

## Contaminating Christmas November 29, 2009

Seems like this time of year that there is always too much going on, doesn't it? So this year, on top of all the regular stuff, shopping, feasting, busy calendars, etc, we have something else to worry about. I'm talking about the flu! It is all around, isn't it? Bugs, viruses all over the place and I've seen more germ x and purrell dispensers. They are out wherever you go! At our house we are more cautious than usual. We are making kids wash hands more often, etc. We are all probably telling contaminated people not to come in to work, to stay at home, right. Don't bring that stuff to work or wherever. No one wants to get sick over the holidays...Christmas and contamination don't go together.

Two years ago, my three siblings and their families and my dad and step-mother all came to stay with us at Christmas. Fourteen additional people were in our house. We have a detached garage with a bonus room above it and we have turned that into a guest house with a bath. So that definitely helps with 14 extras around. One of my nieces brought a stomach virus with her. Next thing you know her brother has it, then their mother gets it. Oh, I can still feel the anxiety. You are too, right? We quarantine the whole family out in the guest room and tell them not to come back in. We banished them to the outer darkness! Then out came the Lysol spray. I was spraying and praying, spraying and praying...I'm like, "oh Lord, please not me."

My poor brother, it was his family, would come back and forth to the house from checking on his family and we'd be like backing away and giving him a wide berth and putting our fingers in the shape of the cross. It was not good and I don't want to experience that again!

So if you're at all like me, then you are working to keep your environment as sterile as possible right now, right. Hasn't completely worked at my house, mind you, but still we're trying to stay as germ-free as possible. And that's a good thing, keeping our environment as sterile as possible, because we all want to avoid contamination.

Our kids got the H1N1 vaccine recently. They are inoculated against that flu. You know how this works... you get injected with the dead version of the virus or if you use the nasal spray version it's a weakened version of the live virus. Either way, your body develops antibodies so that when you encounter the full strength, "real" H1N1 you aren't impacted by it.

As we move into the Christmas season, I think inoculated is a very good description for how I experience Christmas. And I think this is true of most of us. We have been inoculated against the full-strength version of this amazing event when God puts on flesh. We are inoculated against the greatness of Christmas, God and His amazing good news....like we've been given just enough of a dead, dying, weak version of God that we are oblivious to the real, full strength version. We are Christians, we intellectually understand Christmas, but we are often missing the transformation that follows an encounter with the "real" Gospel--a Gospel full of Christ. We've had our shot of religion and...we've had just enough to keep safe, to keep us protected, to keep Christmas sterile and manageable.

This is not about cultural versus religious Christmas. It's not the culture's fault that I am not experiencing the transforming power of God's love more during the Christmas season....I can't blame this on Frosty or Rudolf, or Elf or Clark Griswold or Santa. It's my own fault.

It's my fault because I want to keep Christmas contained and controlled and safe. I love the ideal of Christmas love and giving, but what I am discovering as I take a hard look at my life is that I pretty carefully choose the recipients of that love. I have my list, and honestly, I am

trying to make it shorter each year. Don't you do that too?

The focus of my Christmas really is on the insiders in my life...family, close friends. It's really a pretty "safe" Christmas – in some ways it's sterile. Sure we pick up tags off of the Christmas giving tree and buy gifts for boys and girls, and that is a great thing to do, but it's just one way, one level, and it's a fairly safe one at that. We are giving to nameless or faceless people and someone else is really dealing with that family, someone else is even delivering the gifts to them. Don't get me wrong...this is a really great way to give at Christmas!

If you are not doing anything beyond yourself or the insiders in your life, you need to at least start here. And if you've been doing this much at Christmas, like my family has, then don't stop. Grab a tag or two or three off the trees in the lobby, because we have 100 families we're going to serve this Christmas. And that ministry makes a huge difference in kid's lives, and we need you to get involved at that level of giving beyond your inner circle,

I guess what I'm trying to say is that all in all, Christmas for me has always been demonstrating love to people I know well. In terms of the time and travel and money, it's for the insiders of my life. And when I have included others, like people in need, it has been in a limited, safe, inoculated way.

That describes how I feel about most of my Christmas experiences. I have been inoculated against experiencing the full impact of the Good News of Jesus at Christmas. There is enough of the real story in me to give me a shot of faith, but it has been missing the transformation of a risk-taking adventure with Jesus.

It's taken me way too long, but I've decided that I've had enough sterile, safe, inoculated Christmases and now it's time to contaminate Christmas this year with a contagious dose of risky faith.

Aaron said last week that God wants us to be discontent in some things and the place I am becoming more and more discontented is in the safe, sterile, Christmas. It's time for me to break open my safe, protected, predictable Christmas and move out of the safety zones, beyond my comfort zones. And I want to invite you to join me in contaminating Christmas.

When you think about Christmas, isn't this really what it's all about anyway? This is when we remember and celebrate that God breaks into our broken, sinful, hurting, needy, unsafe, contaminated world in flesh and blood because he loves us. And if that is God's purpose in coming, then that might give us a clue as to how we can experience real transforming power at Christmas. Paul wasn't talking about Christmas when he wrote these verses, but I want to ask you to let these words challenge your response to Christmas.

