

A Christmas meditation

We know the holidays are very commercialized and without spiritual meaning to many people, and to some with broken families and dreams they can be sad and difficult times. But to Jackie and me, they are good times and full of fond memories. Being raised in Christian homes, we both have recollections of church and family traditions at Christmas and New Year's that bond us to family and to the Lord.

As a child, I was accustomed to 6 a.m. Christmas morning breakfast in the church basement: EVERYONE came — all cooked and served by the pastor and his wife. I thought it was fun. For some mysterious reason this memory of mine has always been a threat to Jackie, especially when we were pastoring. For a few years I raised the suggestion of Christmas breakfast for the church; I always got strange piercing glares from her, so I finally dropped the idea.

New Year's Eve was also the traditional time for us to be in church. We expected to enter the new year with midnight communion and prayer. Actually, I think as young people we only tolerated this tradition at the time, but looking back now I see that it put our priorities in the right place.

The only bad memory I have of childhood Christmas was the year when I sneaked a peek at my presents by pressing with my fingers the thin wrapping paper that covered them and reading with some effort the labels underneath. (A skill which I do not recommend that you learn, and please do not read this to your children.) I discovered that I was getting just what I had asked for. I had to act surprised on Christmas morning, and felt secretly guilty! It was a self-inflicted loss of happiness.

Oh, yes there was one other unpleasant thing which I did my best to avoid on many a Christmas eve...the traditional bowl of what seemed to my stomach to be little pieces of inner tubing from my bicycle tire floating in hot milk. My folks thought it was oyster stew and loved it, but I never did!

Jackie and I had some minor problems at Christmas with our own children. Baby Jesus would frequently disappear from our plaster nativity. We would find him later riding a little motorcycle or driving a GI Joe army truck powered by four year old Jeff. Now Jeff is married. Recently his mammoth cat "Pele" moved to our house because Jeff and Jermaine couldn't have pets in their new apartment. Why is it that "Pele" the cat has been stealing baby Jesus from our nativity?

Our first son Jay caused some Christmas problems early on, revolving around his opinion of the hour at which Christmas morning celebration should begin. It was climaxed the year Jackie and I collapsed into bed at 1 a.m. after finishing our gift wrapping...and Jay woke us enthusiastically at 1:30 a.m. with sparkling eyes and dancing feet!

Grandpa Matthews later let me know it was simply divine justice...reminding me that I had plagued Grandma and him with such a “problem” all through my youth.

Recently our daughter, Jenni, the youngest of our Christmas morning sparklers (now 18 years old), told us that one year she had beat Jay’s record by an hour. She had awakened at 12:30 a.m. and had opened the gifts in her “star bag”. Jackie and I never knew this, and were happy for her deceit since she didn't wake us up.

You see, the “star bag” tradition had been carefully developed over the years to take care of such childlike over-enthusiasm. Jenni knew by our tradition that it was all right to open the gifts in her “star bag”, and that there was no need to disturb her parents, and that the same parents would be very excited about her discoveries at a later time of the morning.

Each of our children experienced culture shock the first time they asked their friends what they had gotten in their “star bags”. Only then did they discover that “star bags” were a tradition that their mother had hoped would sweep the Christian community, but in reality never spread outside our home.

Explanation: a “star bag” is really a Christmas stocking in a more biblical form. Not wanting to emphasize Santa coming down chimneys to fill stockings, we (rather Jackie) chose to place in our tradition the memory of the star which appeared over Bethlehem, signifying the greatest gift of all, Jesus...hence, the “star bag”. This was hung on each child’s bedroom door, available for early Christmas a.m. perusing without parental supervision. Necessity is truly the mother of invention.

Christmas has much deeper wonders, however, and the world more desperate problems, than these holiday memories. Isn’t it a wonder that God would choose to enter a troubled and dangerous world in the life of a helpless infant? Isn’t it a wonder that He would commit the future of the world and His eternal purpose to the womb of an unmarried teenage girl?

Under the proud noses of self-centered and self-protecting Pharisees, inside the circle of an iron fisted Roman empire, and within killing distance of a paranoid Herod... Mary and Joseph laid the Father’s Hope for the world into a tiny bed of rough and smelly hay.

Surely the weakness of God is stronger than men! The muscle of armies did not prevent the Prince of Peace from arriving on the scene. Who anticipated a cow’s feeding trough would be this king’s bed?

Surely the foolishness of God is wiser than men! Religious pride made most minds blind to this humble invasion by the Son of God.

Should you wonder then that He chooses to accomplish His purpose in your life right under the nose of trouble and frustration?

Maybe you feel a darkness is enveloping your personal world. In the face of heartaches and disappointments, can you consider that He might be secretly invading your world to do something good — even something great and marvelous on your behalf?

Father God must have been unimpressed with Satan's hate and Herod's sword to have placed His only Son in that Bethlehem stable. Perhaps you have been too impressed with the powers of darkness. Instead, be amazed with God; be overwhelmed with your heavenly Father.

The gospel account of the Baby who became the King of Kings ought to reassure us that His purpose in us, though we may feel weak or frail, is secure. The manger scene in your house declares that your life and future are safe in the hands of a confident Father God. Let's honor Him by trusting Him, by joyously abandoning ourselves to Him. If He can bring His Son from a barn through a cross to a grave to the Throne, then He is fully able to bring you through the trials of life to your secure and safe destiny in Christ.

We are experiencing a national outpouring of wickedness. It feels as though we are in a society that is disintegrating by the hour. The Christmas story reminds us that God...Immanuel...still comes into the middle of human wickedness. It calls us to an increased trust in the One "who sent His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life."

Father God will have the last word in your life and in the world, and it will be good, for He is good.

John Matthews