

## “Making the Holiday a Holy Day”

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There is no holiday like Christmas. Though I happen to have a special fondness for Thanksgiving and Easter, there is no question Christmas is the holiday which captivates our culture and most of our hearts. Christmas music, Christmas movies, Christmas parties, Christmas shopping, Christmas candy, Christmas you name it, are all part of life in December. Yet, amidst all the magnificent celebrations, many folks find that the fulfillment and joy that we think ought to be a part of the holiday is missing. Some people are simply overwhelmed with the stress of the season. Even during the Covid era, the shopping, the baking, finding time in the schedule for all the parties and gathering, traveling far and near to see family (even ones you don't really like that much,) all combine to make Christmas *an emotionally draining experience*. That's why psychologists rank Christmas as one of the leading causes of stress, right behind getting married, getting divorced and having a baby.

Others, however, find that Christmas just seems kind of empty. We may witness and participate in all sorts of holiday activities, but like Cindy Lou Who, the little girl who befriends the Grinch, we find ourselves asking “*Is this really what Christmas is all about?*” Is this all there is to it? December 25<sup>th</sup> comes and goes and life doesn't change a whole lot. The pain, emptiness, frustration, anxiety, and loneliness we may have felt on December 23<sup>rd</sup> is usually still there on December 26<sup>th</sup>. All the fanfare of Christmas sometimes seems like just an empty shell.

Friends, I am convinced it doesn't have to be that way. If we really grasp and embrace the truth of Christmas, peace, hope and joy can indeed fill our hearts. That will happen when the Christmas holiday, truly becomes a Holy day in our lives. I believe focusing on the true meaning of Christmas can make it a day which honors the Lord and fills the emptiness in our souls. Let's pause and pray God will help us understand how this can be our experience.

Let me start by taking a quick look at what the Bible says about holidays. There are some wonderful Christian people who argue that Christmas is nothing but a pagan festival. I don't agree. I don't think there is anything wrong with

most aspects of our Christmas celebration. The mere fact the Bible doesn't command us to celebrate the birth of Christ is not significant. The Bible also doesn't tell us to brush our teeth or do many other things that we do all the time. Yes, if scripture forbid a Christmas celebration it would be wrong to participate, but the fact something is not commanded doesn't make it wrong to do. Listen to what Paul tells us in **Colossians 2:16,17** **Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.**

Folks, this makes it clear that each Christian can choose whether to observe a holiday or not. If someone chooses not to participate in Christmas, fine, but there is nothing wrong with Christians celebrating this holiday. Yet if we do so, it is our responsibility to celebrate in a way which brings glory to God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, including Christmas, do it all for the glory of God.” To do that we need to make sure we are not focusing on the wrong aspects of Christmas. So to really make the Christmas holiday what it should be, we need to avoid some mistakes. Let me mention four of them.

**Number 1:** Don't focus on the presents. Now, maybe you are thinking, “Well, that's obvious. Of course Christmas is not really about presents.” I am afraid not everyone understands that, however. There were a lot of people out shopping yesterday. Many retailers make over half their sales in this one month. We spend a lot of time, energy and money buying Christmas presents. Now, when you stop and think about this I'm not sure that makes a lot of sense. A little girl was asked, “Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?” “No,” she cheerfully responded. “Are you upset by that?” “No, it was not *my* birthday.” Yet in many homes, even Christian homes, Christmas seems to be about buying and receiving gifts.

Having the presents as the focus of a Christmas celebration can be painful. A combination of seductive advertising and the greed which infects the humble heart, means that children and even

adults often feel they did not get all *they should have received* for Christmas. And even if little Jimmy is very pleased with what he finds under the tree on Christmas morning, he may feel disappointed when he gets back to school a week later and hears what little Joey got for Christmas. One little boy told his Sunday School teacher that the true meaning of Christmas was sportsmanship, “being a good sport when someone gets more than you did.” Then there are the parents who, for some reason, feel guilty because they could not afford to spend as much on presents for their children as their neighbors did. Or there are the parents who could not afford it, but put it on the credit card and will then spend the rest of the next year struggling to climb out of debt. As someone said, “A person who doesn’t think Christmas lasts all year must not use a Visa card.” Focusing on the presents at Christmas time can leave one’s bank account, as well as one’s soul, rather empty.

So what are we supposed to do? I certainly am not suggesting that giving gifts to others is a bad idea. It is in fact a very good thing to do. The Bible is clear that God wants us to be generous in giving to others, especially to those less fortunate than we are. Yet, I’m afraid many of the presents at Christmas have little to do with generous giving. We often exchange gifts and give to others simply because we know they will give something to us. Buying a present for someone just because she gave you a present last year, usually doesn’t fall into the category of generous giving. I think each of us needs to do what is necessary to keep the presents from being the focus of our Christmas holiday. Some suggest parents should give more to their children on their birthdays and less at Christmas. That may be a good idea. I know some folks who have stopped at least some of the gift exchange with their family, and instead collected the money that would have been spent and given it to a needy family. That is a wonderful idea. I’m not trying to tell you what to do, other than this: Do what you have to do, to make sure the presents are not the focus of your Christmas celebration.

