



Christmas!

by Mark Brunner

We're Not Supposed to Say It? (Luke 2:16-18)

“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” (Luke 2:16-18)

“Would you like to see pictures of our new baby?” How often have you heard these words, confronted by some proud mother, father or grandparent who had just been blessed with the gift of a child? They’re so proud, so sure that their little baby, no matter how wrinkled and homely, has just got to be the most beautiful little bundle ever born. New parents and grandparents are pretty shameless when it comes to their babies. I personally carry a picture of my grandson and it wouldn’t take much for me to pull it out on a moment’s notice. I am shameless when it comes to little James.

“Happy holidays!” The other day I was greeted by a receptionist at a major company in the area with these words. I paused for a moment and responded, “What holiday do you mean?” “You know.” She stated almost sheepishly. “No I don’t.” I calmly replied. “Did you mean Memorial Day, the Fourth of July or

what?” “I mean Christmas . . .” she whispered in the phone. “We’re not supposed to say it. We don’t want anyone to be offended.”

Offended by Christmas? Who would be offended, I thought. Dave Barry writes: “To avoid offending anybody, the school 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 because we live in Miami. A visitor from another planet would assume that the children belonged to the Church of Meteorology. (Dave Barry in his "Notes on Western Civilization", Chicago Tribune Magazine, July 28, 1991.)

Offended by Jesus! Just think for a moment. You’re a shepherd, one of the dregs of Hebrew society. Not respected or regarded except lowly. Now, in your heart you have this picture of Messiah in a manger. What do you do with it? Perhaps you should regard your lowly status and keep it to yourself. Besides, no one is going to listen anyway. Or, do you proudly pull it out of your heart and show it to everyone. Thank God they were brave enough to do the latter and not the former. “We’re not supposed to say it?” Not on their lives or ours for that matter. MERRY CHRISTMAS! “Would you like to see a picture of the most beautiful baby ever born? Here, I have it here, right in my heart. Look, it’s Jesus!”

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt 6:34)

One of a Kind! (John 1:14)

“The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling place among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One

and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

One of a kind! Isn’t it great to be able to see or even touch the “only” one of something? Recently, I had that opportunity. I’m a big fan of the Chevrolet

Corvair. Over the years I have owned a number of them; and today, I own another. I have always, nonetheless, owned them as everyday drivers. These have never been show cars; just nice old cars that are easy to maintain, simple to drive and fun to own.

Recently, there was a car show in Milwaukee for Chevrolet Vega owners. As I happened by the hotel where the cars were being displayed, I noticed something very unusual. There was a car that was being backed out of van that didn't really fit with the others. It was sleeker, lower to the ground and it looked so familiar. Then it struck me, it was the Monza prototype car that Chevy produced back in the late 1950's. It was the car that gave birth to Corvair and inspired the famous 1968 Sting Ray. "Wow! What was that doing here?"

As it turns out, the car had been mistakenly shipped to Milwaukee by Chevrolet when someone at the show had requested the wrong Monza prototype. I just had to stop and look at it, perhaps to even touch it or, could I be so lucky, sit in it? It was breathtaking for me to just be able to say I actually saw and touched the car that inspired Corvair so many years ago. I walked away from this singular event with a sense of deep-down, car-loving awe. I knew the occasion might never present itself again. I walked away fantasizing what it must be like to actually own this car.

One of a kind! There's just something about knowing that something is the "one and only." There is such a sense of specialness if and when those opportunities come our way. The uniqueness of such an event never seems to fade. I am sure that I will always remember the day I actually saw and touched the most important car for any Corvair owner, the Monza prototype from GM.

Jesus Christ! The Bible calls Him the "one and only." As we approach the manger this Christmas, the uniqueness of Christ, the fact that He was both true God and true man, just has to leave us in awe. And, what's even better, we can have this thrill day-in and day-out. Unlike the Monza, I can actually "own" Him everyday in my life. I can have this breathtaking experience daily and it's no fantasy. Makes owning a Monza seem kind of trivial—doesn't it?

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I Was There First! (Luke 2:6)

“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:6)

When Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, there wasn't any room for he and Mary at all. Though it is likely that he knocked on many doors that night, there simply was no place that could give him what he was looking for, a place to come in from the cold, get warm, eat something and, most importantly, a place for his wife Mary to have her baby. There simply wasn't any room for a man so desperate and a woman in such pain. There was no room. It really didn't matter that they were in dire straits. Other people had gotten there first and it was, “First come, first serve!”

