority? The word "priority," itself, isn't even in the bible.

When we use the concept of priority, we are working from our own human organizational patterns. "Priority" is a word we use often in business or in workshops regarding efficiency and strategic planning. I am actually very good at this kind of framework in my life, building structures is my forte. But when I stop to think about how those structures are built, I realize that much of the time their foundations are built on control and predictability, rather than creativity and imagination. I have to be very intentional about building in space for options and the unexpected scenarios in my systems, so as to not limit what might actually occur when people come together to live into their relationships with one another.

Paul Young explains it this way:

*“Sometimes we relate to God as if magic were involved. We wouldn’t call it that, but that’s how we think it works. If I have the right formula (blood of a newt, eye of a toad) and the right words (abracadabra or shazam), I will get the right result (love potion number 9). The goal is control, or at least certainty. If we pray the right prayer, we can get God off the throne and doing something—whatever it is that we think we need or want. Our formula could be works (do enough of the right activities, such as prayer, giving, reading the Bible, etc.), or it could be faith (if I have enough and exercise it properly, then . . .). Whatever it is, if we perform the formula, we believe that God will come through.”*

We think we can control our lives, and God’s activity in them, by making lists, setting resolutions, and having the “right” intentions so that everything will work out in the end. Only we are constantly met with disappointment and frustration when our efforts get interrupted and our best laid plans don’t work out the way we thought they would. In this disappointment, we believe the failure is on us. Perhaps we did not follow the rules closely enough, we didn’t pray enough, or in the right way, so now we are not connected to God the way we need to be for the wonder and the joy to make an appearance in our lives. We never stop to consider that our assumption that God works the same way we do, might be the faulty piece in this whole equation. What if God isn’t paying attention to our lists and our priorities, but rather is supporting the very nature and core of who we are in relationship with God and with each other? What if Christmas is not about setting the world on the right path again so that the priorities we need are clear to everyone, and all things will then work out exactly the way God intended in the end? What if Christmas is about discovering the joy and wonder of God’s creative activity in all of us no matter what path we are on or what steps we took to be right where we are?

What if Christmas is about how God loves us and is in relationship with us? What if you talk about God’s love entering the world, right where we are, so that God can be with us (Emmanuel)? How, then, could this love be dependent on what we do? Think about the love you experience in your own life and the relationships you have with others. Is your love for others based on their accomplishments and priorities, or something else? Do they love you because you have accomplished the right balance in your life?

Spend some time during our music thinking about how love moves in your life. How does the love you experience change your activity in the world?

Music Offering

## **II. Central and Present**

**Poem: “Everything Is Waiting For You” by David Whyte**

Your great mistake is to act the drama  
as if you were alone. As if life  
were a progressive and cunning crime  
with no witness to the tiny hidden  
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny  
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,  
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;

the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding  
out your solo voice. You must note  
the way the soap dish enables you,  
or the window latch grants you freedom.  
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.  
The stairs are your mentor of things  
to come, the doors have always been there  
to frighten you and invite you,  
and the tiny speaker in the phone  
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the  
conversation. The kettle is singing  
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots  
have left their arrogant aloofness and  
seen the good in you at last. All the birds  
and creatures of the world are unutterably  
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

Assuming that God works through systems, structure and priorities like we do, limits who God is and doesn't leave room for God to work in the mysterious ways that we know God is capable of. Setting priorities and trying to balance things in order to control their outcome, is a human function, not a divine one. Think about the baby in the manger again... what is God "prioritizing" in this scenario? How efficient is it to send a baby to overthrow an oppressive government? Nope, the ever-creating activity of God cannot be controlled or manipulated; it is something altogether different than systems and structures. Instead, God works through an endless flowing current of love that binds us to one another. Period. There is no pre-determined outcome God is moving toward as efficiently as possible. Rather the love is given, and the outcome is the joy it creates. There is no predictability about it.

Christmas reminds us that God interrupts our plans and our systems. Paul Young says,  
*"Instead of a list of priorities, Jesus introduced us to something completely different: a moving, dynamic, living relationship in which God is not first, but central. This is not a flowchart, but rather a mobile where everything is moving and changing as our choices and participation are woven inside the activity of the Holy Spirit. Lists are about control and performance; God is about adventure and trust. If God is at the center of our lives, then so is love and relationship, since God is profoundly both. God doesn't want to be first on your list, but rather central to **everything**."*

If God is central, *incarnate*, to all things, there is never a separation from God, and therefore all things are possible. There is no "right" and "wrong" but rather energy moving in all directions, creating as it goes! This is what God is up to at Christmas, and every day. It is pervasive and lasting. It fills us, renews up and sets us up for the richest of experiences with one another. Everything is waiting for you.

So, set your priorities and make your resolutions to help you attain your personal goals. These are not bad things. They only turn bad if you assume God works this way too. If things start to crumble a bit, or the outcomes you experience are different from what you were expecting, don't be disappointed and blame yourself for failing, or thinking that somehow God is disappointed in you. Rather, ask yourself,

what is God doing through this unexpected outcome? Is there something I am missing by limiting myself to a standard that is too stringent for the unexpected?

In fact, this year, I resolve not to set resolutions that don't leave space for the Spirit and the imagination that the Spirit inspires in all of us. I resolve to only worry about the things that help me build stronger relationships and help me participate more fully in my community. In these resolutions, the only assumption I am making is that God is with me, moving, growing, changing, and leading me into places I could never have predicted on my own. I am not working to make God a priority in my life, but rather allowing God to be central to all I do, and am, in my living. I believe the baby in the manger interrupts my normal patterns of being, to allow for the joy and the wonder that God is continually conjuring up in our lives together. Now *THAT* is magic!

Merry Christmas! And may this be a joyous year for all of us!