

Remembering Christmas
Luke 2:1-20 (NIV)
July 24, 2016

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 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. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 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.

Not too long ago, I read a story about an Episcopal priest who lived in New York City. His apartment was in Greenwich Village and his church was near Midtown Manhattan. As was his custom, he left his apartment at 930am and began his walk to church for the 11am Christmas Day worship service.

As he passed one of the many apartment buildings, he noticed that someone had already thrown out their Christmas tree. 930am on Christmas morning and someone had already stripped the tree of its lights and ornaments, pulled it from the stand, and taken it outside to wait for the truck to come along and pick it up.

How sad is that? 930am Christmas morning, and Christmas was already just a memory, if that. The priest could almost hear the owner of that tree saying, "I'm glad that's over. New Year's Eve is only a week away, and I have a party to plan."

That might be a bit of an exaggeration, but it's close to reality for most Americans today. After all, the "Christmas Season" starts as soon as the Halloween decorations come down. By the end of October you can hear all your favorite Christmas songs in any department store. Televisions and billboards are inundated with pictures of Santa, reindeer, and, of course, Christmas presents.

By the time Thanksgiving arrives, the shopping season reaches a full scale frenzy. You'd better have your Christmas party on the calendar before December 1, or all your friends will be going somewhere else. By mid-December, the advertising, the shopping, the hustle and bustle, have most people completely burnt out on Christmas, and Christmas is still two weeks away.

The church must not let society convince it that Christmas begins on Black Friday and ends on December 26. Christmas is more than a day. It's more than a season. It's more than an event.

The church begins to prepare for Christmas four Sundays before it happens. Those four weeks of Advent are meant to focus our attention on the coming of the Messiah. We wait and we watch and then it happens. But we can't throw out Christmas as soon as the Christmas Day service is over and start preparing for the new year.

Somewhere around the 5th century, the church began celebrating the 12 days of Christmas. A time stretching from Christmas to Epiphany. Time for the faithful to stop and reflect on the importance of this world-changing event. But is that enough? Let's see.

Luke's account of the Nativity Story brings up two very different and very important messages. First, he tells us what happened on that first Christmas over 2,000 years ago.

A man named Joseph took his young wife-to-be from Nazareth to Bethlehem because the Roman government said so. There was to be a nationwide census that required everyone to go to their ancestral hometown. Can you imagine the travel nightmare that would create today?

While in Bethlehem, an ordinary yet extraordinary thing happened. The birth of any child is both ordinary and extraordinary. After all, there is a baby born in the country about every eight seconds. The specialness of the birth depends on your relationship with the baby.

But this baby was different. Mary and Joseph knew this would be no ordinary child. He would be special. He would be special to more people than just them. They knew this birth fulfilled the prophesy of Isaiah: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Is 9:6 ESV).

Mary and Joseph knew that this little baby, lying so helpless on a bed of straw; this little baby, born to working poor parents in a town unknown to most of the world; this little baby was not just their son. He was also the Son of God. This little baby not wrapped the royal robes but strips of cloth; not lying in a royal bed chamber in a splendid palace, but in a stable, surrounded by common farm animals; this little baby boy was the King of

all Creation.

We all know that story. I can stand here and retell it with fine words and flowery language, but we know that story. What makes us want to hear it told again and again is the second amazing point – that story continues to be relevant. Over 2,000 years later, we are still talking about the birth of that baby boy. The question to be answered is, “why.”

That night in Bethlehem, without fanfare and national news coverage, the God of the universe was born a human being. On that beautiful night in Bethlehem, God began to experience what we experience just as we experience it. God began to get firsthand experience of what it means to be human.

The God who literally created the universe took on human flesh and lived and died as one of us. God became human to laugh and cry, to be loved and hated, to be hungry and full, to be happy and sad, to be cared for and lonely. God experienced exactly what we experience.

Only Christians can say that. Moslems can't make that claim because Mohammed was a prophet, not God. Jews can't make that claim because Abraham and Moses were men, not God. In all the world, among all the religions of the world, only Christians can claim the fact that God became human and lived among us. It doesn't get more extraordinary than that.

Since that night, we no longer see God as some distant deity, removed and aloof from our problems and concerns, uncaring about our pain, separate from our grief, untouched by how we live and exist.

Our God is a living God, not a cold lump of wood or stone. As the pinnacle of creation, we have been given amazing gifts by our Creator. We have this world in all its beauty and splendor. We have relationships with other people who make us laugh and cry. We have comforts, machines, and medicines that generations before us never dreamed of. All these are gifts from God. Everything in our lives gives us reason to thank and praise the God who loves us so much he would condescend to our level of existence.

Our lives are not perfect. There are horrible diseases. People hurt each other. Jobs are lost. Families are torn apart. People suffer from tornados, earthquakes, and floods. That brings us to another amazing part thing about Christmas. God knows how we suffer, because he suffered as Jesus. God knows how we feel. God knows what we feel. And, one day, God will wipe all this sorrow and pain away. Until then, God has promised to never leave us or forsake us.

God loved people so much he sent his only Son so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16). That's the promise of Christmas. This extraordinary baby would grow up to live a perfect life that would cancel out our sinful lives. Then, he would die to pay a debt we could never afford.

We are celebrating Christmas in July because Christmas is not a day. It's not a season. It's not a warm fuzzy feeling. It's not just a story. Christmas is the fulfillment of a promise made by a loving God to an undeserving people. Christmas is the sum of God's love wrapped in the human flesh of a baby boy. Christmas is a joy that is meant to be in our hearts every day of our lives.