

Christmas Eve
24 December 2009
Pastor Fred Hedt

“X’ Marks the Spot”
Titus 3.4-7

___ Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, who – because He loves **you** and He loves **me** – gave us the gift of His only begotten Son. His life among us gives us eternal life with God. He is the reason for this season. All of the **gifts** that we give one another are simply pale imitations of the gift God has given us. All of the **lights** we put up – reminders of the light of God’s grace that shines on us. All of the carols we sing, the laughter, the joy, the celebration mimics the rejoicing of **angelic choirs** that heralded his birth. In the name of Him whose birth we celebrate, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I wish you every joy and blessing of this sacred night.

And I would direct your attention to these words of St. Paul from our second reading this night: “When the kindness and love of God our Father appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”

As a child I enjoyed with my friends that wonderfully rich fantasy life that makes childhood such a special time. We played all kinds of marvelous games that required nothing more than fertile imaginations and props that were dug out of the trash can. Old Venetian blinds (remember? the kind with **wooden** slats) became swords that made us knights of Round Table. Old electrical switches and any old gauges we could find, became – with some crayons and cardboard boxes – the spaceships that carried us to the far reaches of unknown galaxies long before any astronaut ever left the earth.

One of our favorite games was “**pirates**”. An old coffee can became a treasure chest filled with coins and marbles and a few baseball cards of our favorite Detroit Tigers. It was buried in a “secret location” in one of our backyards. And then we’d have to make the “**Treasure Map**”. What did this strange island we found ourselves on look like? What kind of sea monsters lurked in the waters off it’s coast? How many volcanoes on this island?

And then the path to the Treasure: Start at the big elm tree, walk 5 paces towards the alley, turn left and go 20 paces ...: And you know where the treasure was always, **always**, located: **“X” marked the spot.**

The treasure would stay buried there only a day or two – we couldn’t stand keeping the secret. And even though it was obvious where in mom’s flower bed we had dug, we always consulted our treasure map. And there, plain as day **“X” marked the spot.**

___ “Christmas” is sometimes abbreviated “**X-mas**”. Some people see that as part of a plot to take Christ **out** of Christmas. “X” as we learned in algebra is the “unknown” quantity: replace Christ with the unknown and “Christmas” becomes “X-mas”. It was just Tuesday that I got another email from a friend lamenting “X-mas”.

Well, the “X” in “X-mas” really **isn’t** an “X” at all. It’s actually the Greek letter “**Chi**”, the first letter in “Christos”, which is Christ in Greek. “**Chi**” is a **monogram** for Christ, his “initials” if you will. And it’s nothing new!

We Christians have been using “chi” as a monogram for Christ for 2,000 years. The symbol on our Christ Candle holder is not a “P X”. It is a “Chi Rho”, the first two letters in the word “Christ” in Greek. The same symbol is etched beautifully in the glass of the Sanctuary doors. It’s been there since this sanctuary was build 1956, and our parents and grandparents who built this house of worship were *not* trying to “x out” Jesus.

And so “Chi-mas”, which may look like “X-mas”, is just a handy abbreviation. If you don’t like it, don’t use it. For me it is useful, and not just as a convenient abbreviation. Whenever I see “X-mas”, I see a reminder that “X marks the spot”:

Where in the world can I find God?

Where in *this* world with so much heartache and heartbreak and cruelty and inhumanity
can we find God?

X marks the spot!

One night a long time ago there were shepherds watching their flocks in fields outside Bethlehem. Suddenly they were surrounded by **angels** singing praises to God and announcing peace on earth. God’s love had broken into our world in a very special way. God’s loving kindness had “appeared” St. Paul writes in our text. Loving kindness that will lift us up out of our sinfulness and restore us to our birthright as Sons and Daughters of God.

The Loving Kindness that will do that has appeared! Where in the world is all this taking place? Where might the shepherds find such wonderful things? It’s all happening in a babe lying in a manger, the angels tell them. **X” marks the spot!** There, in **Christ**, the shepherds will find all of the treasures of God’s grace. There, in **Christ**, we find all of the treasures of God’s grace.

Every day the newspaper documents our warring madness. In our homes anger spins out of control and the people we should love the most get hurt. There is violence in our streets: it hit too close to home recently right here at Ascension when a man was murdered on our property. Nations take up arms against nations: ideological differences that should be settled at the negotiating table are contested in the spilled blood of our young people. When and where will we learn to resolve conflict thru peaceful means?

“X marks the spot”. For the one born in Bethlehem is the Prince of Peace, who one day will lead us into the Peaceable Kingdom. Lion shall lay down with lamb, swords will be beaten into plowshares, and we shall end our warring madness as his love conquers fear and hatred.

We have a young friend who just a few days ago went in for tests to figure out cause of some discomfort. She was diagnosed with cancer, rushed into surgery, where it was discovered the cancer was extensive. The doctors give her less than a 50% chance of survival. In the face of such a dire prognosis, where can she turn for comfort and hope?