Doubtless, the problem in Bethlehem those many centuries ago was not a problem of logistics or timing. It was one of mercy. Don't think for a moment that Joseph simply knocked on a door and calmly inquired about a room. His words were words of pleading, punctuated by pain. “Can't you see that we need help?” “Won't anyone make an exception for us? My wife is in pain!” “What do you want us to do?” But, there was no room and mercy was hard to find that night. If there had been any, it must have died on its way to the census. There was none to be had.

A television interviewer was walking streets of Tokyo at Christmas time. Much as in America, Christmas shopping is a big commercial success in Japan. The interviewer stopped one young woman on the sidewalk, and asked, “What is the meaning of Christmas?” Laughing, she responded, “I don't know. Is that the day that Jesus died?” There was some truth in her answer. (Donald Deffner, *Seasonal Illustrations*, San Jose: Resource, 1992, p. 16.)

Although at Christmas we celebrate the holy birth of a Savior, in many ways it has become a celebration of his death. God comes each year knocking at our hearts, asking if there is room for Him and His message of salvation. “Can't you see how important this is?” “Is there no room for mercy and grace?” But,

for many, it is the old rule: “First come, first serve.” The door is slammed. To make room, something else would have to go and there is no time to make exceptions. Too often the response is: “Other things have gotten there first and these are comfortable. How can you ask me to tell them to leave?”

Unfortunately, for many Christmas has become a celebration of death, not life. The death of mercy and the death of love have firmly implanted themselves amidst the holly and the cheer. “Make room for the birth of a Savior? Really, there are better things to do.” “Hey, anyway it’s first come, first serve! And I was there first.”

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The Price for a Believing Heart! (Matthew 1:24-25)

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary to be his wife.” (Matthew 1:24) God spoke to Joseph in a dream that Mary, his young wife to be, had not been unfaithful to him. Mary, according to the angel, had “conceived” of the Holy Spirit. There was no sin here at all. Joseph was commanded to take her and marry her. He was also to name the child Jesus.

Joseph, the carpenter and son of David, had a dream. In that dream God spoke to him through an angel. He asked Joseph to believe something which was incredible, unbelievable in every sense. He wasn’t asking him to make something with his hands. That would have been believable for Joseph. He was a carpenter. He wasn’t asking him to walk a different path in life, perhaps to change vocation or even his home. Even that would have been believable for it was doable. He wasn’t asking Joseph to give all his money to the poor or anything else quite doable by human standards. No, He was asking Joseph to believe that a virgin could conceive and that this conceiving was by the Holy Spirit. And, if that wasn’t enough, the child would be God’s own son.

God could have easily done all of this another way, in a much more believable and doable way. Yet, He chose to use a miracle. An unknown writer has put it

this way. “If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.” (Source Unknown.)

As unbelievable as all of this was, Joseph took it to heart and did what the angel had commanded him to do. Undoubtedly, there were consequences. When we undertake to do that which only makes sense to God and not to us, there will be. No doubt there were many innuendos that pierced the air behind Joseph’s back. In Joseph’s day a man had three options when his wife was unfaithful. He could have her stoned. He could have her brought to the town square and humiliated. Or he could quietly divorce her. He did none of these things and, without a doubt, he paid the price for his believing heart. Obedience to God, especially when that obedience requires a huge sacrifice, is never easy. In that sense, Christmas is unbelievable. God asks us to believe that which is impossible. As Christians we will always be ridiculed for that belief, especially at Christmas time. But, when you think of it, it is a small price to pay for eternal life in heaven.

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Is That All There Is? (John 1: 14-18)

A story in the paper the other day stirred my anger. A little baby had been stolen from his mother while she was Christmas shopping in a mall. That weak and helpless mother and that little baby. It seemed so opposed to Christmas. Stories like this need to be buried at Christmastime. They just don’t fit. Or, do they? Author Charles Ellings writes, “The message of Christmas is that God intrudes upon the weak and the vulnerable, and this is precisely the message that we so often miss. God does not come to that part of us that swaggers through life, confident in our self sufficiency. God leaves his treasure in the broken fragmented places of our life.

Here's a story: On the wall of the museum of the concentration camp at Dachau is a large and moving photograph of a mother and her little girl standing in line of a gas chamber. The child, who is walking in front of her mother, does not know where she is going. The mother, who walks behind, does know, but is helpless to stop the tragedy. In her helplessness she performs the only act of love left to her. She places her hands over the child's eyes so she will at least not see the horror to come. When people come into the museum they do not whisk by this photo hurriedly. They pause. They almost feel the pain. And deep inside I think that they are all saying: 'O God, don't let that be all that there is.' (Sermon Illustrations, 1999.)

