



Series: Why Christmas Matters

Title: Why Christmas Matter (Series Intro)

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Greeting

Scripture Reading – Edna Kalu

Luke 2:1–14 (NIV)

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

You may be seated...

I heard a story...

I was talking with someone I knew, just about a month ago. They were at a different church, a good distance from Fredericton. They told me about a recent difficult transition their church had gone through.

The issues were not character, but were leadership issues, and theological issues. What surprised me was to hear of issues the pastor had with Easter and Christmas.

Their (previous pastor) was convinced that Easter and Christmas were not really celebrations we're to celebrate as Christians, and that their roots are more in pagan practices than in Scripture, and told his church they were not going to commemorate those holidays any more.

For these (and other issues), the church ended up parting ways with this pastor.

The Real Problems People Have with Christmas

Pagan Roots?

You've probably heard people reference articles (sometimes on Facebook or on tv) in discussions that the early Christians adopted Roman Pagan festivals and simply changed the label from honouring a roman god or emperor to being a time to commemorate Jesus. And they add that we really don't know the date of his birth.

Has anyone heard something like this?

Fascinating to look at why December 25th is the date. There is debate among some schools of thought, especially those who study comparative religions to say that Christians jumped on board with the Romans celebration of the unconquered sun, called *Sol Invictus* - which coincided with the Roman celebration of the winters solstice (which was on December 25th).

The thing is (and I found this fascinating), is that when you do some digging, the picture is a lot more interesting.

It is true that in the early years of the Church there was not general agreement on when Jesus was born, and celebrating his 'birthday' was not an agreed upon practice, the date of his birth was of interest by the mid second century.

Clement of Alexandria, in 192 calculated that Jesus date of birth would have been January 6th (which happens to be the current 12th day of Christmas).

Hippolytus¹ a younger contemporary of Clement writes that Jesus birth would have been on December 25th. Now while some people question the authenticity of one of his references (thinking someone may have put it in after the fact), in one of his other writings he clearly talks of Jesus' conception as happening on March 25th (which he also thinks is the date of the creation of the world), and the date of the Passover of Jesus death.

¹ For more info see:

Thomas C. Schmidt, "Calculating December 25 as Birth of Jesus in Hippolytus' *Canon and Chronicon*," in *Vigiliae Christianae*, Volume 69, Issue 5, 2015.

(this coincides with a rabbinic idea that the OT patriarch's birth and death happen on the same day).

Why this matters (for those of you who find this history interesting) is that the dating of Jesus' birth by some of the early church fathers, predates the popularity of the Roman holiday *Sol Invictus* by several decades. *Sol Invictus* was a holiday that was more popular at the end of the Roman Empire's time.

Some think that the Empire may have promoted the *Sol Invictus* holiday in reaction to the popularity of the Christians using the date of the solstice (Dec 25 in the Roman Calendar) to honour Jesus.

Big Lesson: Simple arguments against the faith are often more complex and fascinating when looked at in detail.

Now honestly, I don't know a lot of people sweating the origins of the date we celebrate Christmas and whether it's present celebration has roots in other festivals, but a lot of people do struggle with...

Commercialism

Image circulating on Facebook. Reminder: "We don't have to continue holiday traditions that leave us broke, overwhelmed and tired."

Struggle with wanting to celebrate, but also not wanting to sink our selves in debt, exhaustion.

Gift giving pressure, when gifts, and events turn from celebration to obligation.

- Gift giving can turn into a balancing act, where you try to be generous (but not too generous, but not too cheap either).
- If you got something the year before, you wonder if you need to the next year.
- Turning from joy to guilt.

Depression

Whether it is the dark time of year, or the holidays, it is not unknown that this is a hard time for many people. Depression and sadness are a bit part of the holidays.

Speaking of facebook, I'm losing track of how many times people are sharing suicide hotline numbers in the past week.

Senior – it is not what it once was.

It is at this time of year, when many have joy, that we also feel our losses more closely. We endure relationships that are strained. We mourn relationships that are lost.

Should we just be rid of it? Or at least as Christians put it aside?

Part of me wondered if my internal defences for Christmas were just vain efforts to preserve the nostalgia of my youth and the comfort of my traditions?

Which of us doesn't have traditions, be they in our faith or just in our homes.

As I was praying and considering all this, I believe the Lord drew me to Luke chapter 2, a part of the Christmas story.

Luke 2:10-12 (NIV)

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

You find Jesus in Christmas.

As Edna read in our passage, the timing of the first Christmas was not 'all is calm, all is bright'

- Things were busy, the town was overcrowded, there was no room at the inn.
- The people were under oppression, from Roman occupiers times were grim for the people of Bethlehem and Israel.

In this space and time, the angels appear to the shepherds, who were occupied with their business of tending sheep. Into a busy, depressed state, the angel comes and says, "today, in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you, he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Christmas is a time of year, when Jesus is flying on the radar of people's consciousness. If ever there was a time you can find Jesus, it is at Christmas.

You can't escape Jesus in Christmas.

In 2011, Russell Peters controversial portrayal of the nativity scene with Pamela Anderson playing Mary in a script that was a basic mockery of Christian claims of her virginity.

Here's the thing, even those who have no faith, or deride faith have to work their way around Jesus at Christmas.

Gwen Stefani's new Christmas album, You Make It Feel Like Christmas, has Silent Night. In the malls, on the radio, on TV, the message of Jesus' birth is available, inviting those who will look, to find.

"IF YOU SEEK HIM, YOU WILL FIND HIM."

What could happen if we looked for Jesus? Because the messengers, the angels are still spreading the same news, "A Saviour has been born, he is Christ, Messiah, the Lord. You will find him..."

After hearing the angels news, hearing the proclamation, the shepherds set out to look. God's announcement, God's work, God's good news, which we can still hear the echo of in our culture over 2000 years later asks us to go looking. And as we look we will find?

Question 1: Have you found Jesus?

Have you found him?

Question B:

How are you helping others find him?

- Konnect Christmas event
- Xmas Eve
- Praying for the hurting
- Visiting the lonely

When We Say Christmas Matters

While in the earliest years they didn't celebrate Christmas like we do, they hadn't entirely settled on a date, they did believe it was important to know the story. That is why Matthew (one of Jesus' disciples), who personally would have met and known Mary (the mother of Jesus) recorded what he heard. Why Luke, when researching on the life of Jesus, wrote down what we have today, and why the early church kept these stories, because they recognized the inspired hand of God in keeping them alive.

So while some might debate dates, whether to give gifts, have a tree, debate egg nog vs. apple cider. And while some struggle under the weight of a culture that puts out an image of the perfect Christmas. Let's not forget, what we really should seek is the baby in the manger, who was and is so much more than an image in a pretty Christmas card. He is the saviour of the world, the saviour of you and me.

Prayer Time

- Specific Questions:
 - Christmas is a struggle for you.
 - Experienced loss and grief
 - Stress of the season
 - "I need Jesus"
 - Come forward for Prayer
 - Those in the seats
 - I will dismiss you in prayer
 - Before you go, let's pray for those here
 - Also let's ask God to show us who we could be messengers of Jesus' birth to this year, and how we could.

As you leave we have some discussion questions you can use in your circle group or with friends this week.

Circle Group Questions

- **What do you find hard at Christmas time?**
- **How could you look for Jesus in Christmas this year?**
- **Who could you share Jesus with this Christmas? How?**

Next Sunday...

We will be continuing our series, Why Christmas Matters, by looking at “God’s Unbelievable Promise”