**Number 2:** Don’t focus on the festivities. I realize for many folks, the heart of Christmas revolves around lights, decorations, pageants, parties, cookie baking and other Christmas traditions which fill the holiday. Is there anything wrong with any of these things? No, I don’t think so. It is a wonderful thing to be putting ornaments on

the tree with a fire in the fireplace and “O Tannenbaum” playing in the background. Wonderful, as long as that doesn’t become the *primary focus* of the holiday. Yet, sometimes it does. A few years ago a man told me he was not going to put up any outside lights that year because he thought it was unfair he didn’t win the decorating contest the previous year. *Is that what Christmas is all about?*

Friends, we need to be careful that the festivities and traditions of our Christmas celebrations don’t become a replacement for the real meaning of Christmas. I love this story: In 1903 the Russian czar Nicholas noticed a sentry posted for no apparent reason on the Kremlin grounds. Upon inquiry, he discovered that in 1776, Catherine the Great had found the first flower of spring at that spot. “Post a sentry here,” she commanded, “so that no one tramples that flower under foot!” So every day for 127 years a sentry had stood by that spot protecting a flower that had not been there for 126 years. That, friends, is an empty tradition. And I’m afraid that this is what some of our Christmas celebrations are starting to become. When folks see little reason to celebrate the birth of Jesus, they end up focusing on the celebration itself, giving little thought as to why this next week should be treated differently than any other. Yet, when we try to celebrate, without really any reason for doing so, the festivities become nothing but an empty shell. They become hollow traditions with no root in the truth.

Oh friends, deck the halls with boughs of holly if you want, put up dozens of strings of lights around your house, invite all your friends and neighbors over for a Christmas party if you choose, *but don’t do those things because you are enamored with holly, lights or parties.* Do them because you are *celebrating the coming of Jesus.* Without Him those holiday festivities mean nothing.

**Number 3:** Don’t focus on the family. My apologies to Dr. Dobson. Some of you may be thinking, “Wait a minute Pastor Dan. Families are important, aren’t they?” Yes, they are and they are an important part of any holiday celebration. However, it is a big mistake to think *family closeness* is what Christmas is all about. Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” and Dr. Seuss’ “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” are two very popular holiday classics. I have never been able to figure out, however, what Dickens and Dr. Seuss think

the real meaning of Christmas is. Both stories are pretty clear as to what Christmas is not about, but rather vague as to *what it is about*. In “The Christmas Carol” the story concludes with Ebenezer Scrooge wishing everyone “Merry Christmas!” and joining the Cratchet family for dinner, where Tiny Tim says, “God bless us, everyone.” Dr. Seuss’ story ends with the Grinch being reconciled with all the residents of Whoville and a declaration by Cindy Lou’s father that Christmas is about all of us “being together as family.” Now, indeed, “There is no place like home for the holidays.” Gathering with loved ones, family and friends, is a joyous occasion, but is that what *Christmas is really about*?

One of the things which has happened in the evangelical church in recent years is that we often are less theocentric and more anthropocentric. That is just fancy way of saying we often focus less on God and more on man, more on human beings. We have spent lots of energy on trying to help people get along better with each other and we have sometimes neglected to emphasize the importance of having a right relationship with God. Now, getting along with each other is important. As a church we want to help people do that. But even more important is to help people understand that through trusting in Jesus Christ they can have a relationship with God where *He is their father* and they are His beloved children. It is nice during the Christmas season to acknowledge the love and commitment we feel toward our family and friends. The focus, of our Christmas celebration, however, needs to be, not on that, but on the love and commitment which God has shown us through Jesus Christ.

Number 4: Don’t focus on the manger. Now some of you are may be thinking, “Pastor Dan, what are you saying? That is what Christmas is really about. Jesus being born in Bethlehem is the true meaning of Christmas.” Oh yes, that is part of the story, a remarkable and important part, but it is *not the whole story*. In fact, it is just the beginning. In some ways it seems a little strange that Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus, often focuses so narrowly on what happened in Bethlehem that night. Now, don’t get me wrong. I think it is a marvelous event. It is wonderful when people have nativity scenes whether in their front yards or on a coffee table in the living room. But we don’t really celebrate anyone else’s birthday that way. February 12<sup>th</sup> will be Abraham