When you and I were born into this world we were just like that little baby, robbed from its mother. Ours was to have been a warm and comfortable birth; one that resulted in a close and perfect relationship with our Heavenly Father. But we were stolen away by Satan. It was not a pleasant birth nor an intended one for any of us. The picture was that of hopelessness and helplessness. Would this story end on a happy note? "O God, don't let that be all that there is." By His almighty power, our violent and unclean birth is removed forever and replaced with the pure and holy birth of Jesus Christ. Born again in Him, we become Him and nestle in the bosom of His mother, under the tender and watchful eyes of our doting God. Justice is served after all. The one who stole us has been punished and we, as rightful heirs of our Father's love, have been returned to His loving embrace; an embrace from which we will never be parted again. What a blessed Christmas gift that is!

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Afraid of Christmas? (Luke 2: 8-14)

As Christians, many of us are just fed up with the secularization of Christmas. For years we've put up with Kris Kringle, elves, holiday shopping sprees, Grandma getting run over by a reindeer, and, of course, Jingle Bells. It has gotten to such a point with this stuff that it almost makes a Christian want to cringe from the Friday after Thanksgiving until New Year's Day.

Being upset with Christmas isn't a recent phenomenon. Many years ago the Puritans objected to the celebration of the holiday when it fell on any day other than Sunday. But they did more than annually complain about it as we do. They took action and got rid of Christmas altogether. In Puritan settlements across 17th century America a law was passed outlawing the celebration of Christmas. Fortunately for us, the Pilgrims didn't succeed. As hard as they tried to dispel the holiday, the more deeply entrenched it became. Within decades it was not only being celebrated in English settlements throughout the colonies, Christmas would find its way into native Indian camps up and down the eastern seaboard as Christianity spread among the various tribes. Christmas was indeed growing faster in the Americas than anywhere else in the world. Despite the fact that many of these customs had pagan origins, the Christmas “promise” was so compelling that many had forgotten that Yule logs had once been a part of Druid worship and that hanging ivy was supposed to provide protection from the evil spirits.

Ultimately, we need to ask ourselves this fundamental question. Do we really want to reform Christmas? Do we want to get rid of Santa Claus and Jingle Bells? What about all the gift-giving? Is it really all about greed or is it, intrinsically, all about love? Do we, when we keep Christmas in our hearts and let Christmas do the reforming itself, do more for Christmas than any well-meaning reformer could do? Santa Claus and Jingle Bells can't keep Christmas from coming any more than the Grinch who tried to steal Christmas. The celebrations and the customs will and should continue. At least they let us know, if only for a brief time, what life can be like if we only try. So let the message ring out this Christmas season, no matter what anyone does, nothing can destroy this day. Christmas is too powerful to be destroyed. It will always come out on top; because the message of Christmas is so compelling; it can be no other way! Merry Christmas!

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Unca' Frank's Christmas! (Isaiah 9: 6-7)

Franklin Chaney was by all accounts what you would call a crank. For years he had lived alone in his upper flat, Vera having gone to be with the Lord many years past. He was pretty set in his ways and by all accounts, especially those of his nieces and nephews as well as his own children, you might say he was eccentric on the verge of “old crab.” He had never been one much for talk or anything frivolous or loud. He attended all the family gatherings but sat on a dining room chair in some shadowed corner of the room with a beer in hand not saying much.

Frank had worked hard all of his life. Married young and barely able to keep an apartment, a bride and a growing family on the meager salary of a warehouse clerk, he had to work two jobs just to keep things going. As the years went by and the kids grew up, went to school, got married and left home and town, Frank trudged on through life. But then Vera got sick and there were those terrible medical bills. When Vera died he sold the house and moved into the upper flat.

