



CHRISTMAS IS FOR THE YOUNG

Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 2:1-14

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Christmas is usually associated in our memory as a time of great joy. But for many it is also a time for cynicism. There are some people for whom Christmas is difficult. It is a time of struggle, depression, loneliness, and anxiety. There are more suicides during the holiday season than at any other time of the year. A comment by a woman in a nursing home indicates the feeling of some: "No one really cares. No one cares about me now. They are too busy with their own matters." A man observes: "Christmas is really just gimme, gimme, gimme." It's hard not to be cynical when you recall reading in the paper last year where someone broke in and stole toys, food, and other items from the Salvation Army's warehouse. I had a neighbor who told me that somebody stole his Christmas tree which he had sitting behind his house. How does someone celebrate Christmas with a stolen Christmas tree?

Some are like the woman who said, "I have never really had a happy Christmas since I was a child living in Raleigh, North Carolina." Some are like the woman who called up her minister and in discussing the Christmas party asked: "Can we use something other than Christmas carols? They are so- so- theological." We may see the cynicism expressed in the words of a young man and his girlfriend as they walked in front of a street corner preacher who was trying to address the Christmas season crowd as they passed. Without batting an eye, they walked in front of him and said: "Yeah, preacher, we know. Christmas is peace and happiness and all that sort of stuff."

Christmas Cynicism

Well, cynicism does abound at Christmastime, doesn't it? Sometimes, Scrooge-like, you, too, have been very cynical. Who among us at some time or another has not used the most cynical expression of all at Christmastime? "Christmas is just for children!" In my judgment, that is the most cynical statement that anybody can make about Christmas. "Christmas is just for children," too many people assert. Of course, it *is* for children. I am not denying that Christmas is not important to children. Some of my finest memories are associated with Christmas. My parents delighted in making Christmas a very memorable time. My mother always decorated our house and made it festive for this special day. Christmas for me was always a memorable occasion.

As I reflect back on what it was like when I was a child, I remember the Christmas I got a cowboy suit and two cap pistols. I recall getting my first football, my first basketball, and my bicycle. For me, Christmas is not so much remembering what I got on that day, because, to be perfectly honest with you, there are lots of Christmas celebrations that I cannot recall anything that I got. But I have never forgotten a spirit I received that time of year. I felt that this time was different from any other time of the year. There was always something exciting about it. I had a sense of expectancy and inner joy. Our family bond was strengthened as we gathered for meals at grandmother's house or at another relative's. I knew as a child that there was something radically different about Christmas. It was impressed on my mind in such a way that it is unforgettable.

In one of his hymns, Phillips Brooks wrote: "The earth has grown old with its burden of care. But at Christmas it always is young." We need to become young again at Christmas. There is a call to become childlike at Christmastime. I believe that Christmas is for children in the sense of Jesus' definition of children when he declared that only those who were childlike would enter his kingdom. To be childlike is not to be childish but rather to discover those qualities which God has given us that enable us to be what we were created to be as complete people. Christmas really is for the young at heart. As Carl Sandburg the poet wrote: "When I die, I want to die with the mind of a boy." This kind of perspective keeps one young, alive, sparkling with vision and vivaciousness. If you mean you think that Christmas is for the childlike, truly you have discovered something of the essence of what it really is to celebrate this sacred season.

Childlike Characteristics

Let me share with you some of the characteristics that I feel constitute childlikeness at Christmastime and that point to the authentic understanding of what Christmas is. Maybe if we have these qualities, then Christmas will really be for the young.

A Sense Of Wonder

When we are young at heart at Christmastime, we still have a sense of wonder in our lives. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that the one who would come as the Messiah would be called Wonderful Counselor. He would be the one who would provide guidance and direction for men and women in how to live their lives. His direction would be wonderful. Christ came into the world with a plan to seek and save those who were lost. He came to give us the wholeness that God created us to have. As fragmented personalities, we find our wholeness and completeness in him. He has come that we might be redeemed and made whole.

