

A MERRY CHRISTMAS

Christmas today

Christmas today is a paradox. It is a time when God's people are reminded of the Virgin birth of a loving Savior, and also a time when we observe many inconsistencies with what Christmas has become. For some, it is a time of simple faith and joy in a Savior, who selflessly came into this world to live among us. To others, it is a time when hidden beneath the innocence of tinsel and lights, there lies a denial of Christ, and a 'mad dash' to pile up as many things as possible.

Every year we see the sinful nature that is rooted in all of us on display on the news or internet. The insanity of the Black Friday sales have people pitted against each other in violence and hate, just so we can get our families that 'perfect Christmas gift.'

For those who don't get caught up in this kind of scene, we may still be consumed with cooking and baking, practicing songs for the holiday play, the parades, decorating the house and even watching the endless list of Christmas movies and cartoons.

While there is nothing wrong with Christmas activities, it is usually when we are so busy with the things of this life that we miss God. We may ask, how is it that these things happen? Were we just not looking?

This very thing happened when Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem for the census. The Bible tells us in Luke 2, "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered... Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child... And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

So picture the scene, a young couple simply traveling to fulfill their obligation to Rome for the census, while the mother carries to deliver the Savior to the world. They traveled in quiet hope and duty while the streets were filled with the busyness of commerce. Vendors and business people working tirelessly to take advantage of the large volume of potential customers to make as much money as possible.

It was in all this chaos that the world literally changed with very little notice. A more lowly birth could not exist for any child, let alone the Son of God.

Off to one side sit a group of shepherds. They sit silently and no doubt in amazement as their night watch had been disrupted by a burst of light from heaven and a symphony of angels. Near the young mother sits the weary father. He can't remember the last time he sat down, and still hasn't figured it all out. What's important is that the baby is fine and that Mary is safe.

He is here!! The time of waiting is over. Of this child, the prophecies of the Old Testament will become very alive and testify of the living God. The Messiah would be born of a virgin, born in Bethlehem, be the seed of a woman, descended of David, would be called out of Egypt, called a Nazarene, perform signs of healing, be the great light, be greater than David, be the star coming out of Jacob, be a prophet like Moses, be preceded by Elijah, be preceded by a messenger, be a light to the nations of the world, be the One to whom the scepter belongs, be our kins-

man-Redeemer, be the rejected cornerstone, be the righteous sufferer, be the willing sacrifice, come riding in on a donkey, be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, be a Passover lamb, be forsaken, pierced, and vindicated, be resurrected and bring in the new covenant. All of these prophecies would be fulfilled because of this Child who arrived. This happened without the fanfare, without a procession, without royal subjects.

The pain of delivery Mary experienced has now been eclipsed by wonder. She looks into the face of Jesus. At this point in history, the human being who best understands who God is and what he is doing is a teenage girl in an old stable. She can't take her eyes off him. Somehow Mary knows she is holding God, our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.

This baby had overlooked the universe. These rags keeping him warm were the robes of eternity. His golden throne room had been abandoned in favor of a dirty sheep pen. And worshipping angels had been replaced with kind but bewildered shepherds.

Meanwhile, the rest of Bethlehem continued its active pace. I do think, that they missed the arrival because they were so busy and couldn't be bothered with anything else. And two thousand years later, not much has changed.

This Christmas, my hope for you is that your family gatherings may be happy and filled with good memories and joy. If you find yourself at a parade I hope it is colorful and brightly lit. I hope you have time to enjoy your favorite songs and movies that bring back only the best memories you have had through the years of Christmases past.

But more than anything else, before the cleanup begins and the tree is thrown out, and ornaments at the store are on sale for half-price, I hope you will take, if only a moment, time to sit quietly to reflect on that night so long ago of the Christ Child in a manger.

"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.'"

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2: 8-14).

*Dr. Carmelo A. Di Salvo
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Reconnecting this Christmas

Recently, I participated in two funeral services. One was attended via YouTube television watching the burial of our 41st president. The other was a quiet country burial of a local member of our community. One service had all the pomp and circumstance of a king or nobleman, complete with a 45 minute peeling of glorious bells tolling in honor of one who held the chair of commander of the free world. Another included strumming from one of the best musicians in our beloved Morrow County, hidden talent in this tucked away gem of eastern Oregon. There exists a profound contrast between the two experiences. Yet, for all the difference there is a stark similarity, both men were born and both men died.

Did it really matter that one man achieved the pinnacle of political ambition and another man lived quietly known only to a small handful of friends and neighbors? Did it really matter that one man lived and died very wealthy and the other comfortable but modest in his earthly possessions? What really matters?

Looking at this contrast at first appears to be pointless, hopeless and quite frankly, depressing. Shouldn't there be more to life? If all there is to life is achievement, comfort or even more noble pursuits like friends and family, in the end, who cares?

There must be more. There is more. We are not just masses of tissue walking on earth to accumulate

wealth, friends or even experiences. All of our pursuits, even the best and most noble leave us empty at the end of the journey because we were created for something more. We are people, human beings created by God, who find our greatest joy once reconnected to that same God from which we were born estranged to. That reconnection to God is possible through, ironically enough, God himself becoming one of us, the man Christ Jesus. This is what Christmas is a celebration of, God becoming a human being and coming to live with us. What could be more personal, more meaningful, than that?

Perhaps you are feeling the drag of empty pursuits. Perhaps you are at the top of your game and have yet to exhaust good things in your life. Unfortunately, those good things will eventually play out. There is only one good thing that lasts forever, and that is a relationship with the personal God, King and Lord, Jesus Christ.

This is God's free Christmas gift to you. Jesus, God Himself, came to earth to bring meaning to what seems meaningless. Why not make this Christmas the time you reconnect to that joy you seek. True lasting joy can never be permanently found in the mirage of political glory, possessions or even family. Jesus is the answer to that which is perishing. Reconnect to God through Jesus this Christmas.

*Pastor Tripp Finch
Willow Creek
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