

ADVENT SUNDAY #1: IMAGES: CHRISTMAS LISTS

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

As a pastor, every time I introduce a new preaching series, I take a few minutes to explain what the new series is going to be about, and sometimes what led me to start that series in the first place. With a Christmas series, things are quite different. When it comes to Christmas, even people who are not normally faithful church goers are aware of the story to some degree, so the challenge for a Christmas series is to attempt to make an old familiar story become something new. A Christmas series is not so much about the content as it is about the perspective. So, as we once again have the privilege of experiencing the twin seasons of Advent and Christmas, we are going to be starting a series which I call, simply, “Images.”

Now when we enter into a season like Christmas, many images may tend to crowd our minds: images from Christmases long past as well as images made from moments today. For instance, I’m old enough to remember my parents taking my brother and me to downtown Minneapolis to look at all the display windows that were filled with incredible, magical scenes of animatronic elves making toys or painting giant candy canes, and Santa Claus getting his sleigh and reindeer ready and all that kind of Christmas wintery stuff — all with Christmas music playing in the background. And no matter how cold or windy, what I remember more is the crowds: It might be -20F, but those windows were packed with people. It’s an image, a memory, I’m quite sure I’ll never lose.

One of my favorite memories from my family with my wife comes from one of our own Christmas traditions. Over the years, we built up a pretty decent Nativity set, complete with the stable, the manger, Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, three wise men, three “associate” wise men, all their camels, and shepherds, leading about 40 sheep, goats and cattle to see the manger scene, along with dogs to keep the sheep together. The tradition became that, once we cleared Halloween, we would bring out the Nativity set. Our girls absolutely loved to play with it, making up all kinds of stories that involved them in the story. They even remembered whose turn it was from the previous year. We would keep the Nativity set up with the rest of our decorations until Valentine’s Day; then everything still standing had to come down. But the Nativity set became the great memory and tradition for our family, and our girls in particular, for all their growing-up years. Soon I’ll be introducing my oldest granddaughter to the same set that we used. What a joy to bring the tradition of being in the Christmas story to a new generation!

What I’m wanting to do this year is to take a look at some of our more enduring images regarding Christmas and its celebration and tie them into the biblical realities of what this season is truly all about. These are all going to be common images, but we’re going to look at them both from the standpoint of what they are saying about the world and its people as opposed to what the Bible says about the human condition. So, as we prepare to take a look at our first image, **let’s start with a word of prayer!**

INTRODUCTION: Christmas Lists

“What do you want for Christmas? I haven’t gotten your list yet.” Sentences something like that one has floated around my life for years, pretty much since my wife and I got married. In fact, I still get reminders from my daughters that they haven’t gotten my “list” yet.

I have found there are basically two kinds of Christmas lists: the things somebody wants and the things somebody needs. Sometimes those are reflections of the family. In my wife’s family, gifts are usually looked at from the practical side: What does that person need? It took me awhile to understand when, upon joining her family, I’d see wrapping paper excitedly undone to reveal toothbrushes or dental floss or a screwdriver set or new oven mitts or things like that.

In my family, my brother and I developed the greatest Tonka Toy fleet of all time, so much so that I think at one point the Teamsters union wanted to contact us. And our neighbor worked for John Deere — meaning that there was usually some miniature farm equipment included under the tree. For my brother and I at least, a large part of Christmas was about the “wants” — the things we put on our lists.

The idea of lists comes from the idea of giving Christmas gifts to children, which seems to have originated in the early part of the 19th century in and around New York City. It was a part of the national transformation that saw Christmas go from being a strictly religious holiday to today’s almost completely secular one. Along with that came the desire to know what a child might want for a present. Therefore, the list itself was born — and it has done very well for itself. As of 2019, the last year statistics are available, approximately \$300 was spent per child on toys in North America. Now think about this: As of 2019, there were approximately 73 million children in the U.S. That translates to approximately \$22 billion dollars. For toys. To put that into perspective, \$22 billion dollars is more than the gross national product of 82 countries spread around the world — all because of lists that are made from the perspectives of “I want these things” and “I deserve these things because I’ve been good.” Now, that being said, remember these lyrics?

*You better watch out, you better not cry.
You better not pout, I’m telling you why.
Santa Claus is coming to town.*

*He’s making a list, he’s checking it twice
He’s gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.
Santa Claus is coming to town.*

*He sees you when you’re sleeping,
And he knows when you’re awake.
He knows if you’ve been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake (etc.)*

A few things to note from the “authority” of those lyrics:

- 1) Behaving yourself is most important when Santa Claus comes to town because misbehaving might impact the gifts you get.
- 2) Santa needs to check a list to find out who’s been good or not.