Lincoln’s birthday. A third grade teacher may mention to her students that Lincoln was born in a log cabin in Kentucky, but that is not going to be the focus of her presentation. She will talk about what Lincoln did not as a baby. But as a man. The Lincoln-Douglas debates, his election as President, the Emancipation Proclamation which freed the slaves, the Gettysburg Address, preserving the union, his assassination at the hands of John Wilkes Booth, those are the things we remember on Lincoln’s birthday. When we think about the birth of Jesus, we need to think about more than what happened in Bethlehem. We need to explore His ministry, the healing and other miracles He performed. We need to think about His profound teaching, His compassion and power. And most importantly, we need to reflect on His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

When we read the New Testament it is interesting to find that only two of the four gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, even mention Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. When we go through the rest of the New Testament there is no reference to Bethlehem, Joseph, the shepherds or the Wise men. In fact, Mary, the mother of Jesus is only mentioned twice outside the four gospels, both times in Acts 1. The gospel, the great news of Jesus Christ, is not about what happened that first Christmas night. Yes, that is part of the story, but the focus of the gospel, is what happened about 33 years later, when Jesus died on the cross and three days later rose again from the dead. A little girl was looking at a nativity scene which had been set up outside a church. “Isn’t it beautiful?” her mother asked. “Yes, I guess so,” the girl replied. “But one thing bothers me. Isn’t Jesus ever going to grow up? He’s the same size as last year.” Friends, if we are to really understand Christmas, we have to let Jesus grow up. His birth was a marvelous event, but we should never allow it to overshadow Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Maybe you are thinking, “Come on Pastor Dan, you are taking all the fun out of Christmas. If we are not supposed to focus on presents, festivities, family or the manger, what is left? Why not just join Ebenezer Scrooge and treat December 25<sup>th</sup> like any other day?” Well friends, there is a way we can grasp the true meaning of Christmas and really make this holiday a Holy day. That can happen if we focus on the incarnation as we celebrate Christmas. Though Jesus’ birth in

Bethlehem is only part of the story, the incarnation is at the heart of the story.

The word “incarnation” means to take on flesh. In the context we are talking about, it means the eternal son of God, the second person of the divine trinity, *took on flesh* by becoming human. It is described for us in the first chapter John’s gospel. **John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.** This is God the son. **John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.** God takes on flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God becomes human. Understanding this gives us a whole new perspective on what happened in Bethlehem and on the whole Christmas story. Martin Luther once said, “When I read from the first chapter of John, the devil stood motionless when he heard ‘In the beginning was the Word.’ But when I read ‘and the Word was made flesh,’ he immediately fled.”

Looking at it from a human viewpoint, the virgin Mary indeed had a baby boy she named Jesus. That in one dimension of Christmas. Yet, from God’s perspective, Christmas is the point when God became a man. He becomes a man without ceasing to be God. Thus it is Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, who grows up in Nazareth, and who at about age 30 begins His public ministry of teaching and healing. It is Jesus Christ, fully God and Fully human, who performs all sorts of amazing miracle such as calming storms, feeding 5000 people from a little boy’s lunch, and bringing the dead back to life. It is Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, who enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, shares the last supper with His disciples, is arrested in Gethsemane, is condemned by Pilate, beaten by soldiers and executed on a Roman cross. It is Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, who three days later rises from the dead and then 40 days later ascends into heaven, promising to one-day return. You see the incarnation is not just God becoming human that night in Bethlehem, it is about God being human for the next 33 years or so and through that making it possible for us to experience God’s salvation. The truth of the incarnation, as C. S. Lewis put it, that “the Son of God became a man, to enable men to become the sons of God.” Or as the apostle Paul says in **2 Corinthians 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,**

**that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.**

Friends, I encourage you to make the Christmas holiday this year a Holy day. I know some of you already do. For many years you have treated it this way and that is wonderful. But for many of us Christmas is often something a bit less than that. To be honest, it won’t be easy to change. Christmas is stuffed full of traditions and those traditions are hard to modify. But, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, if by God’s grace, through faith in Jesus, you have received His salvation, you have every reason to celebrate the incarnation, to focus on God becoming man. Without that we would be lost and without hope in this life and the next. If we understand that, we have every reason to celebrate this Christmas. Nothing is more important than knowing we have been rescued from death and given life. If you are not a believer in Jesus, your condition is indeed one of being lost and without hope. You may not realize that. You may feel very content and satisfied with life, but you are just kidding yourself. And happiness you feel apart from God will evaporate very quickly someday. But if you will stop trusting in yourself and turn to Jesus Christ you will receive the salvation which has been made possible through the incarnation. You will then have every reason to celebrated Christmas. May the Lord help us to make Christmas 2021 a truly Holy day, as we rejoice in the truth that the Word has been made flesh and dwelt among us, so that we behold His glory! And even in the next few days, may he help shore this great news with others.