

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two or three months, I've known this Sunday was coming. I knew on December 21 I was going to bring a message about Christmas. As I thought about it, I decided I had pretty much run out of things to say about Christmas. This is my 18th Christmas here and according to my records I've preached exactly 26 different Christmas messages—I even did a series in 1997. If you want to dust off some of these from the online message archive they include such cute titles as, “The First Star Trek.” “Three Wise Men and a Baby,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and “Have Yourself a ‘Little Mary’ Christmas and “It’s beginning to look a lot like X-miss.”

But come on—there are only so many parts of this story I can talk about, right? I've talked about the angels, the Innkeeper, Mary, Joseph and Joseph, the Wise Men, the Star and Herod. As I approached this season, I asked the Lord to give me a fresh slant on Christmas. So I've been doing some reading, and a friend gave me a CD by Andy Stanley that really stimulated my thoughts as well. Now this is going to be a different experience from what we usually share. As a teacher, I usually provide an outline and as I teach, you fill in the blanks. Now, don't go into blank anxiety, but there is no outline today. Instead of developing three or four points, this message only has one point—and if you don't get this one point, then I'm not a very good communicator—and just in case, I'm going to give you something as you leave to remember this one point!

Actually there's only one blank I want us to fill in together this morning. It's on the screen, but don't answer it out loud, and don't answer it too quickly. How do you fill in this blank:
_____ IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON. Fill it in mentally. How, how many of you said “Santa is the reason for the season?” Good. How about shopping? No? Did you say decorations are the reason for the season? Nope? Okay, this is church, so let's see how many of you filled in “Jesus is the reason for the season.” Good for you! That sounds right doesn't it? I've seen it on bumper stickers and on Christmas cards; it looks nice, neat, and religious. But this is the new angle God has given me. Over the past few weeks, I've come up with what I think is a better answer than Jesus. But don't worry about it for now; we'll come back to it a little later.

Let's just talk about family Christmas celebrations for a few minutes. The thing that makes Christmas so great for kids is the sense of expectation, the anticipation. Remember how easy it was as a kid? All kids have to do is to come up with a wish list of things you wanted from Santa. Then they either tell Santa at the mall, (and kids that's not the real Santa there, he just works for Santa) or they give a letter to their parents to mail to Santa—and then all they have to is wait. And it's that delicious expectation that makes it fun. Can you remember trying to sleep the night Santa came? There you were all nestled in your bed while visions of sugarplums danced in your head. Actually I don't know what a sugarplum is, so I've never had a vision of one. You could hardly wait for morning to come. And then you'd wake up the next morning and go down the stairs, or around the corner—and THERE it was! Sometime during the night Santa had come! There under the tree or around the room was your new Red Ryder BB gun, or your Malibu Barbie or a shiny new bicycle. After you'd played with everything for a while, and opened all the presents of socks from grandmother, you'd run to the phone and call your friends (And you'd never say, “How are you doing?”) You'd say, “What did you GET?” Then you'd play with your toys until they broke.

I had a reputation for breaking toys, so one year my dad gave me a toy dump truck made of hard, thick plastic. It was advertised as “unbreakable.” He said, “I’d like to see you try to break that one.” Well, he probably shouldn’t have said that, because I stuck it under the back tire of his pickup truck and when he backed out, I had proven it really WAS breakable! Such fun—and the expectation was the best part!

Then we become an adult and we still have expectations. But the same kind of expectation that makes Christmas so much fun for kids often ruins it for us as adults. We’ve had enough bad experience with obnoxious family members in the past that we sometimes dread the whole experience of Christmas. When we grow up our Christmas wish list sounds like this: “I wish everyone in the family would just get along this year.” Or “I wish ‘he’ wouldn’t show up this year.” Or, “I he wouldn’t bring up the election this year and get everybody debating.” Or “I wish he wouldn’t drink so much this year.” Or, “I wish ‘she’ would come but that she wouldn’t bring ‘him’ with her.” Or these days, “I wish he would come and he wouldn’t bring HIM with him!”

