

RETHINKING CHRISTMAS

“HOLIDAY OR HOLY DAY?”

Second in a sermon series by James R. Blades
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December 14, 2008

I am going to get risky with you this morning and tell you something about myself that a man of the cloth should not tell, that you may not want to hear, that you may want to cover your children's ears from hearing.

There! Do I have your full attention?

Okay, here it is. For many of the thirty-five years of my Christian faith journey, there are things about this holiday season we call *Christmas* that I have disliked and dreaded every year the season rolls around. I have at times felt a kinship with Ebenezer Scrooge's reading of the Yuletide Enterprise: “Bah, Humbug!”

The reason I fear to disclose this sentiment is because, across the years when I have done so before, I have gotten some strong reactions. To some folks, anything negative said about this holiday puts one in cahoots with *The Grinch That Stole Christmas*. To others, it is as if one had uttered blasphemy against a central date on the liturgical calendar. “Oh my,” they would say, “you can't speak a word against Christmas! What will the children think?”

So what's my problem with Christmas? Well, first, I have a theological problem with much of it; not the Biblical part about Christ's birth, but the cultural part about greed and excess and false expectation.

The fact is that most of the roots of this holiday are far more pagan than they are Christian. In 312 A.D. the Roman Emperor Constantine decided to adopt Christianity as the favored religion of the Empire. Whole peoples and tribes joined the Christian faith without really understanding its meaning and they brought their pagan customs right along into it. Thus, the great Roman holiday of *Saturnalia*, the celebration of the Sun's rebirth at the winter solstice, was filled with new meaning as the celebration of the Son's birth—that is, the Son of God. Jesus, of course, wasn't born on December 25th or anywhere close to it. We can surmise from the context of the Bible's narrative that it was more likely in the Springtime when shepherds fielded their flocks. So why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25th? Because it is shortly after to the winter solstice—the shortest day of the year. Particularly in the northern-most parts of Europe closest to the Arctic Circle, the sun actually disappeared at this time of year. And the masses of people, ignorant of physics and astronomy, thinking the heavenly orbs were ruled by the whim of the gods, heaved a sigh of relief and launched huge celebrations that the sun came back. That's how we got the date. Now you may have likewise wondered what Christmas trees have to do with Jesus' birth? What holly and mistletoe and evergreen have to do with it? What Father Christmas and Santa Claus and elves and other such figures have to do with it? All these are but sub-streams of centuries old Mesopotamian, Roman, Germanian, Scandinavian and British Winter Solstice customs that flow into the river of the Christmas traditions we celebrate today.

That is why today we have a rather uneasy alliance of both Christian and pagan meanings of Christmas. And I get the sense that the pagan meanings often prevail in our culture's view of this season's significance, even in the church! It's not that I mind celebrating Jesus' birthday on December 25' even if he wasn't born then. It's not that I

mind using the occasion to reflect upon the wonderful mysteries of Advent: how God came out of heaven's splendor and was born a human being in Jesus. But here's what gets my hair in a knot: that Jesus and the gospel and the true meaning of his birth get entangled with all the other stuff that has nothing whatever to do with the Spirit of Jesus.

Instead of Christmas being a simple time to observe and reflect upon the Savior's birth, look what it has become: **Time to** haul out the decorations! **Time to** get the lights up. **Time to** cut down hundreds of thousands of perfectly healthy trees and haul them into houses to load them up with ornaments and tinsel. **Time to** figure out what gifts to buy for Uncle Joe and Grannie Annie and children and grandchildren and friends and even pets! **Time to** worry that you might offend someone by failing to buy them the right gift. **Time to** hurry down to the store for the early bird sales and once-yearly specials. **Time to** stand in line at the post office! **Time to** get out the *Christmas cards* and load up the *credit cards*.

Jeesh!

Doesn't it wear you out just thinking about it?

Here's something else about Christmas I don't prefer, particularly as a pastor: the rather stark irony that the very time of the year most expected to be full of cheer and merriment is the time of the year when some of us, maybe many of us, secretly feel most sad. Of course, we don't let on that we feel this way, for we should not want to ruin things for our families and children and friends. Still, within ourselves, to many of us, Christmas is hardly a season of cheer. Why is that? Because it is the time when evidence of our losses are most paraded before us!

