

Merry Christmas

By Pastor Greg
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John 3:16-21

Bunkertown COB

I grew up in a time when “Season’s Greetings” was plastered everywhere in town. It hung in the storefront window at Pague & Fagen Hardware. Henry’s Rexall Drug store had a bright neon sign that would greet you on the way back to the soda fountain. It was printed on the money envelopes at the People’s National Bank. Even my mother would dig out the old 78’s on Christmas Eve and we would listen to Andy Williams sing “Happy Holidays”. Truthfully, back then I never really gave the phrase “Happy Holidays” much thought. But today it seems we are in the midst of a battle, a slugfest between those who say “Happy Holiday’s” and those who say “Merry Christmas”.

The question, I suppose is whether we are celebrating a holiday or something else. I suspect most people think that we are simply celebrating another holiday (and if that is true, then why am I not greeted with warm wishes for a “Happy Holiday” in February since we celebrate Groundhog Day, President’s Day, and Valentine’s Day so close together?). But there is far more to Christmas than perhaps some may realize.

Actually, if you want to get real picky, a ‘Holiday’ is a period of time when an individual takes a break from their labors and rests a while. So to wish someone a ‘Happy Holiday’ is to wish them a relaxing and enjoyable vacation, which is what mostly happens around the Christmas Season. People take some much needed time away from work and spend it with family or friends. People open up their homes to one another for a chance to reconnect. Families gather to exchange love and compassion. A ‘Happy Holiday’ is also a time when some people fondly look back to when their life was much simpler; when there was joy and peace and love.

I’ll admit that this is much of what happens during the Christmas Season. But this is still simply celebrating a holiday. I know, I know. Some people will actually attend a church service like this one because, well, that’s just what you do during the holidays. It is Christmas, after all. But to celebrate Christmas is something altogether different.

In Christian circles, the thought is that Christmas is a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Traditionally you will see dramatic reenactments of the story found in Luke chapter two. A young girl will be asked to play Mary, the mother of Jesus, someone will either donate the use of a life sized baby doll, or in more elaborate cases, a real baby is used and the mother prays the diaper stays dry during the performance. And some young boy will play the part of Joseph, reluctantly because he has to pretend he's married to some girl (cooties! Yuck!). Maybe you've even seen the Live Nativities, complete with real animals and a shanty that is supposed to depict first century Palestine, yet look surprisingly colonial. Many churches conclude this with a Candle Lighting service, a memorial to the birth of Jesus.

But I'm even going to challenge that this is still not a celebration of Christmas. You see, a person can be fooled into thinking they have celebrated Christmas by participating in or watching a Christmas Eve celebration like this. They probably have Manger Scenes in their homes or boldly display one outside for all to see. Why, they could even go so far as greeting everyone they meet 'Merry Christmas'. But they would merely be celebrating the events surrounding Christmas, not the true meaning of Christmas.

To celebrate Christmas is move past the manger and come to the cross. You see, unless we recognize the work that Christ came to accomplish (to be the One to restore our broken relationship with God) we are still simply celebrating a holiday. No offence to Linus, but Christmas is about a heart that has accepted the work of Jesus, and is moved to worship and gratitude. In order to keep this season from becoming just another holiday, you must first recognize why Christ was born in the first place. Listen to how Jesus describes Himself. ¹⁶“For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸“There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. ¹⁹And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. ²⁰All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go

near it for fear their sins will be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.” (John 3:16-21)

My friend, to really celebrate Christmas is to get past all the traditions and customs found in the holiday and come to terms with what Christ has said here. He was sent to earth so that you and I might find eternal life with God. And there is incredible grace to be found in what Jesus has said. If God did not care about you or if He was just looking for an excuse to condemn you, He never would have sent Jesus to save you. And those who can get past the traditions of the holiday understand the magnitude of what Christ has done for people like you and me.

That’s why a Christian celebrates Christmas, not a holiday. A Christian knows what Jesus has done and responds with a gratitude and love that bursts from their soul. A Christian takes a moment to recall the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus that purchased their eternal life. And a Christian, who no longer hides in the darkness, will gladly share that message with all who will listen. A Christian knows that to merely celebrate a holiday is to hide one’s self from God.