It was now Frank’s 82nd Christmas and the family had gathered at his nephew’s house. After dinner Frank found his place in the corner, anchored himself silently and waited for the time to pass when it would finally be appropriate to ask for hat and coat and go home. But there was one more amenity to suffer until then. There was a new baby in the family, a little great-grandson. Baby passing, a family tradition, was about to take place. The little bundle passed from arm to arm and lap to lap. That is until it came to Unca Frank’s turn. Plop! Eight pounds of sweetness found its way into his lap and Unca Frank stood blankly staring into the face of life itself. A single tear crossed his furrowed cheek, a lonely crossing since none had passed that way for many years. He picked the baby up and kissed it, never realizing how sweet a kiss could be. His was a bittersweet kiss, bitter in its regret and sweet in its promise. He stayed for supper that night. He didn’t say much but all could tell that somehow Unca Frank had changed. Before he went home he straightened a few ornaments on his nephew’s tree and asked to hold the baby one more time. He liked the feeling it gave him. Somehow he felt closer to Vera. “Thanks!” he whispered to the baby as he handed him to his mother. “And, Merry Christmas!” Merry Christmas!

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Will Christmas Come? (Luke 2: 8-12)

Is it right to be carrying around your burdens at Christmas time? If we drag our fears and anxieties out during this holiday season, will we be spoiling it for everyone else? Is it right to be sad at Christmastime?

Here's a story: “If you don't put a smile on your face, maybe there won't be any Christmas this year!” The little boy had been dragging himself around the house all day. When it comes to Christmas “cheer,” his bucket was pretty empty. His best friend had just moved away only days prior to Christmas. He had a rotten cold but his mom made him go to school any way. His little brother's present under the tree was big and heavy and he didn't see anything like that with his name on it. And, added to all that, there was this guy at school that had just started picking on him for no reason at all. And now Christmas was coming and he didn't even feel happy about it. Maybe his mom was right, if he didn't buck up perhaps there wouldn't be any Christmas at all for him. He looked longingly into his little brother's room. There he sat at his keyboard plunking one finger messages into his computer, a smile on his face, friends who cared. He was sure that Christmas would come for him. “But, what about me,” he thought. “Would Christmas come for me?”

When the Angel of the Lord appeared to those lowly Shepherds, he didn't find them standing around full of awe, in rap- ture that they should be given such a beautiful, heavenly vision. No, the Angel found them full of fear and dread. Why would God appear to them? They were sinners and had ever reason to believe God would punish them. They were very afraid. It was the kind of fear that knocks you down to your knees and causes you to tremble. Standing in the presence of God is fearful as it ought to be. Whenever we stand before God, we stand before He who knows even those sins we can't account for. In that sense, fear and dreading at Christmas time is not really out of place; is it? God didn't announce the message of salvation for all mankind to an inn full of merrymakers. It was to the “sad and troubled heart” seeking peace that God

sent His Son. Hearts like yours and mine, hearts burdened with care, even sorrow, are His targets at Christmas time. It's for hearts like these that Christmas has come and will always come. Merry Christmas!

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No Billboards Necessary! (Luke 2: 1-7)

Wouldn't it be great if every subdivision yard throughout the country had those little blue and white yard signs that say, “Keep Christ in Christmas?” Or those bumper stickers that say “Jesus is the Reason for the Season?” What a wonderful Christmas holiday it would be if all the liquor ads on roadside billboards were replaced for the month of December with colorful displays of angels, shepherds and Christmas stars. Can you imagine driving along the major highways and never seeing one smiling Santa drinking a Coca-Cola or your friendly car dealer asking “wouldn't you like one of these under your tree?” Wow! Perhaps then, when the true message of Christmas couldn't be missed by anyone, then we'd finally get it right. Right?

When you come right down to it though, God doesn't work through Madison Avenue and He could care less about our billboards and magazine ads. It's hearts, cold and lonely hearts barren but willing to offer what they have, that He prefers. The world has no regard for God and He has no regard for it. Let it do as it pleases. If they want to put up liquor bottles and overpowered, gas-guzzling automobiles on their billboards, so be it. God doesn't need their roadside signs. And He doesn't even need our little yard signs. His message gets through without all these things.

We see Christ in Christmas not because a star has guided us there, but because God has silently taken us by the hand and led us there. He uses His ways, not ours. We are led to a lowly manger not because of what a Christmas decoration or a movie have revealed to us. These things serve only to enhance what God has already put deep within our hearts. The message of Christmas has no regard for tinsel, lights and glitter. The message of Christmas comes quietly like the softly falling snow and peacefully as the sheep grazing upon a Judean

hillside on a starlit night. As the Shepherds joyfully spread the message to a world that wasn't interested in it, so should we. If only a handful react with joy, that is victory enough. We know Christmas because it knows us. Deck the halls? You bet! It's fun to do. Put Christ back in Christmas? He's already there. When we look within our hearts, we will find Him. Merry Christmas!

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