A family Christmas isn’t always like those Norman Rockwell paintings where everybody is happy and smiling. There are actually some adults who dread Christmas and they have come up with different ways to cope with the whole dysfunctional scene. Some people just fake it. They ignore the family issues, and they put on a happy face and say “We’re going to have a good-old hap-hap-happy family Christmas if it kills us!” (And it almost does)

Others merely endure it. Studies have shown depression and suicides spike during the holidays because it is often so stressful. For some people their coping strategy is, “It’s only a few days, and like running through a wall of fire, I can do it and get it behind me. Sure, I’ll be burned a little and singed, but once I get to the other side, I don’t have to deal with it for another 12 months.”

Others cope by controlling it. “I’ll just put him next to her, and her next to her, and I’ll make sure that they aren’t here when the others get here.” You arrive at 3 p.m. and then leave at 6 so *they* can come that evening. “I bought this gift for you to give to her because I know you don’t like her, but it would look bad if you didn’t give her a gift.” And you end up being like an air traffic controller “Aunt Gertrude you’re cleared to land at 10 a.m. on Christmas Eve” “Uncle Joe you are cleared to depart for Cousin Bill’s place—expedite your departure...over.”

All of this is a little odd, because this really is supposed to be the time for all that “good news of great joy to all people—peace on earth—goodwill and all.” We’ve romanticized all these wonderful Christmas scenes from all the wonderful Christmas music. And when our reality doesn’t correspond up with the Bing Crosby Christmas songs, we think we’re the only ones who have lousy Christmases. We imagine everyone else has a perfect Christmas, and ours is a mess. And indeed you may be here today and your Christmas is perfect—if so, God bless you! You can sit there and color or something while I talk about this to all of us who have had some dysfunctional Christmases.

Wouldn’t it be great if all our Christmases were like the songs we hear at Christmas? For instance, there’s a wonderful Christmas song entitled “Sleigh bells” and the lyrics say,

“There’s a happy feeling nothing in this world can buy; When they pass around the coffee and the pumpkin pie. It’ll nearly be like a picture print from Currier and Ives; These wonderful things are the things we remember all through our lives.” Currier and Ives was a printmaking company in New England that published beautiful, tranquil landscapes of snow and happy families. But the sad truth is for most families, most Christmas celebrations don’t look much like that scene from Currier and Ives; instead many families have Christmas celebrations that look more like the movie Christmas Vacation! You know, with all the obsession with having the brightest and most lights on the street—and neighbors you don’t really get along with like the yuppies, Todd and Margo, who hated Clark with all of his Christmas spirit. One of my favorite scenes in the movie is when the four Griswolds are home and it’s quiet, then the quiet is shattered by the ominous sound of the door bell ringing—ding dong!—ding dong!—and they look at each other in terror as they realize *the family members have arrived!* And suddenly the house is full of people. The in-laws arrive and, of course, they don’t get along. Clark’s father-in-law is always making sarcastic statements. Then when you think it can’t get any worse, Cousin Eddie drives up in his battered RV that belches smoke and parks it right in his driveway and brings his dog named Snots. And the party still isn’t over, because later, old Uncle Lewis shows up smoking his cigar wearing a bad toupee with poor sweet Aunt Bethany who is there, but not really *there*. And when she’s asked to say grace, she says the Pledge of Allegiance. And the turkey is so dry you can hardly eat it, but everyone tries anyway. And instead of getting the gift you really expected, you get a subscription to the Jelly-of-the-month club. Get the picture? Do you know why that movie is so popular? Because it’s a more accurate portrayal of family Christmases than Currier and Ives ever dreamed! To put it another way, most 21st century Americans don’t have a Christmas like Currier and Ives—it’s more like a Christmas full of cursing and hives!

