

**Christmas Present (Advent 2011 Series)**

4 of 4

**Skipping Christmas**

Luke 2:8-20

12 18 2011 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

**Scripture: Luke 2:8-20****Introduction**

Welcome to church—where we're not afraid to use the "**C**" **word of Christmas!** Now I certainly hope you have a wonderful winter solstice, happy Hanukah, joyful Kwanza, and festive Festivus. During Advent, however, we gather as a community of faith to prepare our lives for the celebration of Christ's coming into the world. God's light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

**The War on Christmas**

There *are* times it seems like we are fighting an uphill battle against our worldly culture. We have witnessed a **sea change** in our society during the past decades. When I was a child, we had a Christmas tree in our school classroom, sang Christmas carols at the school Christmas pageant, exchanged Christmas presents at our Christmas party, and then enjoyed a Christmas break. People at stores and on the streets wished one another a "Merry Christmas." Manger scenes were proudly and prominently displayed on courthouse lawns. And a "*Charlie Brown Christmas*" appeared on primetime, network TV with Linus reading the Christmas story.

Today, prayer and Bible stories are banned from school. School teachers dare not mention the "C word" in class. Our children go on "Winter Break."

**Dave Barry**, wrote: "To avoid offending anybody, my children's schools dropped religion altogether and started singing about the **weather**. At my son's school, they now hold the winter program in February and sing increasingly non-memorable songs such as '*Winter Wonderland*,' '*Frosty the Snowman*' and —this is a real song—'*Suzy Snowflake*,' all of which is pretty funny since we live in Miami. A visitor from another planet would assume that the children belonged to the **Church of Meteorology**."

Merchants now wish their customers a generic "Happy Holidays." The Salvation Army is banned from stores. Manger scenes on public property must blend into secular displays. Even Santa Claus has been replaced in soft drink ads with polar bears and seals.

I seldom listen to Neal Bortz, but I heard him on WSB recently. He ended one segment with a great line. He warned: "*Remember—every time you say 'Happy Holidays' an elf DIES!*"

John Gibson, popular news' anchor for Fox News, published a book (2005) entitled **The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban Christmas is Worse than you Think**. He examines the secularization of America's favorite holiday and the ever-

stronger push toward a neutered "holiday" season so that non-Christians won't be even the slightest bit offended.

The book is an interesting read. I don't subscribe to conspiracy theories and liberal plots; however, I DO believe that political correctness and inclusiveness have become our cultural idols. The minority rules in all things related to faith issues.

There have been signs of a **Christmas backlash**. You may recall a few years ago when the Georgia governor's office mistakenly referred to the tree at the governor's mansion as a "holiday" tree but quickly corrected the error thirty minutes later. The news' release read: *"It is, in fact, a Christmas tree."* The earlier wording was blamed on *"a politically correct 'staff brain freeze" and "the staffer responsible can be contacted at P.O. Box 432, Anchorage, Alaska, 99501!"*

## II. Christmas Day on Sunday . . . or Not

The battle over Christmas has even extended to the **calendar**. This year December twenty-fifth is on **Sunday**. This is nothing new. Christmas has been falling on Sunday every five or six years for twenty centuries now. For two thousands years, this has apparently never posed a problem.

A few weeks ago in a sermon I told about someone asking if we would have church on Christmas Day. My immediate response was, "Of course! Canceling church because Christmas is on a Sunday would be like canceling church on Easter because it also happens to fall on a Sunday every year."

I'm not naïve. On Christmas Eve, we will enjoy our record attendance for the year. And on Christmas Day only a fraction of the crowd will return. However, numbers don't dictate worship. So in case you haven't gotten the word, we WILL be having a combined worship service at 11:00 on Christmas Day to celebrate Jesus' birthday.

Little did I know that having church on Sunday would become headline news! In 2005, Christmas fell on Sunday for the first time in over a decade due to leap year. Many of the **mega-churches** announced they would *NOT* have services on Christmas Day.

These mega-churches with 10,000 plus in worship cited two reasons for the cancellations. First, they require hundreds of volunteers to make the services possible. Most of their laity would be unavailable. Second, they wanted staff and volunteers to spend time with their families and friends on Christmas. A spokesperson for Willow Creek, one of the largest churches in America, said: *"It's more than being family friendly. It's being lifestyle-friendly for people who are just very, very busy."*

The backlash was tremendous. Although the congregations never openly acknowledged making a mistake, I noticed most of them are offering at least one service on Christmas Day this time around.

Now it would be easy to take pot-shots at the churches that decide not to meet on Christmas Day—so I'm going to! I understand the church leaders' reasons and rationalizations. And to be fair, I also know these churches will have multiple services in the week before Christmas that will reach tens of thousands. Yet in a time when the

church is battling the secularization of the holiday season, I think their decision to cancel Christmas Day worship sent the wrong message to our society.

Christmas is first and foremost the celebration of Christ's coming into the world. Everything else gains meaning and purpose from this core belief. The commendable desire for people to spend Christmas with their families should not redefine the holiday as a family celebration rather than a faith event.

Hear me clearly—my family is a prime priority in my life. And I will do back-flips to spend quality time in quantity amounts with those I love. But I don't think worship and family are either/or choices on Christmas. There is room for both. And our worship together enhances our time with those we love because we are celebrating what is dearest to our hearts: the love of God experienced in the love of others.

