

“God. With. Us. Taking Back Christmas.”

Man we’ve got lots of images of Christmas, don’t we! Some of them pretty crazy! What is all this about?!

It probably started two years ago for me. I’m talking about noticing how our culture is now handing Christmas back to Christianity. Most stores and businesses are all into “Happy Holidays,” instead of Merry Christmas, it’s all about holiday decorations not Christmas decorations, holiday gatherings, holiday music. The word “Christmas” is being eliminated from the language of our stores, schools, and government offices for fear that someone might get upset and take their business somewhere else, or file a law suit. This year I began to realize that our culture essentially took Christmas, used it to make gobs of money, set a pattern of consumption for people to follow, and now our culture is ready to get rid of Christmas and keep the pattern of consumption.

It kind of reminds me of somebody who would use somebody else to get what they want, and then just leave them. That all sounds kind of harsh and tragic and I really don’t want to go there, that’s just the nature of consumerism—so I’m not being all Scroogy. But here’s the thing, Christmas is a Christian holiday, and it’s OK by me if the culture wants to give it back to us! As I see it, our consumer culture has messed it up any way, and we should have taken Christmas back a long time ago!

So if the culture wants to get rid of Christmas and just have a nameless “holiday,” fine, let’s take it back! We’re Christians, and we’re taking Christmas back. For some reason it makes me want to talk like a pirate: “It’s our holiday, you stole it, and we’re taking it back! Argh! Have a merry Christmas!”

The more I think about it, the more I like it that our culture is dropping the language of Christmas. Why? Because our consumer culture does a real poor job of conveying the depth, the power, the gravity, the awesome majesty, of what Christmas is about. Our culture, public schools and government, does a poor job of telling the Christmas story and interpreting it for us. It’s not their role anyway.

The culture is giving it back to us, thank God! And now Christ-followers can convey the depth, the power, the gravity, the awesome majesty of Christmas! That’s where it should happen anyway. Christ-followers have been given the job of telling the Christmas story and interpreting it for our world. We should have been doing a better job of that along the way anyway.

The Church, the living body of Christ, should convey the events and the meaning of Christmas. We shouldn’t really need Wal-Mart, or public schools, or government or any other entity to teach the world what Christmas is really all about. The Church is the keeper of the Christmas story. But here’s the thing, we don’t keep it for ourselves. It’s not a story we hoard or hide. Christ-followers keep Christmas so that the world can know what God was up to when he invaded planet earth and split history between BC and AD.

But we’ve got to think this trough. If the culture is giving Christmas back to the church, if we can’t count on the Christmas story being told and interpreted in our secular world, in retail stores, in shops, in our public schools, then guess what? We had better get better at telling, understanding, interpreting, and applying the story of Christmas. And at the same time if we’re Christ-followers, we should be prepared for people who are not connect to Christ yet, to look to us hear this good news of great joy.

So I really am excited to start this new series of messages. It’s going to be like basic training in understanding what this celebration is all about, reclaiming it as our story, find real ways how we honor God at this time of year, and how we do the job of sharing the most powerful event in history that changed the world.

What I want to do today is retrain our eyes and minds to see things differently. You see, we’re surrounded by potentially powerful images and metaphors. But we’ve got to have a little information to really unleash that power within those images and metaphors.

So if we’re taking Christmas back it’s important for us to really grasp a few things. First, **the birth of the son of God was in the plan from the beginning**. Throughout the Old Testament there is an expectation that God’s anointed one, or the Messiah, would arrive one day to finally bridge the gap between God and

humanity. Centuries before the birth of Jesus the prophet Isaiah wrote, **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14, NIV)**. Immanuel means, “God with us.” There are prophecies about the Messiah coming for the family line of king David, about him being born in Bethlehem, prophecies about him having to flee to Egypt to escape being murdered.

Christmas was in the plan. God had a plan to come to us, when the time was right. Next week we’ll look at that time, at how people perceived God around the world, at the struggles of humanity, at the culture that Jesus was born into.

