

December 6, 2009

“Christmas Presence: Spend Less”

Luke 2:1-7 (NLT)

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. ² (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. ⁴ And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. ⁵ He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant.

⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. ⁷ She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

(vs1-2) Why did the Roman emperor (Augustus was a title rather than a name) want all the people of the Roman Empire to register in this census he decreed should be taken? For the purpose of taxation. Herod the great, who wasn't so great (actually he had this title not because of his greatness, but because he was an eldest son), he was a ruthless fighter, and a skilled diplomat. Roman appreciated the way he subdued opposition and maintained order among the Jewish people. They first made him a governor, and eventually appointed him as king of Judea. He owed this all to the emperor, and so it is no surprise that he cooperated with this census. As far as the divisions of the Roman Empire were concerned, Judea was a part of Syria.

(vs3-4) Everyone was to return to their ancestral town to register and because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem, David's ancient home. Actually this was not a Roman, but a Jewish custom, and there seemed to be a freedom to allow this.

(vs5) Joseph took Mary, she wasn't required to go since she was his fiancée, but she went, probably because of her love for Joseph, her desire to have Joseph with her at the birth of her Son, and most important of all, the leading of the Holy Spirit.

(v6) While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her first born (Mary had other children after Jesus' miracles birth – the term here implies it and in other scriptures Jesus' siblings are mentioned – Matt. 13: 55; Mark 3:31-35. which in no way lessens the dignity or sanctity of Mary and her role as the Mother of our Lord).

(v7) She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid Him in a manger. The stables in those days would have been a cave. In spite of beautiful scenes on Christmas cards, they were dark and dirty. A manger was carved out of the rock in the cave and used to feed the animals. Perhaps Joseph put some hay in the feeding trough and Mary laid the baby there. The reason they were in the stable was because there was no room available for them in the inn.

The inn was full and hopping that night. The innkeeper must have been a happy man, business was great. Every room was filled, and people were spending money on food and drink. Lots of money was being made. Joseph and a young pregnant Mary had to be turned away, there was no more room. And so Luke tells the story of the birth of Christ and everything pointed to obscurity, poverty, and even rejection, as the Savior of the world is pushed aside. No room for Him that night, people so caught up in other things that they missed the spectacular event taking place right under their noses. And today also because of commercialism, and materialism Jesus is pushed aside, though Christmas starts and ends with Him.

Millions of people shopped on “Black Friday.” They say the average person spent over \$340. I heard one person say they don’t know why they shopped on Black Friday, “there was pushing and shoving, and grabbing...and they were shopping on the internet!” I can understand people wanting to get a bargain, especially with all the gifts they need to get, but going shopping in the wee hours of the morning is not for me. And we all remember someone getting trampled to death last year at a Wal-Mart. Being in a crowd of people like that doing Christmas shopping would give me Santaclaustrophobia!

It was just before Christmas and the judge was in a happy mood. He asked the prisoner who was before him, 'What are you charged with?'

The prisoner replied, 'Doing my Christmas shopping too early.'

'That's no crime', said the Judge. 'Just how early were you doing this shopping?'

'Before the store opened', answered the prisoner.

What will you spend on Christmas this year? What do you usually spend? I looked up some figures on the internet and got the following information:

- Q: How many Christmas trees are sold each year?
A: Thirty-seven million fresh Christmas trees are sold each year.
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- Q: How many candy canes are made each year?
A: More than 1.76 billion candy canes are made annually for the Christmas season.
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- Q: How much does the average American family spend on Christmas gifts?
A: The average American family spends about \$800 on Christmas gifts every year.
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The commercial aspect has caused Christmas to become a time of great stress for many people. In particular, many feel financial stress as they shop for countless presents and the expenses can add up very quickly. Many times we are trying to figure out what to buy someone, who really doesn’t need anything. Every year a new toy becomes popular that people will lie, maim, and go to great lengths to get. How many toys do our kids really need? I remember a parent telling me that they had actually converted their garage into a type of toy warehouse to keep all her children’s things. I’ve observed a living room filled with Christmas gifts for two small children, waiting anxiously for the okay to be given by their mom. When mom said okay, it was like a hurricane hitting the living

room with Christmas wrapping paper flying around as the kids ripped open one gift, took a brief look at the gift, threw it to the side, and open the next gift, sometimes fighting over which gift was there's; usually wanting what the other got. It was chaos.

Someone has stated that the three phrases that best sum up the Christmas season are:
Peace on Earth.
Goodwill to Men.
And Batteries not included.

What if we were to cut back on Christmas spending? Some have embraced this idea, and with less focus on the material part of the holiday, it has helped them to reclaim a purer joy during this time of year. By simplifying, you allow yourself to have greater emotional wellbeing, and you can get back to the real meaning of the season.

Look for ways to give gifts that don't cost a lot of money. Give home-baked goodies, instead of buying gifts. Consider drawing names, so that each person in your family gives and receives one or two presents. Instead of piling up credit card debt, you will be able to shop for one or two thoughtful presents. Set a limit on the monetary value of the gifts. Putting a bit of thought and time into shopping for fewer presents will be much more emotionally fulfilling than stressing yourself out over what to get a lot of people. Perhaps some family members will be willing in lieu of a gift to chip in to give to some compassionate ministry need. Substitute compassion for commercialism – spend less to free your resources for what really matters.

Focus on the story of the birth of Christ. Bring comfort and joy to your home. Enjoy the beautiful music of the season together. Decorate your homes together as a family. Spend quality time as a family and friends. Tell some funny stories. Laughing with your family and friends is one of the healthiest things you can do. Be a part of the Advent and Christmas activities at the church. On Christmas day ask each person to share something for which they are grateful. This can set the tone for a pleasant day.

Through such focused efforts, you can take some of the materialism out of Christmas. You will feel much more relaxed and peaceful, too, as you will spend much less money.

A family that celebrates in an emotionally positive state will be greatly blessed. In fact, they will have more to be thankful for. After all, most of the true gifts in life cannot be bought with money.

Last week we spoke about giving Christmas Presence this year. Maybe one way of doing that is to spend less.

Now, before you think I'm getting all Scrooge on you, let us explain what I mean. We like gifts. Our kids really like gifts. But consider this: America spends an average of \$450 billion a year every Christmas.

How often have you spent money on Christmas presents for no other reason than obligation? How many times have you received a gift out of that same obligation? Thanks, but no thanks, right?

What if we consider buying ONE LESS GIFT this Christmas? Just one. Sounds insignificant, yet many who have taken this small sacrifice have experienced something nothing less than a miracle: They have been more available to celebrate Christ during the advent season.

Christmas was intended to be a time for remembering the birth of Christ, and what His life and sacrifice means for us. Christmas was supposed to be about peace, joy, love. It's the story of Christ's birth, a story of promise, hope, and revolutionary love. So what happened?

Let's start changing things this Advent by making it about worshipping more, and spending less.