

## What if You Don't Have a Merry Christmas?

What family traditions do you have for Christmas? Do you have a Christmas party every year? When do you put up your Christmas tree and your other decorations? You've got to be done by now, certainly. Will you open presents tonight or wait til tomorrow? Will you go to grandma's this evening? Do you do that "elf on the shelf thing" – which I'll confess is not a Christmas tradition that we will be starting at the Kieta household any time soon. Most of us have memories of Christmases growing up and then the Christmases we've observed with our families. It's the kind of holiday that we dream about and look forward to. We have expectations and our society feeds them. I've seen endless jokes this year about the TV Christmas specials and the point of all of those specials is the joy of this season.

**But what if you don't have a Merry Christmas this year?** What if you fell into the holiday expectation trap and you're really disappointed with how it all turned out? What if you're sad and lonely this year? What if your son or daughter is deployed overseas in the military and you just miss them? What if you're divorced and family time this year is going to be limited or really strained? What if you just feel empty and forgotten? What if no one is going to give you a Christmas present or you don't have the money to celebrate? It might feel like this whole holiday is designed to rub salt in your wounds. It might feel like all those songs that our car radios keep playing over and over again, all those Christmas specials on TV, all the lights you see as you drive by are mocking you and your pain. You might even get a little angry when other people express their joy.

I'm sorry if it feels like a downer to dwell on those things tonight, but not everyone is going to have a merry Christmas this year, or any other year. As wonderful as these holidays can be, almost everyone has had at least one disappointing or even bad Christmas. I think recognizing that truth helps us remember what this holiday is really about. The truth is, we can get so distracted by our efforts to make our celebrations so happy and wonderful and bright that we easily forget what we're celebrating. So maybe, God lets us have those down years sometimes to remind us.

In Luke 2, God tells us what this holiday is really all about. And it's a beautiful account. But it's a pretty straightforward story. It's been embellished by so many pageants and movies and so much Christian art that it might be worthwhile for us to note how simple and ordinary the story really is. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, way up in the north of Israel. They were newlyweds. She was pregnant – although not in the usual way. It was a miracle of God. But most people didn't know that. The Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, spent his whole reign stabilizing and reorganizing the empire after decades of strife and civil war. Like all rulers, he was very concerned about collecting taxes, so he ordered a census to determine exactly how much revenue he should be getting. It was actually a pretty normal thing for a government to do. Sending everyone to their hometown to register was just the most logical way to do it in a world where people didn't have last names or social security numbers or zip codes. In their hometowns they should've been able to keep straight who was who. So Joseph and Mary did what everyone else was doing. They went to Bethlehem down in the south, because they were descended from King David and that's where he grew up.

Even the birth of the baby was not all that unusual. Babies are born every day and not always at the most convenient moment. So the fact that the baby came when they couldn't even find adequate lodging is almost what you would expect. He was wrapped in cloths because that's what people did then. They didn't run to Target and buy special newborn outfits that the baby would only wear for a week or two. Even the fact that they were in the stable was not as odd in that time and place as it would be today. Bethlehem was a little town with limited resources. It didn't get a lot of tourists. And the stable may even have been part of the same building as the main house or inn was. People lived a lot closer to their animals than we do today. If you and I had been there, if we were first centuries Jews, almost nothing in this account would've struck us as being unusual until the angel appeared to the shepherds and told them what had happened.

That miracle in the midst of ordinariness is what God underlines in this account. The time came for the baby to be born. He was laid in a manger because that's what was there. And an angel of Lord declared to the humblest members of Jewish society that God had kept the promise he had been making since the Garden of Eden: a Savior had been born to them. He was Christ the Lord.

What are we to make of all this ordinariness? This baby was one of us. He came to live the life we live. To suffer the hurts and sorrows that we have to endure. To obey the laws that God gave to us. To die and even to suffer hell itself just as we deserve to. And then to rise, as God promises that we will. Of course, that child was more than just a human being. Isaiah prophesied that the child to be born would be the mighty God. The angel told Mary that he would be the Son of the Most High. But everything about the birth itself reminds us that he was also the true child of Mary. He was a real human being, made like us in every way.

He came to rescue us from what sin does to us. In the ancient church, people wrestled with what it means that Jesus is God and man. Some people tried to make the God part replace some aspect of the human part. So they argued that the divine nature – the God part – replaced his human soul or his human heart or his human reason. But a very famous theologian, whom most of us have probably never heard of, named Gregory of Nazianzus pointed out that what Jesus has not assumed, he has not redeemed. If Jesus didn't have a real, human body, he didn't redeem my human body. If Jesus didn't have a real human heart or mind or soul, he didn't redeem my human heart or mind or soul. The book of Hebrews says that he shared our humanity. That he was made like us in every way, except that he had no sin.

And it says that he became all that so that by his death he could free us from him who holds the power of death, that is the devil. St. Paul adds that when the time was fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman, to be born under the law, to redeem those who are born under the law so that we might have the rights of children of God. So the Son of God took on human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God was made man so that he could stand in our place and live the perfect life we cannot live and then so that he could die in our place and free us from all that our sin deserves.

That includes death and hell. But it also includes all loneliness and sickness and sorrow and loss. It includes everything that will make it hard for some of us to celebrate Christmas this year. It includes every unfair thing and every painful thing that robs us of our joy. Jesus came to undo all of it because he came to undo the cause of it all: human sin. In the Garden of Eden, human sin robbed us of eternal life with the God who loves us. But it also broke this world and introduced every pain and sorrow we face here. Human sin robbed every generation of the perfect joy God wanted us all to have. In Bethlehem, God began the process of restoring that joy to us. Bethlehem was the beginning, not the ending. Jesus still had to live that perfect life in our place. He had to grow up just like we do. He had to experience hunger and pain and loss in our place. He had to know the joys and the sorrows of real human life. And he had to die, just like we do. He had to rise, as we all hope to. He had to do all that to win back God's gifts for us.

And then he had to ascend into heaven and send his church out with this gospel message. That's where all our traditions and celebrations really come from. They all grew out of the church's annual celebration of the greatest Christmas gift of all: the Son of God made flesh for us. That message had to reach each and every one of us personally. That message comes to us again this year in whatever state our families are in and it reminds us of God's endless love for us. It reminds us of his promise of a new and better life to come. It reminds us of how God moved heaven and earth so that his Son would rescue us from all that hurts today.

We may not be freed from those hurts yet. Many people still will not have a merry Christmas this year because of those hurts and losses. But all of us can have a blessed Christmas this year. Because tonight and again tomorrow, God uses the simple words of this rich and wonderful account to remind us that he loves us. That he knew us before the world began. That his Son became one of us to rescue us. And that one day, he will heal us from all that hurts today, and we will live forever with him in joy that goes beyond anything we could possibly experience in this life, even on the best of holidays. That promise is certainly worthy of celebrating. That promise may even be enough to give us an inkling of that joy, no matter how much our lives hurt today. Celebrate Jesus' birth and love for you. Amen.