- 3) You can make yourself good on your own efforts.
- 4) Christmas is all about getting the gifts (all about me).

Let's contrast that with the Bible's account, which sets the context for everything we're told about Christmas.

TEXT

According to the Bible, God knows us like nobody else. Did you know that the Bible says the same thing about God that the Santa Claus song says — *“He sees you when you're sleeping, and he knows when you're awake.”* Here's how David said it in Psalm 139: ***You have searched me, Lord, and You know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; You are familiar with all my ways — David, Psalm 139:1-3.*** God understands all too clearly the truth of mankind's being “naughty or nice.” He always has known this, from the beginning. Remember all the way back to Genesis, when God decided to judge the world? Why did He come to this decision? The Bible tells us: ***The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time — Genesis 6:5.*** Every inclination, only evil, all the time! So, God rendered judgment in the form of a worldwide flood that wiped every last living, breathing thing off the planet — except for eight people who believed God's commands.

But eventually the floodwaters receded, and the eight people who survived the flood exited the ark which had been built for so many more. And what does the Bible acknowledge was God's view of mankind at that point? Not a whole lot different: ***“[E]very inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood” — God speaking, Genesis 8:21a.*** Because of the ongoing presence of sin in the world, mankind's circumstance would not change, nor would God's knowledge and understanding of that sin-filled circumstance. And did man ever change? No.

We saw that even as the kingdom of Judah was falling down all around that corrupt nation's people. The prophet Jeremiah famously mourned his people's “heart disease” with these famous words: ***The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure — Jeremiah 17:9a.*** And then, even in the midst of a shameful life as a conquered people living in exile, the hearts never changed, as the prophet Ezekiel noted as God spoke through him: ***“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.’ But you are a mere mortal and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god’” — God speaking, Ezekiel 28:2.*** And while these verses pertain specifically to the Jews, they are emblematic of all people worldwide.

So clearly man was left with a vexing problem — just think the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. Only here, the irresistible force is mankind's sin while the immovable object is God's unchanging, eternal holiness. Man is incapable of changing that. And worse still, it most often seems that man does not want his sin problem to change. In other words, men and women like the way they live. Jesus made that very plain when speaking one night with Nicodemus, one of the Jewish religious leaders: ***“This is the***

verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed” — Jesus Christ, John 3:19-20.

So where does all this leave mankind? Completely separated from God and living in no relationship with God. There is no need to make any kind of “Christmas wish list” because, in the context of the song, we are never good; in fact, good is impossible, as is pleasing God. In fact, our hearts and minds were so corrupted by sin and its pervasive influence that, even as saved children of God, should we ever want to make some kind of “wish list,” according to the words of the apostle Paul: ***We do not know what we ought to pray for — Paul, Romans 8:26a.***

So, what happened? Well, first of all, God submitted His own list. What? God had a list, a wish list of things He wanted? Absolutely!

- 1) ***“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?” declares the Sovereign Lord. “Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?” — God speaking, Ezekiel 18:23.***
- 2) ***God our Savior . . . wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth — Paul, I Timothy 2:3b-4.***
- 3) ***For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people — Paul, Titus 2:11.***
- 4) ***[The Lord is] not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance — II Peter 3:9b.***

Does God’s wish list include lots of toys and riches and prosperity? Not even close. In fact, the apostle John tells us (and I love how the NLT phrases it: ***[T]he world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world — I John 2:16 (NLT).*** Clearly God had a very different agenda for our good than we do.

But there’s a problem. Who is God going to give His wish list to? He can’t give it to us; we’re the problem, not the solution. So, God gave His wish list to Himself — and then provided the fulfillment. God stepped in with a gift — a one-of-a-kind gift that would provide everything we would need to redeem us from the sinners God saw to the children God wanted, thus fulfilling His fondest wish. And in so doing, He gave us the greatest gift ever:

- 1) This gift was born into the world in the most helpless way possible — as a human infant, reflecting our own helplessness before God.
- 2) This gift was born in a town few people had heard of and grew up in a town even fewer people had heard of in the household of parents that nobody had heard of, yet His life and His name would become the most well-known in the history of the planet.
- 3) This gift was born to earthly parents overwhelmingly poor, yet His life would promise to meet His followers’ needs ***according to the riches of God’s glory in [Him] — Paul, Philippians 4:19b.***

- 4) This gift was born to a people in a place occupied and subjugated by the most powerful empire in the history of the planet, yet His life would promise His followers an absolute, irrevocable, eternal “freedom” based on a power they could never otherwise have known.
- 5) This gift was born to be both a shepherd and a servant, titles and roles looked down on by the world but ultimately fulfilled by the One to whom all others would bow.
- 6) This gift was born to die, becoming a sacrificial lamb as well as a human ransom, willingly severing His relationship with His father while purchasing relationship with His father for all mankind.