A second thing to get our brains around is that **Jesus really was born**. I read last week that some think that Jesus was a myth that was a compilation of the beliefs of several different religions of that time. But there is so much historical evidence about the reality of Jesus, walking this earth, teaching, gathering followers, being betrayed and crucified and then returning from the grave. It really happened! But we’ve got to be honest and say we don’t know exactly when Jesus was born. I always hate to bring this up because I don’t want anybody to be all shocked and dismayed. “You mean Jesus wasn’t born on December 25?” Probably not. The Bible doesn’t tell us when he was born. It was probably early spring, because that is usually when shepherds are in the fields at night because that is when the lambs are born. The shepherds are there to help that happen. By the way the lambs born at that time are the Passover lambs. The sacrificial lambs.

So why do we celebrate his birth on the 25th of December? Because that is right around the winter solstice. Christ-followers in the 1st and 2nd centuries were not really very interested in celebrating Jesus’ birth because his resurrection was much more important to them, and being ready for Jesus’ return was very important to them. Because the Bible didn’t say when Jesus was born, for a couple centuries, our spiritual ancestors didn’t really celebrate Christmas. But as Christianity spread and people become Christ followers who had been pagans or followers of other religions, they brought some of their traditions with them.

Some other religions celebrated the births of their gods, and when these people became followers of Christ, they wondered, “So when was Jesus born and when to we celebrate that event?” Many cultures celebrate the winter solstice as an important time of year. Through the winter the days are getting shorter and the nights longer until the end of December. When the light begins to return and the light of day begins to overcome the dark of night.

The ancient Christians said, “Well we don’t know when Jesus was born, but what better time to mark his birth than the time of year when light returns to the earth and darkness retreats.” Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” And so the ancients said, “This is the time...” And since many of the new Christians had celebrated winter solstice in other religions, they just brought some of their traditions with them and reengineered.

Our Advent wreath was brought to Christianity by people who were Pagans before becoming Christians. It was a wheel of life and light where candles were lit to lure back the sun. When those Pagans became Christians they said, “Let’s use this as a way to prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the giver of life and the Light of the World.”

Every once in a while I’ll hear people bash Christianity for stealing Pagan symbols. I say, “So what?” People from all sorts of religions, all kinds of spiritualities, have become Christians over the ages and often they bring traditions with them, reengineer those traditions to point to Christ, to remind them of some facet of the teachings of Jesus, and those traditions help them draw closer to God.

I just mentioned the Advent wreath. Let’s talk about the word “Advent.” **“Advent means “to come to” or “something which is about to happen”** Advent means “to come to” or “something which is about to take place.” It means that something is going to come to us; something is about to take place. For many centuries Christians have called the time leading up to Christmas day the season of Advent and traditionally it’s a time to get ready. Just like the season of Lent is the time to get ready to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection, Advent is a time to get ready to celebrate his birth.

The concept is that Jesus’ birth is so important that you don’t just show up one day and say, “Oh gosh, this is the day isn’t it. We should do something.” No. The day God took on human form and became one of

us is really important. So we get ready. But we're not just getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birth. The ancient tradition of Advent is also about preparing for Jesus' return. That's right. For centuries Christians have spent a good part of Advent, right here before Christmas, thinking about when Jesus would fulfill his promise to come back and bring this age to a close. That time when the living and the dead would stand before him for final judgment.

That's why the first Sunday of Advent traditionally focuses on the life of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was just a few months older than Jesus, and he was Jesus' cousin. John's role was the role of a prophet. He spoke like a prophet; we're told that he dressed like a prophet of old. John was sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry and his primary message was this, **"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near!" (Matthew 3:2, NIV)**. His message was simple and it cut people to the quick. They knew at some level that their lives were not what they should be. They felt disconnected from God and powerless to do anything about it by themselves. John spoke with the voice of a prophet saying repent, turn away from your sin, turn toward God, and be set free.

The symbol of letting go of their sin was baptism and thousands followed John to the Jordan River. He would wade out into the middle and say, "If you want to experience forgiveness, then repent and join me in the river and be baptized." The symbolism was that as a person repented, turned from the wrong in their lives, the river would carry that sin away. The Jordan River leads into the Dead Sea where nothing can live. The symbolism was the washing away of sin to a place where it cannot live—it's gone; it's dead.

So one message of this season to you and me is repent and be ready for the return of Christ! One of the traditional readings for this the first Sunday in Advent is Matthew 24:36-44. Jesus says, **"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father...That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come... So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:36-44, NIV)**.

