

## What's So Important About Christmas?

Luke 2:8-20

“I hate Christmas,” declares the author of a recent opinion piece in the Washington Post. He explains that this feeling started when he was a child. His father had lost his job; but, as he writes, that tragedy

did nothing to stop the commercials with shiny, happy, children opening reams of colorful paper to reveal the things that they'd always wanted. The ads seemed to suggest that the more stuff you got, the better person you were. I learned through those commercials that good people got presents and that my family was trash. I took it into me every year like communion.<sup>1</sup>

If Christmas evokes such feelings of despair, it's worth asking, “What's so important about Christmas?” Luke's account of the first Christmas—the night Jesus was born—supplies this answer: Christmas is important because it means that *God has come to comfort and change us*.

### 1. Christmas means that God has come to us (Luke 2:1-9).

An ancient inscription now housed in the Berlin Museum bears the announcement that a king's birth heralds a new era.<sup>2</sup> The reign of this king—he was called Lord, God, and Savior—would be so great that it would end all wars. Calendars would henceforth number the years beginning with his birth, and the declaration about his birth was called *the gospel*. This great ruler is named in our text, but not where we expect it: “In those days a decree went out from *Caesar Augustus* that all the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1, emphasis added). Here we see one of the greatest ironies of history: now the world reckons the birth year of Caesar Augustus, not as year one, but as year sixty-three *before Christ*—that is, with reference to the birthday of a baby born into a peasant family on the eastern fringe of his empire.

The flow of Luke's narrative makes this point abundantly clear: the coming of God to earth confronts our basic assumptions about the path to peace and prosperity. While the Roman emperor ascended, as it were, as a god over the vast *pax Romana*, the true Son of God, the true Lord and Savior, came not to Rome but to Bethlehem; not in a royal cradle, but in a feeding trough. And he would triumph, not from a Roman throne but from a Roman cross. Christmas shows us that God does not need the currency of power, wealth, and prestige to bring about peace.

### 2. Christmas means that God has come to comfort us (Luke 2:10-14).

When the angelic messengers came to the shepherds, their response was one of fear, and with good reason: “the glory of God shone around them” (Luke 2:9). This response is typical of anyone who finds themselves in the presence of God (Luke 5:8; Revelation 1:17; Isaiah 6:5). When we catch a glimpse of God's glory, we fear because then we realize that—because of our sinfulness—we are utterly unfit for his presence.

The immediate response of the angel is to assure the shepherds that they need not fear. Why? Because God's glory, far from destroying human peace, is the very thing that brings peace: “Glory to God in the highest *and* on earth peace among those with whom he is well-pleased”

<sup>1</sup> “Opinion | Brian Broome: Why I Hate Christmas - The Washington Post,” accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/12/why-brian-broome-hates-christmas/>.

<sup>2</sup> “THE PRIENE INSCRIPTION,” July 22, 2017,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170722070724/http://www.masseiana.org/priene.htm>.

(Luke 2:14). Christmas comforts us because it shows us that the way to God is not by our arduous ascent to him. God has come to us, not as a conquering king, but as a servant who weeps with the sorrowing (John 11:35), touches the unclean (Matthew 8:3), dies for the guilty (1 Corinthians 15:1-3) and rises in victory for them (Romans 4:25).

### **3. Christmas means that God has come to comfort and change us (Luke 2:15-20).**

The shepherds believed the news of the angels and went to see the newborn baby. Then, in a sentence that wraps the story up like a package, “they returned” to their flocks. In one sense, everything returned to normal: they were the same shepherds, in the same fields, tending the same flocks. But in a more important sense, now everything was different. Now they were “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” They had taken into them the news about God’s coming as Savior. Martin Luther made the observation that the shepherds did not run out to a monastery in the desert; rather, the news sent them back to their same occupation with a higher purpose and deeper joy. The Christmas story does not promote an otherworldly preoccupation that calls us *away* from our work; rather, it calls us to approach our work as our way of worshiping God.

Do you remember how the author of the Washington Post article said he would take the glittery hype of Christmas into him “like communion”? I appreciate his honesty, and think he meant this in all sincerity—his yearly ritual of viewing the happy children open up shiny packages was as religiously formative as drinking the juice and eating the wafer. It deepened his belief that this is the way the world works, so all the worse for the poor and lowly.

But the true Christmas story is just the opposite: it is about God going so low—down to the earth, down to a manger, further down to a cross—to bring us up.

#### **Application Questions:**

1. How has our culture turned Christmas into something it is not? Keeping in mind that culture is merely a scaled-up version of our own hearts, what features of your heart lead us to embrace these (false, unhelpful) things about Christmas?
2. According to this study, how do the events of Christmas (as recorded in Luke 2) confront our pride?
3. How does God’s glory “in the highest” seem to conflict with our peace “on earth”? According to the angels’ announcement, how do God’s glory and our peace get reconciled?
4. How does Christmas bring us comfort? Share some circumstances in which you (or others you care for) need comfort? How might the Christmas story intersect with these circumstances?
5. What is the significance of the shepherds’ returning to their flocks? What does this teach us about our work in light of the good news about Jesus’ birth?