“X marks the spot”. Christ is the Lord of Life. And our young friend lives her life where we all live our lives: securely in the hands of a loving God who has promised that there is nothing in any of the circumstances of life – nothing in sickness or in health, not even in death – that can ever separate us from the love God bears for us in Christ. We will keep this young friend in our prayers and know that God’s grace **will** accomplish His purpose in her life.

The struggle of this young friend brings to mind for us here at Ascension the too many times this past year we gathered to say goodbye to one who was taken from us too soon. Lives were cut tragically short. Where did we turn to find the strength to go on?

“X marks the spot”. We gathered not just to celebrate the life of a departed loved one but to remind ourselves that Jesus is resurrection and life for all who believe in him. He conquered death and lives again, and promises that because He lives, we shall live also. And that “X” marks the spot where we shall be reunited with all who have gone before us.

“X marks the spot”!

Where can I find peace? “X marks the spot”!

Where can I find forgiveness? “X marks the spot”!

Where can I find hope even in hopeless situations? “X marks the spot”!

Where can I find a constant companion in moments of alone-ness? “X marks the spot”!

Where can I find purpose and meaning in life? “X marks the spot”!

Where can I find direction? “X marks the spot”!

Where can I lay my thanksgiving for all that God has done for me? “X marks the spot”!

Where can I learn selfless love? “X marks the spot”!

Where can I lean to forgive? “X marks the spot”!

Where does the path begin that leads me back home to God? “X marks the spot”!

“X marks the spot”!

So, I wish you a Merry X-mas!

“X” is not the unknown quantity, it is not an attempt to take Christ out of Christmas.

It is the “X” that marks the greatest treasure you will ever find:

the spot where God entered our world and made known to us His saving love. Amen!

“X’ Marks the Spot”, postscript.

After preaching this sermon on Christmas eve, I had quite a few people tell me how much they appreciated it. They, too, had received emails etc. bemoaning the use of “x-mas” as a plot to “take Christ out of Christmas” and appreciated this alternate approach.

It got me thinking about the other ways in which we use “X”:

1) “X marks the spot” where the treasure is found.

“Xmas” marks where we find all the treasures of God’s grace.

2) We “x out” bad stuff.

When I’m writing out a draft longhand, if I make a mistake I don’t take time to erase or use white out, I simply write an “x” over it. It’s gone, it will not be taken into consideration when I do the rewrite.

When I was baptized into Christ, God publically adopted me as his child and covered me with the righteousness of Christ. The righteousness of Christ “x’s out” all of the bad stuff in my life.

My sins? They are “x’ed out”, literally – Xhrist covers them. They’re gone. God will no longer take them into consideration. “As far as east is from west ...”

And what do I do about all that stuff in my life of which I am not so proud?

The old, deadly ways that are legacies of my fleshliness and rise up to haunt me, to disrupt my life, to hurt and disappoint those around me (See Romans 7 “... the good that I would do” etc.)

If I simply attack that stuff as an act of will ... well, it will probably go the way of most of my resolutions. I recently spoke of a resolution I made waking up one morning on vacation in a hotel. I bounded out of bed resolving that this would be the day that I would begin being more disciplined about my eating. It held while I showered and shaved and dressed. It held all the way down to the dining room where the breakfast buffet was set up. It held until that moment I stood before a tub of bacon. Maybe 40 minutes.

I can’t tackle that “bad stuff” by myself.

But I can “x” it out: seek the power and presence of Xhrist. Let him live in me and thru me and teach me to live the new life I have in him.

3) We use “x” to mark our choices.

Which candidate do we prefer – put an “x” next to his name.

On this multiple choice quiz which is your answer, put an “x” next to it.

I am a “Xhristian”. Look carefully, you’ll see an “x” next to my name.

“You did not choose me – I chose you”, Jesus says.

God chose you before the world was created, Paul writes in Ephesians 1.

Before you were you, God put an “x” next to you.

Before the world was created, God put an “x” next to you.

You are God’s choice.

The “x” that marks you was re-traced in water at the baptismal font.

Many of us re-trace on ourselves that “x” again and again when we hear the baptismal words “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

4) We use the “X” as an instrument of torture.

It’s called the St. Andrew’s cross because according to tradition it was form of the cross the Romans used to martyr the Apostle Andrew.

“X”mas reminds me that even at my Lord’s birth, the cross loomed on the horizon. Taking my place on my cross for my sins is why Jesus was born and why we celebrate his birth.

So, I’ll keep “X-mas”.

It marks the spot where I find God’s grace.

It reminds me that Jesus has “x’ed out” my sins.”

It reminds me that in love God chose me to be his child.

It reminds me that Jesus was born to go to the cross for me.

Merry X-mas!