



Upgrade Your Christmas This Year

How Can This Year Be Different?

Perhaps you are like me. Christmas is stressful. Every year for the past 23, I have been responsible for our church Christmas Eve Service. I always have enjoyed it, but it is a lot of work and takes plenty of planning to put together. There are lots of moving parts to the service, audio visual components as well as participants who need to be coordinated. There have been times when someone I have asked to do a reading or sing just didn't come. One year, our projector blew the bulb and so the video I planned to show that was a key part of the service couldn't be played. I am always responsible for closing the facility after the service and the time of fellowship and so my wife and I never get home before nine at night. More than once I have been exhausted and frustrated by how things have gone during the Christmas Eve service and just wanted to curl up in bed and go to sleep but I couldn't. We still had hours of Christmas wrapping to do as well as get together the stockings for the family. Finally, after having spent all day making preparations for the Christmas Eve Service, conducting it, wrapping the gifts and trying to get everyone involved in the work, I fell in bed, too exhausted to do any more and went to sleep, my wife finishing the wrapping I didn't do. Often, unbeknownst to me, the rest of my family stayed up until well after 2 AM. The next morning, Christmas morning I would get up, take a shower and everyone would still be asleep. I would wait for an hour or more but still not a peep from anyone. Finally, I'd get to work making the bacon and pancakes that are a kind of tradition for the family and after two hours cooking and cleaning, still no one would be awake. I'd start making noises to see if I could stir anyone but there was absolutely no interest to eat all the food I had prepared or unwrap the presents until well past the time I had grown frustrated with my entire family. Exhausted from two days of hard work and disappointment, I could think of a thousand things I'd rather do right then than celebrate Christmas...like take an ice cold shower or walk on coals. Have you ever felt that way? Is Christmas sometimes just too much hard work to enjoy?

There are plenty of reasons why Christmas makes many of us tense up each year. We struggle with the well-intended desire to have everything go just right. It's got to be a Christmas to remember, one that everyone enjoys. The food is delicious, the gifts are appreciated and make everyone happy, the whole family gets along, and everything gets started on time and no one feels bored. Each Christmas we have high expectations that just can't be met. In real life, the hot water heater stops working, people get sick and dinners aren't as good as we hoped. In Christmas life though, everything has to be perfect. It isn't a true Christmas if there is Covid-19, a disagreement, or poorly coordinated dinners. Not only that, how often is it that relationships become strained at Christmas. Couples are separated, children are upset with their parents or someone in the family has recently passed away. There are so many parts to Christmas that can go wrong and make it come apart at the seams. Yet who of us would want Christmas to just disappear, to not come around each year. For many, maybe it's so for you, Christmas is the best time of the year.

That very first Christmas was full of joy and excitement. Luke, a trained physician who also developed into an historian did exhaustive research into what happened the months before and after Jesus was born and he records what he learned in his self-named Gospel, Luke. **While they were there, the time came for the**

baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2: 6-7 NIV) Joseph must have felt a certain rush of relief at finally having the baby Jesus born. The anxiety about how others would react to his fiancé being pregnant, the stress over how he might respond to being a father to God's own child, the fear about his wife delivering the baby while traveling; it all took a backseat to Jesus being born and the relief he felt when the delivery went safely. Mary of course would have experienced the flood of love she had for her newborn, the joy at finally being able to hold him in her arms after carrying him for nine months, the peace that she enjoyed having made it through childbirth. All fears of what dangers and trial might be ahead were swallowed up in the joy of having Jesus there before them, beautiful and tender in their arms.

But then, the historian Luke has more to tell. Even as the intoxicating effects of the safe and happy birth were still lingering in their hearts, an unexpected collection of guests joined them in their early Christmas celebration. Shepherds who had been half awake tending their sheep at night were stunned by the majesty of a great crowd of angels serenading them in the sky and announcing that the long awaited Savior of the world, the Messiah had just been born nearby. Terrified by the spectacle and at the same time driven with excitement of the prospect of seeing God's messiah, they rushed off to Bethlehem. **So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.** (Luke 2: 16-20 NIV) Maybe you are like me. You like the term "treasured" when connected with Christmas. Isn't that what we really want for Christmas? We want to treasure it. What a morning it was for the shepherds, after having witnessed the marvel of the angels, they were able to first-hand see the Messiah, the promised one that the nation of Israel had for more than a thousand years awaited. For Mary and Joseph to hear of the miracle of the angelic host just magnified their joy on that day!

How do you think your Christmas will go this year? You have often heard the expression that it is more blessed to give than receive. It was Jesus Himself who made that declaration and we all know that it really is true. What makes Christmas so lovely, when it really is so, is seeing how we add to the joy of others somehow. At the risk of adding to your already crowded Christmas month, here is a way to gain back what makes Christmas special. This is not about increasing the guilt you and the rest of us often feel for not having done enough to get Christmas right this year. It is just some simple ways you bring joy to your life as you take your eyes off what you hope will happen this Christmas and be like the shepherds who with great enthusiasm lifted up the hearts of Mary and Joseph as they celebrated the birth of God's Son. So see if there is something here that can make your life better and add to the gift Christmas is to us all.

The Apostle Paul, who was an expert on making his own life better by pouring himself into others wrote, **Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.** (Philippians 2: 4 NIV) Here we go. 1. Set aside at least one day to only offer praise and never complain or criticize. Try to find as many people as you can to let know how great they have done. 2. Write a note to someone explaining what makes that person a joy to be around. 3. Give a gift that is impractical and unnecessary but filled with the joy you have in giving. 4. Show kindness to someone in a quiet and secretive way. 5. List on a piece of paper twelve gifts that you know have come from God. 6. Take time to listen to someone actively and carefully. 7. Relieve someone's burden. Make life easier for at least one person. 8. Find a Christmas song to make your theme and sing it through the Christmas season. (Mine is O Holy Night) 9. Practice smiling. 10. Make a Light in your home or office be a sign of Christ's presence. 11. Create a prayer for the season. Write it down and speak it out loud every once in a while. 12. Make someone your subject of prayer the last 12 days of Christmas.

Picture yourself sitting down next to Joseph and Mary as they coo and caress the baby Jesus. What sort of thoughts would go through your mind? What would you say as you enjoyed that first Christmas with them? Would you have a plan for what you would do when you got back home and the memory of the day changed the way you saw things? This Christmas could be a turning point for you and give you a whole new way of seeing things. Make the most of your opportunity.