### III. Skipping Christmas

In 2002, legal thriller author, John Grisham, published a humorous book entitled **Skipping Christmas**. In 2004, the movie version premiered with the title *Christmas with the Kranks*. Tim Allen, who has made a living off of holiday movies, starred in the film along with Jamie Lee Curtis.

The book dust cover reads: *"Imagine a year without Christmas. No crowded malls, no corny office parties, no fruitcakes, no unwanted presents. That's just what Luther and Nora Krank have in mind."* When their daughter, Blair, leaves for Peru as a Peace Corp volunteer, the Kranks decide to skip Christmas altogether. The previous year they had spent over \$6,100 on the holiday with "little to show for it." So the couple plans to forego all the season's activities and go on a Caribbean Cruise.

<b>DVD CHRISTMAS WITH THE KRANKS</b>	<b>START: 12:00</b>
<b>END: 14:53</b>	<b>Mute sound after "No Christmas whatsoever!"</b>

The Kranks' attempt to skip Christmas has unexpected consequences for all. By the end of the movie, Tim Allen finds himself dangling upside down from his roof by a light cord, and Dan Akroyd fusses at him about being such a Scrooge.

We might laugh at the movie's antics, however, we can all sympathize with the Kranks' desire to skip at least a little bit of Christmas. How often have we said to ourselves, *"Next year we're going to cut back and simplify."* I hear people constantly complaining about the busyness of the month along with the commercialization of the season. We long to slow down and refocus. We find ourselves doing things we don't want to do because we're expected to do them.

And then there is Christmas shopping. Our gift-giving is often gift-swapping. We simply exchange money. I remember last Christmas when I gave someone a gift card to a home improvement store. When I opened their gift to me, it was a gift card from the very same home improvement store!

There are some things about the season that I would like to **skip**, including:

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|---------------------|------------------------|
| ✓ Fruitcakes        | ✓ Hectic schedules     |
| ✓ Over spending     | ✓ Crowded Malls        |
| ✓ Unwanted presents | ✓ Shopping in general! |

- ✓ Over eating
- ✓ Traffic

- ✓ *I'll Have a Blue Christmas*
- ✓ Figgy pudding

#### **IV. Celebrating Christmas**

Yes, there are parts of the holiday season we could all do without. Yet we should not confuse the peripheral with the essential and the trivial with the important.

When I graduated from seminary, I owned a 1982 **Honda Civic**. I was on a tight budget and did most of the car's maintenance myself. When the time came to replace the water pump, I spent two days removing and replacing the part. I didn't really know what I was doing, but this has never stopped me before!

After finishing, I proudly surveyed my work. It was THEN that I discovered half a dozen parts left over, including a long bolt, a nut, and an assortment of washers. To this day, I have NO clue where they were supposed to go. However, the car continued to run fine without them for another ten years. Whatever I forgot to put back apparently wasn't essential to the motor's operation.

There are some things we could leave out of the holiday season and never miss them. In fact, we not only COULD but perhaps SHOULD skip parts of the world's observance of Christmas. Yet there are other things that we dare not leave out. If we do, then we will have missed the true meaning of the Christmas season.

**Dr. Clement Moore** was the Professor of Oriental and Greek Literature at Columbia University in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He later donated land from his family estate to found the General Theological Seminary in New York City. He became the Professor of Biblical Learning at the Episcopal seminary. Clements Helped found a new church in New York City. However, he is best known for writing a story entitled *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* which today is better known as *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*. The poem has been cited as "arguably the best-known verses ever written by an American."

And yet . . . this poem that shaped the very way our culture views Christmas today does not mention God or the birth of Jesus' one time.

Since the birth of Jesus, the world has conspired to change Christmas to X-mas, removing Christ from the holy days and our lives. In math, X stands for an unknown variable. Yet God has made himself known in Jesus of Nazareth. In him, the fullness of the deity dwelt in bodily form. We know the Father because we know the Son.

When you are making your list and checking it twice, there are some essential things you dare not skip. They include:

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|--|---|
| ✓ Worship  | ✓ Rededication of our lives to Jesus              |
| ✓ Prayer   | ✓ Declare the Christ our Savior and Lord          |
| ✓ Read the Christmas story from Matthew and Luke | ✓ Emmanuel—God with us—entrust with all our life. |
| ✓ Give to others as Christ has given to you      | ✓ Family  |

Through these spiritual disciplines, we will not skip Christmas but find its true meaning and joy in our lives.

### **Conclusion**

If you have not read *Skipping Christmas* or seen *Christmas with the Kranks*, I don't want to spoil the ending. Suffice it to say that the Kranks' plan has unexpected consequences not only for them but also the entire neighborhood. In the end, the book and movie emphasize the importance of family and friends during the holiday season.

The family's minister makes a few cameo appearances. Missing the Christmas Eve service at church is mentioned a time or two. But to the best of my recollection, Jesus isn't mentioned at all. Instead, the virtues of home and neighborhood are extolled.

Ironically, a book about the dangers of skipping Christmas still manages to skip the true meaning of Christmas. Like a church canceling worship because it is Christmas Day, the novel and film miss the real point entirely.

I DO hope you have a wonderful winter solstice, happy Hanukah, joyful Kwanza, and festive Festivus. I pray this IS a time you spend with those you love. During Advent, however, we gather as a community of faith to celebrate Christ's coming into the world. God's light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Jesus Christ is THE reason for the season. Don't skip Christmas this year.