

What Christmas Means to Me

As I sit here writing these words, I am remembering as far back as possible, what the first recollection of Christmas was for me. I have done this before and the same memory keeps coming to mind. The first memory of this glorious season is a room magically lit with the central focus on a beautiful tree, none like I had ever seen before - and in the suburbs of Washington DC, there were still plenty of foliage and trees of every variety growing in our middle class neighborhoods. But this tree in the magically lit room was full of shiny bulbs, figurines and lights and seemed to go all the way to ceiling and beyond where my toddler eyes could see. Beneath this magical tree were boxes, wrapped and reflecting the light from every corner of this magically lit room. And then, wonder of wonders! around the presents, circling the magical tree was a train! Yes, a train! I was familiar with trains because I had taken rides on the downtown trolley and we had taken Dad to the majestic Union Station downtown...now here was this equally majestic, yet miniature version of one those glorious trains circling this magical tree! I can recall being caught up in the wonder and awe of this epiphany moment frozen indelibly in my mind for time and perhaps for eternity. I lay on my tummy in my "feety" pajamas watching, listening and beholding Christmas! It all seemed to culminate when I was assigned a few of those presents beneath the tree on Christmas morning, opening to my surprise something given to me by someone special who loved me. I can remember the paper flying everywhere and being lost in what seemed to be a gigantic confetti type celebration holding toys that I was so glad to have. So there I was holding new toys, lost in a sea of torn Christmas wrapping, the majestic train beneath the magical tree, great smells of food from the kitchen and smiling faces of my family, all of them in good health. And in the background when those rare moments of silence came...I could hear music, but not just any music...Christmas songs, carols of the season.

I have to tell you, as a pastor, I wanted to be able to share with you that my first Christmas memory was a spiritual epiphany -- Baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph -- basking in full knowledge of the true meaning of Christmas. But, alas, I cannot. I fall into the category of your all-American kid with all the secular trimmings bursting out everywhere. Now, I have to tell you that as I look back, my parents did me no disservice by allowing the Christmas celebration to be enjoyed by our societal customs. They did not curse the darkness of the world around us that many times over commercializes this blessed season and leaves Jesus out; no, they did not curse that darkness, but lit a candle, a Christmas candle, if you please and seized the moment to teach us what was most certainly the real meaning of the season and to Whom we give homage. Therefore, with these thoughts in mind, let me share what Christmas means to me:

1. Presents

A gift costs us nothing, but it cost the person that gave it to us something. I still remember that enchanted Christmas morning when I receive my first two-wheeler. I was so excited, although there was snow on the ground forbidding our opportunity to ride outside; we wasted no time riding our bikes in the basement of the church. I was seven years old. Can you imagine me saying, "Mom and Dad, thank you so much and I promise not to ride this bike until I pay for it." You know what my parents would say, "Son, it's not something you have to work for, we gave it to you." So continuing with this hypothetical made-up conversation, imagine me saying, "I don't deserve it; I won't ride this bike until I earn it!" There would not be enough driveways to shovel snow or enough lawns to cut in spring that would be available to a seven year old who could not even push a lawn mower. I could not do it. Besides it would be rude, thoughtless and irresponsible to reject the free gift of the bike given to me in love by my parents.

Christmas is associated with gifts. The Magi brought gifts to Jesus. Above all, the coming of Christ to earth means the greatest gift of all is proffered now to the world, salvation in Jesus Christ, our Lord! In the same way Christmas gifts are given to us by people who love us, God is willing and desirous to give us salvation, not because we deserve it, but because He loves us. We place our gifts beneath the tree; our Heavenly placed His gift to us on a tree. When I think of Christmas I think of gifts and all of them reminding me of the greatest Gift of all. *"Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift"* (II Corinthians 9:15).

2. Family

Christmas is a time traditionally when families get together. It is true, we should stay in touch with our family, but I appreciate the deliberate effort by many who have been caught up in their own little world, feeling pressure to come together. Often times it is those moments sitting around talking, eating a big Christmas dinner together that reminds us how important each and every one of us are to each other.

I remember at the last family reunion in September seeing extended family members of our family that I had not seen in years. Annette, my cousin was unable to attend the family reunion because her husband, only forty-one years old, suddenly died the day they were leaving for the reunion. I received a very touching Christmas card from her yesterday and she wrote a brief note and entitled it, "Lessons I've Learned Since Becoming a Widow." The opening sentence made a poignant point: she quoted from Marie O'Conner, "It's not so much how busy you are, but why you are so busy. The bee is praised, the mosquito is swatted." Besides bringing a smile to your face, this statement makes an affirmation about priorities and time we spend. Christmas is a time to stop everything and get together, no matter what it cost. I have never met a man who lived to regret not having spent more time in the office as his children were growing up, but many a person has lived to regret time they did not spend with the family.

Christmas is a time to remember just how very important family is to all of us. We need each other; God Himself is the one who put us in these units called families. It needs to be observed that when the Philippian jailer got saved, God had a desire for not only this jailer to get saved and serve Him, but for the whole family together to serve God! It is seen in this beautiful phrase, *“And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house”* (Acts 16:34).

3. Jesus

Most importantly, Christmas is not just about Jesus – Christmas is Jesus! In the opening syllable of the word we find the meaning of Christmas - “Christ.” It is the time we commemorate His coming to the earth, born of the virgin in a manger. We have been studying the Christmas story throughout December here at Christchurch in our sermons. One point I have made every week is that Jesus came to parents who were not affluent in this world. The residents of the humble village of Nazareth were helpers who cleaned homes in the neighboring larger and much wealthier city nearby. They were carpenters like Joseph who built furniture. Christmas beginning in a stable reminds us that Christ did not only come to royalty, as a matter of fact, He came to make paupers into royalty. In Christmas, Christ identifies with the whole world. No one is left out.

In the “Operation Christmas Hope” campaign at our church this year, our members went to those who were poor and gave them the Gospel and gifts. There are too many stories to share with you in these closing moments, however, one of the most touching ones was told to me by one of our faithful members. He and his wife went to an Iraqi War veteran, his wife and children’s home last week. The wife and husband had already braced the children that this Christmas they were just going to give God the praise for having food on the table; there would be no gifts. When our church members presented the gift from our church in Jesus’ name, the mom broke down crying and with a thankful heart declared, “Now we can have Christmas.” Because of this gift from Christchurch, they were able to buy some gifts for the family. Oh yes, this reminds of Jesus! He gave us salvation, hope, family and Heaven! If you have Jesus, you have Christmas! May we all learn what was told us in Acts 20:35, *“I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.”*

-Pastor Pope-