The birth of Christ is surrounded with a sense of wonder and awe. The word “wonder” itself can have at least two meanings. In one way, wonder can be used to discern if something is true. Questions are raised in our mind. But another meaning of wonder is that we may see something that is awesome to us. We are struck with a sense of awe. There are times that wonder takes the form of some questions we have about the Christmas events. To me, the greater wonder is awe, which forces me to kneel in worship. We approach the manger as the shepherds did. We follow our star as the wise men did, which leads us to Bethlehem. We hear the angels sing again and our lives are radically different. The wonder of it is beyond our understanding.

A woman once said, “I can remember when I believed in everything about Christmas when I was a child. I wish I could still believe like that again.” It is sad when we cannot. We need to recapture our sense of wonder that reveals the richness and vitality of Christmas. When we have the sense of wonder in our lives, we know that we are indeed different. Do you recall as a child that you were excited when you saw a bird fly? A walk into your yard or into the woods made you excited. A dog, cat, or rabbit aroused your interest. Your sense of wonder was stirred by a small, fuzzy worm that crawled across a leaf or by the discovery of what was under a rock, or by looking in a rushing stream, or by simply examining the grass. All of life was exciting. You had a childlike sense of wonder.

Wonder Surrounded Jesus’ Birth

When Christ was born, a sense of wonder surrounded his birth. The scriptures depict his birth as a wonderful event. We celebrate it today with a sense of thanksgiving. It was the time that God drew near to us, In the manger we sense the presence of God coming to us through this unique child, God became Incarnate. There is some- thing wonderful about his birth.

The Wonder Of Jesus’ Life

There was also something wonderful about his life. He reached out to those who were hurting and needy in society and touched them with his life and they were different because of the wonder of his life. There was the wonder of his words. We sometimes sing the words of a hymn: “Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life.” In the words of Jesus Christ, men and women have found guidance to live differently. His teachings offer directions in how to live our lives. We see the wonder of his death and resurrection. Jesus Christ, through his birth, life, words, death, and resurrection, leaves us with a marvelous sense of wonder in who he is and what he does for us. When we are childlike, we can never forget that.

A home was hit by a storm one afternoon and all the windows and doors were rattling. A young boy in the house rushed to his father and exclaimed, “Daddy, Daddy, it sounds like somebody is knocking at every door we have.” In the Christmas

season, Jesus Christ once again approaches every door of your life, every window into your being, and rattles them and shakes them and knocks and says: “I want to come in.” As he enters our lives again in this Christmas season, he enables us to recapture once again the wonder and mystery of this special birth. Childlike, we open ourselves to the wonder of his presence.

Going Home Again

Go a step further with me and I think you will agree that Christmas is a time of going home again. In one of the Christmas stories, we read that Joseph was required to go to the city where he was born, like all other males, and register for tax purposes. At Christmas we don’t have to go home to pay our taxes, but many return home again at Christmastime. The question is heard on many lips. “Are you going home for Christmas?” Well, I hope in a sense every one of us will go home again. I hope you will return to an earlier stage in your life—not physically go home, though that may help sometimes, but return to someplace in your life where you can recapture some rich meaning from your past. Go home again during this Christmas season and recapture your lost ideals and lost dreams. See, once again, the Christmas star and follow it to new horizons. Go back to some of your youthful aspirations, youthful goals, to those times in your life when you really dreamed dreams. Go home again and seek to find those things which enriched your life.