APPLICATION

Now there is one thing true about a holiday preaching series that is not necessarily true in other series. There is a very high likelihood that, maybe outside of some interesting statistics or stories to help make a point, you are not going to be hearing anything new. The Christmas story is the Christmas story. But the world that story came to present is in chaos.

Have you heard this relatively new phrase? “Flash mob.” A flash mob is a group of people who organize to go into some retail outlet — usually high-end electronics or expensive designer-type products — and rush in, causing chaos and, in the chaos, grab as much as they can as fast as they can and get out of the store before the police arrive. The first I heard of this happening was in the San Francisco area. OK; well, that’s just West Coast, liberal California craziness gone even crazier, right? Well, the last episode I heard of where this took place was at a Best Buy located in Burnsville, MN. Even made the national news feeds; Yahoo News and Newsweek online reported it. An estimated 20-30 people did this kind of holiday shopping yesterday. Another six people made a similar visit to a Best Buy in Maplewood, MN.

But what’s craziest about all this was that this was something that these people organized; they planned it and carried it out, with absolutely no concerns about it being wrong or illegal or immoral or anything. Just doing what they wanted to do — and what they wanted was enough to justify it. And the Bible of course predicted these kinds of attitudes; what is it that Paul wrote to his pastor friend Timothy? *[M]ark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — Paul, II Timothy 3:1-4.*

That’s the world we live, and that’s a world that needs the gospel, and that’s the world in which God in His perfect sovereignty has deposited us — not to run from, but to run towards. The world needs to hear the Christmas story because it cannot live without Jesus Christ. Without Him they are merely existing — all the while not realizing that every single one of them was, due to the power of the cross, on God’s wish list.

CONCLUSION

Now where we do need to pay particular attention is to our place as ambassadors to the world. Our ability to fulfill our roles in spreading the gospel is directly connected to how willing we are to welcome the gospel's ongoing changing power in our own lives.

Let me explain. One of the character traits that social scientists have been noticing during these times of extreme political divisiveness is that people are in large part taking in information — news, opinions, etc. — that they already agree with, thus taking their already hardening positions on issues and viewpoints and attitudes and setting them in concrete. Now some pastors I have talked with and listened to are noting the same dynamic in their congregations. People are only listening to what they want; if they are already in agreement with it, they listen but, if it is something they don't agree with — it makes them feel uncomfortable, such as having to reach out with the gospel, or maybe reconcile a broken or damaged relationship, or confess a difficult sin, or maybe it is challenging them with the need to make some changes in their lives — they ignore it. The danger in this is that they are leaving their church after a message and returning to the world into which God has planted them very unaffected by what they have heard. How can we expect the world to crave *all things become new* — *Paul, II Corinthians 5:17* if we don't crave all things new ourselves? The consequence is that they are living lives that have very little impact on our culture with the power and presence of the gospel. And a culture that is not capable of being impacted by the gospel of Jesus Christ is a culture that is dying.

Now we may have talked ourselves to one degree or another into not caring what happens to our culture. But our culture is made up of people for whom Jesus left heaven and was born and grew up and ministered and suffered and died and rose and ascended. And will come back. How many people will become longing for Jesus Christ because they saw us longing for Jesus Christ? How many people will see their helplessness without God because they saw us see our helplessness without God? How many people will desperately want His life because they saw us desperately want His life? How many people will be moved to surrender to Jesus Christ because they've seen our surrender to Jesus Christ? No limits, nothing held back?

How much does Christmas mean to us? How many of us are still capable of being moved by what Jesus did in leaving heaven to live among us on earth? How many of us are still able to be “wowed” by the amazing grace of Bethlehem, and Nazareth, and Capernaum, and Jerusalem, and Gethsemane, and Golgotha, and an empty tomb, and a glorious promise? Those are all pieces of what we ultimately celebrate in Christ — and Christmas is where all that begins. All those things are the message we need to bring to the world. But first let's make sure that same message has been born and brought with all its power and presence into our own lives. Praise God for His “wish list.” Praise God He wanted us. And praise God for how His one and only Son became His Father's wish fulfillment — and our greatest Christmas gift ever. Let's pray!