Just as we celebrate that God came to us born as a baby, we know he promised to come again, so don't delay in getting things settled. Turn from the things that you know are wrong, don't delay, don't put it off any longer. You want to be free, be free! You and I can make this an extra special Christmas by using it as a time to experience freedom. What a great gift to give yourself, the gift of repentance. I know it sounds strange, but maybe that's the most important preparation you could make for Christmas. If we're taking Christmas back, let's go all the way! Listen, let's get honest about the things we do that we need to repent of. I hear from your own mouths. You tell me. You lie, you cheat, you sleep around, get drunk, gossip, undermine people and relationships, don't give a flip about the poor. You and I, we need to do something about that!

It should not be strange at all for us to look at the ugliness of our sin staring at us right here in the midst of the beauty of Christmas. Part of the Christmas message is clearly, repent, Jesus is coming back, be ready!

Advent has also traditionally been a time to prepare to meet Christ. This means thinking about death. We've got to do it. There would be no Christmas celebrations if there were no Easter. Nobody would care about this baby Jesus, if he didn't grow up to be a man who was crucified and then came back to life to once and for all take care of the sin in our lives. There is always a hint of sacrifice and death woven throughout Christmas.

Think about holly. You can look at it and say, "It's Christmas symbol because it's red and green." But let's take it back. It's a Christmas symbol because Christians long ago saw the sharp points as a reminder of the crown of thorns that Jesus was forced to wear as he was mocked and crucified. The red berries symbolize the blood he shed to pay the blood-price of our sin. It's evergreen which symbolizes eternal life and God's never-ending love.

Let's reclaim the Christmas tree too. The Christmas tree was never meant to be a shrine we put presents around. It can be so much more than a decoration. It was chosen as a symbol by our spiritual ancestors to remind Christ-followers of a few things. Its shape points toward heaven reminding us that God came down at Christmas. At first it was called a Paradise Tree. It was used as an object lesson to teach people about the tree in the Garden of Eden and how Adam and Eve sinned and were kicked out of the

Garden of Eden and how Jesus was born to restore paradise. Ornaments on the tree represented both temptation of sin (the apple) and the fruit of redemption, the bounty of goodness that God provides.

Traditions of putting a star or an angel on top of the tree symbolize the star that guided the magi to Bethlehem and the angles that told the shepherds about the birth. Putting candles and then electric lights on the tree are reminders that Jesus called himself and us the light of the world.

I have a religious experience with Christmas lights every year. I borrow 24 foot extension ladder from the church and put lights on our home. Every year, as I put them up I'm praying, "Oh Jesus, Light of the World, please don't let me fall!" This year I was leaning the ladder against the house, or trying to, it was fully extended and awkward as heck. It kind of got away from me and starting sliding on the concrete. I couldn't keep up and then the ladder starting to collapse. I'm chasing it down screaming like a girl, afraid of two things. That my hands are about to be sheared off, and that nobody is going to see this hilarious event! And it was hilarious. Because one of the neighbors was outside watching the whole things. He drove over and could not speak he was laughing so hard. I nearly fell over laughing! Anyway, lights, light of the world.

Why do we give gifts at Christmas? Let's take it back! We give gifts to remember the magi from the East who brought gifts to Jesus—gold, frankincense and myrrh. And we give gifts to remind ourselves that we have received the greatest gift of all. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"** (John 3:16-17, NIV).

Okay, I need to wrap up. So why does all this matter? It's just one more busy march toward Christmas. Our kids think they're entitled to all kinds of stuff that we can or can't afford. We work hard to bring back feelings of nostalgia that are harder and harder to muster up every year. We're obligated to buy gifts for people that have everything already, or people who don't appreciate something nice when they do get it.

Let's take Christmas back! Let's open our eyes and let the outward trappings of this Advent season, become internalized. Don't walk by a Christmas tree without reminding yourself that it is pointing heavenward to remind you of God coming down to you. Don't forget the colors of Christmas, evergreen to remind you of God's never ending love and the eternal life he offers. And the red of Christmas to remind us that the Christmas child would willingly give his blood to pay the blood-price of your sins. Look at the lights that we string up and make yourself remember that Jesus is the light of the world and he said that you are the light of the world. See, really see, the angles, the stars, the gift-giving in a new way.

And let this time of year be a great time to get honest with God about some areas of your life you need to get right. He's eager to help. That's why God took on human flesh, became one of us, experienced joy, anger, betrayal, friendship, pain, love everything.

Christmas. It's our holiday, and we're taking it back! And we're making it real. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.