This is likely what Frederick Buechner was wrestling with when he observed that he had not written *The Christmas Tide* “about the child I was, but to the child I was, and to all other children who are caught up as I was in mysteries beyond their power to fathom and secrets they don’t understand the reason of keeping. I think also of those children as they continue to live on in old timers like me who are pushing eighty.”¹ The children in Buechner’s story wonder what the meaning of “holy tide” is in the Christmas carol, “God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman.” The response: “It’s the high tide. It’s the Wizard of Oz tide. It’s the one that brings you home.”²

People are different at Christmastime, aren’t they? Here is a shy fellow who puts on a bright red tie that blinks at you. You can’t imagine him wearing it, but he does. A family who appears to be so reserved decorates their house from top to bottom with bright sparkling lights that blink at you as you go down the street. A father, who is often too busy for games, kicks off his shoes and takes time to get down on the floor and play with his children. A busy mother takes time to make some candy with her small daughter. At Christmastime we reach back within ourselves and let the child out to play. Somehow, some way, we have to travel home again and recover those important values that may have been lost.

Charles Rice said that one day he was riding the subway toward mid-Manhattan and he looked up at the marquee and saw the first sign of the

Christmas season. The poster ad depicted an old, wooden child's sled, trimmed in red, and surrounded by snow. Underneath the picture, there were two lines which read: "Remember when this was the only thing you wanted in the whole world?" I'm not encouraging you just to take a nostalgic trip. Some of us need to reach back and remember some of those earlier dreams, ideals, and goals, and hopes that we may have lost. Some of these are dreams or ideals we had for our family, our marriage, our work, and our own ethical behavior. Christmas permits us to go home again and recapture those ideals. Helmut Thielicke, the German theologian, said, "Blessed are the homesick for they can go home again." At Christmastime we are reminded that we can come home to God and recapture those things that have been lost. Christ gives us an opportunity to begin again.

A Sense Of Belonging

Take another step with me and see if recapturing something of the childlikeness of Christmas is not also seen in knowing that we belong. The great message of Christmas for Israel was that the Savior, the Messiah, had come. As a nation, they had looked forward to his coming. As a nation, Israel existed with a strong bond of unity. Joseph returned to the city of Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David, but all the tribes of Israel were a part of the nation with a strong sense of belonging together as a family. We often talk about the Holy Family—Joseph, Mary, and the baby—at Christmastime. This was a special family. Remember, though, that Israel gave the family an important place in society. Their identification was found within their personal families and the nation itself.

At Christmas we reach out to establish our sense of identity. Family is very important at Christmastime. That is the reason some people feel such deep pain and hurt when they do not have all of their family with them in this season. Sometimes they have been separated by death, distance, or divorce. Christmas is a difficult time for some. Not having one's family is hard. A part of recapturing the sense of the authentic meaning of Christmas is knowing that we belong. To reach back to one's past and be tied into a particular history means something to the ongoing personhood of whom one is as an authentic being. Too many of us live rootless lives. At Christmas, we reach back to our roots and tie ourselves to Christ and identify with him and the family of God he established. We are identified as his son, his daughter—his children. We belong to Christ's family—the church. In him and his church we have a sense of belonging and a sense of identification.

What does the husband mean when he says to his wife at Christmas, "What do you mean we are not going to have cornbread dressing?" We always have it at Christmastime." "We are not going to have candied sweet potatoes? But my mother always had candied sweet potatoes. I want them at Christmastime." "What do you

mean we are not going to have, oyster stew for breakfast? We always have that in Virginia where I grew up.” What are these people saying? They are talking about their roots, a sense of reaching back; they are talking about continuity and tradition. All of this tradition reminds us of who we are as a person and who we are as family. Our family traditions speak to us of continuity of our being tied together.

Do you have all new decorations for your Christmas tree? If so, you are very unusual. I like the old ones best. Many of these date back to the time when our children were small and they made some of them themselves. Some of our Christmas decorations I purchased when I went to the Baptist World Alliance in Stockholm or traveled to other places. Some have been given to us by family members or friends. Each one of the decorations that we put on the tree reminds us of some moment in the past, some person, or some event in our family life. They all represent continuity; they depict our family roots. Being a child at Christmas reminds us that we are tied in with the family of God. We belong. We are not isolated, fragmented egos, but we belong to the family of God. That gives us a rich continuity.