When most of us think about our best Christmas memories, it’s always when we were kids. My favorite memory was when I’m 9 years old and I really did get a Daisy BB gun. But the reason that was such a happy Christmas was I was clueless about everything that was really happening with the adults. I didn’t know at the time that my aunt really didn’t like my mother. I didn’t know that Pa Pa stayed drunk most of the day—he just seemed happy to me before he took his nap in the recliner. And I remember that Uncle John Henry was living with us, but I had no clue until years later he was there because he had been arrested for smuggling dope across the Texas/Mexico border and because his own children refused to have anything to do with him. My dad, his nephew, had driven all the way to El Paso to get him out of jail to come live with us. I never knew that when I was nine! It may be the same with you: When you were a kid you had no idea the guy you called “Uncle” wasn’t even your uncle at all! As you grew into a teenager you began to figure all those things out. “Oh, so that’s why he was never here when she was. Now I know why he never gave him a gift...okay, it makes sense now.”

So, as you get ready for another Christmas experience—what can you do? It always helps to focus on those first five letters in Christmas: CHRIST. But in the midst of all the decorating, shopping, cooking, and family issues, Christ sometimes seems to evaporate.

I opened my Bible a few weeks ago to a familiar passage and asked God to show me something about the Christmas story I’d never seen before—and I think I found it. Let’s read the words

found in Matthew 1:18-21 and I want to walk you through what I discovered.

Matthew was a former tax collector who became a follower of Jesus and he later wrote down what he witnessed and heard.

Matthew 1:18. “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. [Back then, marriages were arranged by the parents when kids were small—and Mary had been pledged to Joseph—it was like being engaged, except it was legally binding.]. But before they came together [consummated the marriage] she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” Now we don’t know how Joseph learned about this. Maybe he’d been off doing a carpentry job and when he came back one of his friends said, “Hey Joseph, man, did you hear about Mary?” Joseph said, “What?” The friend said, “She’s pregnant.” Now, I’ll bet Joseph asked the same question any man would ask today if he heard his girlfriend was pregnant. Since Joseph knew he wasn’t responsible, I can just hear him asking, “Who’s the father?” And the friend says, “She says it’s the Holy Spirit.” I think Joseph reacted the same way we would today. “Yeah, right.” Because Joseph was planning on splitting. At that point he had several legal options. He could have publicly divorced her, causing Mary to suffer humiliation. Or he could go to a priest and have their engagement annulled; he would undergo shame, but Mary’s reputation would not be so damaged. So we read in verse 19-20, “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid.’” (Joseph probably said, “Son of David?” My father’s name is Jacob. And the angel said, “Yes, but your great, great, great, great, great grandfather was David, King of Israel” and that qualifies you to be the stepfather of the King of Kings!) The angel said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Now, verse 21 contains the key to this message. God was saying, “The reason I’m sending this baby into the world is because I want to save my people (and later ALL people) from their sins.” If it wasn’t for sin, God wouldn’t have had to send Jesus. In other words, if there had been no SIN there would be no Christmas.

John also wrote about Christmas, but he didn’t write about mangers and shepherds, instead he looks at the big picture. He wrote in John 1:4-5 “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

In the beginning God created a perfect world. He created Adam and Eve in a perfect environment and they enjoyed a perfect relationship with Him. There were no Christmases in the Garden of Eden, because there was no sin. There was perfect life and perfect light. But when sin entered the world, death and darkness descended on all of us. Sure the sun still shone, and people ran around breathing, eating, and working—but morally and spiritually there was darkness and death. So many people *think* they’re alive today, but they are dead while they live.

Notice John wrote that the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. Some people just don’t get it—they’re still clueless. They think they can fix every problem in

their life without God. But everyone must come to a place where they admit, “I can’t fix myself. I’m in darkness and I don’t really know what life is.” God looked at that kind of darkness and death on a grand scale and said, “I’m going to send my Son to give LIFE and LIGHT.”

So my point is that the reason we even have Christmas is because of sin. Joseph heard it straight from angel’s mouth—God is sending Jesus into this world because there are sinful people who need their sins forgiven. Had there been no sin, there would have been no need for God to send a Savior.

Then it hit me—it is precisely *because* of messed up people like the Uncle John Henrys and the Cousin Eddies and the Aunt Bethanys that we even have Christmas.

