

How to save Christmas

How do you gauge a good Christmas? I am sure most of us have some kind of gauge that determines whether or not this Christmas, or any Christmas, can be classed as a good one. And, I suppose most of us have some idea of where this Christmas fits on that scale. And obviously where it fits is determined by how we measure it.

So how do you gauge a good Christmas? Children will often measure Christmas by the amount of (and quality of) gifts they receive, and I suppose I did as well, in those days toys were different, less sophisticated, and we were more easily pleased. And I am sure most parents will try and make every Christmas memorable for their children.

As I grew up though my ideas about a good Christmas shifted to the fact that it was a break from school and to the number and type of parties I could go to. And I suppose that means that Christmas was all about me.

As a parent, I also tended to gauge Christmas by the quantity and the quality of the presents under the tree. Most of those presents weren't for me, of course; they were for my kids. But the quantity and quality of the gifts, was the determining factor in how I gauged that year's Christmas. When I was in business my income would fluctuate, depending on the state of the economy. I suppose on that scale my best Christmas was the one I was able to give all my children the vouchers for our Skiing holiday in Colorado. On the other hand I sometimes feel bad on the years I am not able to give good, expensive, gifts to my wife and children; I feel a sense of failure. If I'm honest I must admit that means it's still all about me.

I have always enjoyed having my family with me at Christmas, family to me in this sense has been my parent and my children and being able to have them all around for Christmas dinner, with their respective boy friends or girl friends has been a great blessing. But again it has been about me, about me being happy at being able to provide a good spread.

As a minister my gauge might have changed, sometimes it is determined by the tangibles of the season: a good Christmas sermon, a good Christmas nativity play, and maybe good Christmas parties and, of course, good attendance. And to a large extent, these things determine my mood during the month of December. So it's still all about me.

I think what I might be admitting to here is that there have been times over the years when I have missed the point of the Christmas season. There have been at least a few Christmases when, looking back, I see it was all about me: how much I would get, how much I would impress my family, how much better this year's numbers would be than last year's numbers and on and on. This admission would be a lot more difficult if I was the only one who had done this, but the fact is that many of us get a little side-tracked during the Christmas season. It is so easy for kids and parents and families and churches and ministers and Sunday school classes and businesses and employers, for Christmas becomes a competition; every year has to be better than last year. I am already trying to think what we can do with the stairs poster next year, to be able to improve on Kathy's excellent work this year.

There are of course problems with this kind of thinking. One is that it means some Christmases will be a loss because we can't always beat last year. A second problem is that it causes us to become focused on ourselves, either impressed with ourselves or feeling sorry for ourselves, and this prevents us from getting the full benefit of what God wants to see happen in our lives each Christmas season.

So here we are now, Christmas is over, and I'm wondering if some of us have already decided what kind of Christmas it has been. Maybe some of us are feeling a bit smug about how much we've accumulated, or how much we've spent, or how many parties we've been to. And maybe others are feeling discouraged because this year there hasn't been that much money and only a few wrapped packages under the tree. We haven't been asked out much and maybe we have decided that this Christmas is a loss and we can only hope that next year will be a little better. I know at least one young person here was wishing they could skip Christmas, because all the commercialization was getting to them. Regardless of how you feel this Christmas has been, I want to talk to you about some steps I believe we can take toward Saving Christmas.

If you've allowed yourself to get caught up in the marketing game and it's been all about spending money and beating last year's record, well it's not too late.

And if you've been blue because this year doesn't measure up, because the kids won't be coming home, because you can't buy all the things you want to buy, because you just haven't been able to get in the spirit of things, it's not too late..

And, not to exclude those of you who are doing it right so far, here are some ideas that might help you experience the fullness of this holy season more fully.

I suppose you might be expecting me to say things along the lines of "Give. Smile. Spread good cheer. Think of those less fortunate than yourself." Well these are all good things and, of course, I urge you to do them, but first I want to encourage you to receive the gift that God desires to give to you.

Those of you who were here on Christmas day may remember that I said that there's a sense in which Christmas really is all about me and all about you, because we desperately need what only the Christmas event can give us

2000 years ago Jesus left his home in heaven to come to earth as a man. The Bible says, "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form," (Philippians 2:6-7 NLT) And He did this because there was no other way for us to become fully alive in a personal relationship with God.