**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:**

**Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.                      Philippians 2:5-8 NIV**

The key words for us are humility and servant. When Paul describes what the character and nature of God who came in flesh, he uses these two words...humility and servant. Like I said, this has taken me way too long to live out. Experiencing God in the Christmas season is not about the perfect family gathering with a white Christmas and the perfect Christmas music playlist on your ipod (which I happen to have). It is about imitating the humility and servant-nature of Jesus, which is not just for the insiders in our lives, but for everyone.

And the gospels make it very clear. Jesus didn't come for the insiders, the people who were easy to love, the religious and upstanding. He came for everyone, and he has a special

heart for the broken-hearted, broken-spirited, marginalized, outcast people who were far away from God.

Listen to the way Luke describes the birth of Jesus...**Luke 2:8-18 NIV**

**<sup>8</sup>And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ<sup>[a]</sup> the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."**

**<sup>13</sup>Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,**

**<sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."**

**<sup>15</sup>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."**

**<sup>16</sup>So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.**

When God chose to live among us, he didn't choose privileged parents. When he arrived, he didn't arrive in the middle of the capital city in religious ceremony. When the angels sent out the party invitations (at the last minute), they invited the humble and lowly shepherds. When the shepherds started spreading the word, who do you think they told...their friends. The friends of shepherds probably didn't include the Bethlehem's Better Homes and Gardens set.

Matthew's version of the story does include Magi from the east. They were sages, not kings, and they were not down and out. They were people of means. But they were also gentiles. They were not Jews. And Matthew is telling us in another way that Jesus came for the people who were on the outside of faith looking in.

And that is exactly who Jesus went searching for when he launched his ministry. People who are on the outside of faith. People who were distant from God, who were marginalized. It included the lepers and divorced and the needy, but it also included people like Zaccheaus, who was a rich man, but was socially and religiously outcast because he made his fortune by placing large surcharges on the people as he collected the roman taxes.

When Jesus meets Zaccheaus, he agrees to have dinner with him that night and all the religious people couldn't understand and they asked Jesus how he could do that. And Jesus answered simply,

**Luke 19:10 - For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.**

This is what Jesus is all about...this is what Christmas is all about. The full force of this good news is that God loves people, all people. No one is too far away, too lost, too unlovable.

And here's the powerful part...Jesus has invited us to join him on this mission of taking God's love to the people who don't know they have it yet. Inoculated christians receive the good news for themselves. Transformed Christians search out the people who are on the

outside of faith and share this good news with them.

About six weeks ago our entire family started getting involved in a ministry called LifeHouse. It's home is in what used to be Northside Christian Church at 516 N Wall, and it's mission is to share God's love to families in that neighborhood through ministries that help meet their needs. We participate in Kid's club, which is a fun, safe place for elementary kids to come every Tuesday after school for a few hours. They play games, do crafts, get fed dinner and share in a Bible story and some worship time. Mostly what they receive is a reflection of God's love, given through volunteers who are willing to be a part of a kid's life for a few hours a week.

For some of these kids, school and LifeHouse are the safest places for them to be. Their Christmas season is probably not much different than life in general; kids living in abuse or neglect or in need. What does Christmas mean to kids who don't have beds to sleep in, or kids who are sexually, physically or verbally abused? Where in this world are they going to find hope, find love? Lifehouse and it's volunteers are trying to be there for them. And Lifehouse is the place that is pushing me outside of my safety zone and making this Christmas less about the insiders in my life and more about the people I would normally ignore.

My life has been infected with this amazing love, this powerful forgiveness, this contagious hope and joy. But way too often, instead of turning that loose on the world, I live an inoculated, safe, faith. I've decided that I don't want to live an inoculated Christmas, I want to contaminated Christmas. I'd love to see a Christmas where God's love is unleashed in our world in epidemic proportions. For that to happen, our Christmases can't be about us and the people we invite to our parties. Somehow, someday, we need to make Christmas about the people Jesus sought out; people in need, people who are distant from God, people who are marginalized; people who are struggling with life. We need to include the people Jesus would invite to his party.

LifeHouse serves the needy, and that's the place I'm where I am going to take the next step, but it's not just about the needy. It is about anyone and everyone who is disconnected from God. If you choose to make Christmas less about you this year, then here's the real challenge. Make it personal. Are you willing to bring hope into someone's hell; healing into someone's pain; joy into someone's loneliness; forgiveness into someone's bitterness; meaning and purpose to someone who has lost their way? That's what a contaminated Christmas is...meeting people where they are and bringing the gift of God's love with you.

You WILL choose your experience of Christmas this year. It can be safe and inoculated and that doesn't mean that God loves you any less. Or you can choose to see Jesus more fully by accepting his invitation to be where he wants to go...among the least, the last and the lost. If you want to experience the power of the Good news of Jesus this Christmas, then make your Christmas contaminated, make it infectious and contagious, make it less about you and more about sharing God's love. Receive the gift of God's grace that is for you, but don't hold onto it. Let it go. Give it away. Share it with people who need to know that God loves them. That's what Jesus did, and that is definitely good news.