You've lost a loved one, for instance. Now you celebrate the season of merry family gatherings without that one whose company you once enjoyed.

You've lost a job. Now you can't afford to put those glittery gifts under the tree that bring a smile to your children or grandchildren.

Your job or career has carried you far away from your family with whom you gathered all the years. You find a way to celebration without them.

Or you've grown quite old, as we all do, and all the loved ones with whom your memories of Christmas past are all gone.

Or you've gone through a divorce, your own or a loved one's, which the Christmas gatherings or lack of them only serve to highlight. I remember the first Christmas after my divorce. It was a bleak and lonely time.

So what's the point of this? Why pay attention to the sadness of the season? Am I just trying to be a Grinch, a Scrooge, a buzz-kill, a party-pooper?

No, I hope you have a merry, merry Christmas and I don't want to interfere with whatever cheer this season brings you. But just in case you happen to be part of the other crowd for whom Christmas is not particularly happy, I want to suggest that perhaps the way to redeem this season is to **re-think it** in some practical ways. Here are some suggestions:

First think simplicity. Decide, I'm just not going to do the stress thing, the hustle and bustle thing, the dragging out the decorations thing, the getting down to the super sale at 5 a.m. thing. Decide to center your Christmas traditions on what really matter:

- like connecting with friends and family in whose presence you feel nourished;
- like using the occasion to help the less fortunate,
- like taking time to wonder at the mysteries of Christ's incarnation and attending worship events that celebrate these truths.

You don't have to attend every party you're invited to. You don't have to send out Christmas cards. You don't have to buy gifts for everyone, or anyone for that matter! Years ago, someone advised me to put two questions to everything in your Christmas that tyrannizes you. Here are the two questions!

Who says?

So what?

"I have to get out those Christmas cards!" **Who says?**

My grandkids may just get a call from me this year and not a gift. **So what?** They already have everything.

"We've got to have a Christmas tree and decorations." **Who says?**

"MayBelle is going to miss us if we don't attend her big Christmas gathering this year (after attending, Ralph's and Mom's and Grandma's)." **So What?** Sure, MayBelle will miss you but she'll get over it.

Try popping those two questions on every holiday tradition by which you feel bullied, browbeaten, tormented, or tyrannized. **Who says? So what?** Aim for simplicity!

Second, simply quit trying to pretend to be all happiness and merriment and quit conspiring with the sham that holds up such an unrealistic ideal. Stop feeling guilty about feeling sad during this season. Instead, embrace your feelings, welcome your tears, bring your remembrances into your celebration of the season; in doing so, you may give permission to lots of other folks who have also been hiding their seasonal sadness.

Third, and this is perhaps the biggest key: decide to draw the spirit and values of your Christmas experience from the message of this Book rather from pagan traditions of greed and excess that have nothing to do with the message and meaning of Christ's birth. And what a stunningly marvelous message that is!

Who is this child whom angels adore, whom wise men come from afar to pay homage, this child of whom wondrous things are spoken, this cooing helpless infant whom it is easy for all to adore? What a story it is! The Greatest Story Ever Told! God becomes human! Christ comes to challenge the smug and self-satisfied; to undo the evil powers of this world, to heal the sick and free the captive, to shine the light of heaven into hell's darkness, to lift up the lowly and humble the highborn!

A far, far more stirring message than Santa Claus and the Elves and Rudolph the red nosed reindeer! Truth more fascinating than myth. Fact more amazing than fiction!

I submit to you that if Christmas is Christ's story, then perhaps it is time for us to rethink Christmas: **Not just** a season for superficial cheer but for profound reflection upon what is truly of value. **Not just** a *holiday* for the jolly but a **holy day** for those who mourn the losses and disappointments of this life, for he was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." **Not just** a season for getting more and having more and doing more but a time for adapting Jesus own example: to seek to have less rather than more and to give more rather than less. **Not just** a time to celebrate with our own family and chums but to offer ourselves as instruments of the Spirit of Jesus who came to this world to welcome the outsider in.