Several hundred years ago Augustine wrote these words. 'God became a man for this purpose: since you, a human being, could not reach God, but you can reach other humans, you might now reach God through a man. And so the man Christ Jesus became the mediator of God and human beings. God became a man so that following a man-something you are able to do-you might reach God, which was formerly impossible to you.'

Augustine's words echo the words of Paul to Timothy, "For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus." (1Timothy 2:5 NLT)

Jesus Christ came into the world to reconcile us to God. That's the meaning of Christmas. He came to bring peace between us and God. There was a gap, a gulf, caused by our sin and our self-centeredness and Jesus bridged that gap with an act of love. Paul wrote, "He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." (Philippians 2:8 NLT) That's what it took to make things right between us and God. That's why Jesus came to earth. That's why we have Christmas.

So when we talk about Saving Christmas there are a few things we need to do. I believe we need to spend some time thinking about God's gift to us. We hear the slogan "Jesus is the reason for the season." We have it on our banner outside, I have it on my msn nick. And of course it's true,

because Christmas is about his birth. But it's also true that we are the reason for the season, because we are the reason that Jesus came to earth.

David Meece wrote a song with these words; “As little children we would dream of Christmas morn, of all the gifts and toys we knew we'd find, but we never realized a baby born one blessed night gave us the greatest gift of our lives. We were the reason that He gave His life, we were the reason that He suffered and died, to a world that was lost He gave all He could give, to show us the reason to live.”

Take some time to think about this. Then take some time to exchange gifts with Jesus. His gift, the one he brought us at Christmas, is the gift of life. It includes salvation, love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, purpose, joy, peace, fulfilment, and eternal life.

Our gift to him is the only thing that is ours to give: our self. This is the gift that he's hoping to receive this year. I encourage you to spend some time confirming, or reconfirming, your vows to him. Tell him, either for the first time or the hundredth time that you want to know him, to follow him, to live for him, that you want to give back to him the life that he has given you.

Christmas is God's gift to us; he gave us the one thing we so desperately needed: life. And now we have the opportunity to give it back to him. We've all heard the cliché “the gift that keeps on giving”, It can be said about salvation. Jesus said, “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.” (Mt 16:25 NLT) The life that we give to him he gives back to us, but it's more abundant, more complete, and more meaningful than ever before. Take some time to get alone with God and re-affirm your commitment to live for him.

And then give one more gift. This is a gift you can offer to God, to your friends, your family, and everyone else who is involved in your life. It won't hurt your budget and you won't have to fight traffic to get it. That gift is gratitude. Say “thank you” to God for all that he has done for you. Say “thank you” to those around you for being a part of your life.

Philippians 1:3 says, “Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God.” (Philippians 1:3 NLT) Imagine saying that to your children, or to your wife, or your husband, or your employer, or your employees: “This year, in addition to my other gifts, I'm giving you Philippians 1:3. This year, every time I think of you, I will pause for a moment to give thanks to God for your presence in my life.”

I encourage you to take some time to thank God for the people he has brought your way. Thank him for the blessings he has put in your life. Maybe some of us are struggling with unmet needs right now or we may be dealing with some difficult relationships. But we can all take a few minutes to forget about what's missing, and focus instead on what exists: the many blessings that God has given us. So I encourage you take some time to give this additional gift back to him, and to other people close to you.

In Psalm 80 David repeats the same phrase three times. He says, “Turn us again to yourself, O God. Make your face shine down upon us. Only then will we be saved.” (Psalm 80:3) By sending his Son Jesus Christ into the world, he turned the world back to him, and he made his face to shine upon us. This is the only way we could be saved.

We have a bad habit of making Christmas all about “me” in all the wrong ways, my expectations, my wants, my needs, my preferences. The result is, often, that Christmas disappoints us or frustrates us in one way or another, year in and year out.

The paradox is that Christmas really is about me, all about you, we are the reason that God sent his Son into the world. It was the only way we could be saved. He sent Jesus to be born in a manger and to die on the cross for our sins so that we could turn back to Him, so that we could experience the forgiveness of sin, so that God's face could shine upon us. Only then can we be saved.

So I encourage you, receive His gift, give Him back the life He has given you, and be thankful. Then this Christmas past, and all Christmases in the future, will have real meaning and blessing for you.