Snoopy’s doghouse is covered with snow. Woodstock flies and lands on top of it. Snoopy looks at him and says, “You know I am not going to tell Woodstock about Santa Claus. Because Santa Claus doesn’t bring presents to non-descript nobody birds.” Then he pauses and says, “It’s a shame to be a nobody bird at Christmastime.” No one is a nobody when he or she is in Christ at Christmastime. We have a sense of belonging. We belong to the family of God and we are rooted in him. As children in God’s kingdom, we have discovered a vital relationship.

A Sense Of Expectancy

Being childlike, Christmas fills us with wonder. It allows us to go home again, gives us assurance of belonging, and lastly keeps alive our sense of expectancy. Who among us doesn’t recall the anticipation about what gifts we might get at Christmastime? We lived with expectancy. For centuries Israel had looked for the coming of the Messiah. With assured expectation Israel awaited the coming of the one who would bring new life and hope. Christmas reminds us that we can live with a sense of expectancy. Even if our days seem dark and difficult, we still live by faith in God. We hope in God. Our trust is in him. God has been working in the past and God continues to work out his will in the world today. Our times may be filled with war, prejudice, difficulties, pain, or other kinds of problems. Nevertheless, we have the assurance that God is still at work in the world. We are men and women of hope. We live by the assurance that God will bring about his will and purpose in the world. Darkness will not overcome the light; evil will not conquer good.

Many years ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a powerful sermon titled “The Decisive Babies of the World.” In that sermon, which was preached during

World War II, he noted that it was a difficult time for people to be living. Many wondered if there was any hope in such a difficult time. But people wondered that same thing in the year of 1809 when Napoleon was moving across Europe. It looked like Napoleon was going to conquer the whole world and everything would be put under his dominion. Many thought that the year 1809 was the year of only bad news. But, in the year 1809, Cyrus McCormick, the inventor of the harvester was born. Charles Darwin, the great scientist, was born. And so were Alfred Lord Tennyson, Edgar Allen Poe, William Gladstone, Abraham Lincoln, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, as well as Mendelssohn and Verdi, the composers? In the year that seemed to be the worst time that people could be living, births ushered in people who changed history.

In the Christmas season let us remember that when life seems to be dark and difficult, it may be the very time that God is bringing to birth a young baby who may grow up to be the person who will lead us to the way of peace, or discover a cure for cancer or arthritis or some other dread disease. There may be a child born that will enable us to learn how to work together more fully. A baby may be born who will provide new beginnings in many yet unknown areas.

God may also bring a new beginning in your life. The Christmas season, which is symbolized by the birth of a child, may be the time in which God will bring to birth anew a sense of newness in your heart. The Christian faith is about new beginnings and Christmastime can be a wonderful time to begin that pilgrimage. God may come in your life and touch you at Christmas, and you may be radically changed and find the opportunity to begin anew.

Christ can be born again in you. Phillips Brooks says in one of his hymns, "Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today." Martin Luther was correct when he made the comment, "I care not whether he be the Christ, but whether he be the Christ to you." In this Christmas season, we worship Christ as living Lord. But is he Lord in your life?

Over 200 years ago, a German composer was living in England. He had had some success in publishing music, but he had come on hard times and had become almost destitute. He just couldn't seem to write any more. His creditors were on the point of putting him in prison. His right side had become paralyzed. One night somebody left a manuscript by his dingy door and asked him to set it to music. George Frederick Handel wrote the oratorio, Messiah, containing the famous "Hallelujah Chorus," and his writing of this piece has not only affected the lives of millions of other people, but it changed his own life as well. In the writing of this composition about the birth of the Messiah, Handel was also reborn.

This Christmas season I hope that you, too, can remain young. I hope you will be childlike and that God can continuously keep you young and alive to his spirit.

May you always have a sense of a childlikeness that Christ has come to give us. I pray that you may have it in this marvelous season and throughout the year. ■

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Christmas Tide* (New York: Seabury Books, 2005), p. 110.

2. *Ibid.* p.107.

3. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Living Under Tension* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), p. 224.

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