Then I came up with this idea about printing up some bumper stickers to remind people about this. I shared it with some of the staff and they said it was a really bad idea. Why don’t we print up bumper stickers that say: SIN IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON. Like it? Actually, God personalized it. He sent Jesus to save sinners, so maybe the bumper sticker could read: SINNERS ARE THE REASON FOR THE SEASON. Yeah, that’s more like it. But then I got to thinking, “Let’s just be more specific and identify some of these sinners who are the reason for the season.” There are some absolutely stupid drivers out there, so the next time someone cuts you off, point at this bumper sticker on your car: Stupid drivers are the reason for the season. Or maybe you’ve got a mean boss. You can put this on your car: My boss is the reason for the season. Or maybe you have some neighbors you don’t like, you could do one that says: My neighbor is the reason for the Season; And if you’re really brave, how about: My mother-in-law is the reason for the season.

Those bumper stickers probably aren’t a good idea and I’m not really a bumper-sticker-kind-of-guy. So I did the next best thing. I got some stickers printed up that say, “YOU are the reason for the season.” I’m going to give all of you some stickers as you leave, so I want to show you how to use them. I need a volunteer. I’m going to imagine that Mike Parks is my brother-in-law who shows up every Christmas (and you pretty much ruin it for everyone). You’re loud, you eat too much, drink too much, you can’t keep a job, and you’re always trying to get family members to sign up for your latest get-rich-quick scheme. I have no idea why my sister married you, but hey, you’re family. So when you show up this year I need a little reminder that you’re the reason for the season, so when you come in, I give you sticker. And then every time I get a little impatient and miffed at you I’ll be reminded that “If it wasn’t for Mike here, and people like him, we wouldn’t even HAVE a Christmas!” And if you need more than one reminder, you can do the old slap-on-the-back sticker plant!

All of a sudden this person who previously irritated me and ruined Christmas for me suddenly becomes a point of celebration for me. Thanks to you, Jesus came. Instead of grumbling over dysfunctional family members and friends, I can thank God for people like Mike, Uncle John Henry, Cousin Eddie, and Aunt Bethany!

The reason I didn’t print “I am the reason for the season” is because it would have sounded narcissistic. Narcissism is self-love based on the Greek myth of Narcissus who fell in love with his own reflection. So it would communicate the wrong message if the sticker said, “I am the

reason for the season” (but ... I am). When I look in the mirror, I realize my obnoxious brother-in-law has nothing on me. When I look in the mirror I see a guy full of many shortcomings and failures—I still have a lot of darkness in me. So I need more of these stickers than anyone else.

Do you still think Jesus is the reason for the season is still the best answer? Was Christmas for Jesus? Did Jesus say, “Father, I think I’d like to go down to planet earth and live as a man and be tortured and die a cruel death?” No. Christmas wasn’t for Him; it was really for sinners like you and like me. Jesus didn’t need Christmas, but we sure do. It wasn’t for the sake of Jesus that God sent Him to earth, but for OUR sake! So the take-home truth and the one point I want to leave with is simply this: “YOU (we) ARE THE REASON FOR THE SEASON.” The prophet Isaiah prophesied, “For to US a child is born; to US a son is given.” (Isaiah 9:6)

On Christmas God did the very opposite of what we are prone to do. When someone we don’t like gets too close to us, we want to lean away. But on that first Christmas when the darkness was thick and death was rampant, God leaned in toward every one of us and sent Jesus.

One of the most powerful songs ever written was the Christmas song, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” by Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley. The third stanza says, “Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace; Hail the Son of Righteousness! *Light and life* to all He brings; Risen with healing in His wings. Mild He lays His glory by; Born that men no more should die; born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth; Hark! The herald angels sing; glory to the newborn King!”

Christmas was when God leaned in toward unlovely sinners, and as His follower how can I do any less? This Christmas don’t lean away from those dysfunctional, obnoxious people—they’re the reason we’re celebrating! Lean in and remind them that God loves them so much that if they had been the only person needing Christmas, Jesus would have come just for them. Give them a sticker and tell them God loves you so much that He sent Jesus just for you—so YOU are the reason for the season!



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes