



RENEWED HOPE

Christmas day has come and gone. So what! What's the point? Why's Christmas so important? It's important to retailers, for one. For some as much as 40-60% of the year's profits are from Christmas sales.

Do you wonder why Christmas is advertised earlier and earlier? In one store Halloween stuff was on one side of the aisle and Christmas stuff on the other side. Christmas is big business.

Unfortunately, many are more concerned about their 'p-r-o-f-i-t' from Christmas than they are to hear from the 'P-r-o-p-h-e-t' of Christmas, Jesus. The sound of money is sweeter than the announcement of the Savior's birth.

Other's are tuned in to a different, yet similar sound—their stock portfolio. Is Wall Street going up or down? The birth of a baby in a manger 2000 years ago is pretty irrelevant to those whose faith is in stocks and bonds,

Some love the revelry of the season—parties, entertainment and fun. Many chose to imbibe spirits at Christmas, instead of imbibing the spirit of Christmas.

They chose to celebrate in the wrong ways. And we must not forget those who didn't celebrate at all, but found ways to forget their loneliness and hurts.

So many were so busy with a thousand and one things that they had no time to consider the real reason for Christmas—the Baby of Bethlehem. It was no different two thousand years ago. The birth of Jesus was pretty much ignored. For millions today Christmas is just another holiday—rather than "Merry Christmas," it's "Happy Holidays." My brother-in-law carried around a \$50 bill to put into the Salvation Army kettle of the first bell ringer who said "Merry Christmas."

I've heard but haven't confirmed, that the Salvation Army was instructed by Target stores not to say "Merry Christmas." Can you believe that—a Christian organization told to forget the meaning of Christmas!

I'm not terribly bugged by "Happy Holidays." Everyone I said "Merry Christmas" to responded in kind. But I am bugged by Christians don't act very Christ-like whenever someone says "Happy Holidays."

We Christians need to be reminded that Jesus Christ came to our world because of the darkness in it. Christmas reminds us that Jesus is the light. It is a time of renewed hope. Hope in Jesus Christ, and a reminder of the important things—family, love, and sharing.

Christmas is generally a family celebration. Good Friday and Easter are more church celebrations, celebrated in the church. Fourth of July, Memorial Day and other national days are marked by speeches and parades.

But Christmas is family because it's about the birthday of our Savior. Christians celebrate because Jesus is God's gift to us. It renews our hope and helps us face the future with assurance. It is a time of renewed hope because....

1. Jesus, the Light of the world

Matthew 2:1-2 says, "We have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him." This, of course, is the story of the Magi, the Wise Men of the East. Who were these Magi? No one really knows. They may have been descendents of the wise men of Daniel's day.

They had been watching the stars and saw a phenomenon unlike anything else—a star that shone with brilliance above all the other stars.

It was as though God had taken a lamp from the ceiling of heaven and hung it in the sky over a spiritually dark and troubled world. What the star was cannot be explained other than a miracle of God.

The Magi had probably studied the ancient writings of the Jews, and as astrologers, they understood the meaning of the star. That's why they followed it. They came to worship the Savior it proclaimed—Jesus Christ is the One they worshipped.

The most interesting thing about this story is how Matthew contrasted the eagerness of the Magi to worship Jesus, despite their limited knowledge, with the apathy of the Jewish leaders and the hostility of Herod and his court—and they all had the Scriptures to inform them.

Jesus said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world." He is the only hope for a lost and dying world.

During the dark winter of 1864 at Petersburg, Virginia, the Confederate army of Robert E. Lee faced the Union divisions of General Ulysses S. Grant. The civil war was 3 ½ years old. Late one

evening one of Lee's generals, Major General George Pickett, received word that his wife had given birth to a baby boy. Up and down the line the Southerners began building huge bonfires in celebration of this blessed event.

These fires were noticed in the Union camp and soon a nervous Grant sent a reconnaissance patrol to see what was going on. The scouts returned with the message that Pickett had a son and the fires were in celebration of it.

Well, it so happened that Grant and Pickett had been at West Point together and knew one another well. So, to honor the occasion also, Grant ordered that bonfires should be built up and down the lines.

What a peculiar night it was. For miles on both sides of the lines fires burned. No shots were being fired. There was no yelling back and forth. No war was being fought. Only light celebrating the birth of a child.

But it didn't last forever. The fires soon burned down. Once again the darkness took over—the darkness of night and the darkness of war.

The good news of Christmas is that in the midst of a great darkness there came a light, and the darkness has not been able to overcome that light.

That light wasn't just a temporary flicker—to burn itself out; it was an eternal flame that continues to burn in believers everywhere.

I'm afraid that our world is just as apathetic as the Jewish leaders were. Peace in our world is as elusive as it was in Jesus' day. There will never be peace until Jesus comes again. Jesus "was despised and rejected by men" (Isaiah 53:3). Because of that rejection there is no real peace in the world.

Our world is filled with synthetic stars that bring only fear, worry, apprehension, disappointment and war. And many follow those stars rather than Jesus, the Light of the World.

To those of us who believe, Jesus said in Matthew 5:14, "You are the light of the world," and in v. 16, "Let your light shine before men..."

We let the light of Jesus shine not by taking offense that someone says, "Happy Holidays," or cuts us off in traffic, or butts in line, or says crude things in our presence, but by responding in love as Jesus would.

When we Christians act more like Jesus, some will find the peace they so desperately need. It is a time of renewed hope because:

2. Jesus, a New Song.

On the night He was born, angels told shepherds, of all people, the good news first. An angel told them, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

We love the Christmas songs. Jingle Bells, White Christmas, I’ll be Home for Christmas, Over the River and Through the Woods. We used to sing these songs in the car as we drove to Grandma and Grandpa’s house for Christmas—anything to help entertain the kids during a 15-hour drive.

And we’d sing the beautiful Christmas carols that are so dear to our hearts. The sounds of Christmas music are all around us. But the song that brings renewed hope is the new song brought by the Savior.

Paul wrote in Galatians 4:4, But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son... At the time of Jesus’ birth the world had lost its song, but now it could learn to sing again.

Because God became one of us, born to a virgin girl named Mary, the fulfillment of prophecy—hope sprung forth again in the hearts of the people. Today a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.

Led by the angelic beings we take up the song, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men... There are many competing voices and songs claiming to have the answers to lasting peace and happiness. But how poorly they measure up to Jesus, who left the riches of heaven and became poor that through His poverty we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

The new song is about heaven and earth being joined together—God and sinner reconciled. Hope for the hopeless, pardon for the guilty, forgiveness for the conscious-stricken, peace for those who know no peace, and good news for those who have had nothing but bad news.

Peace—not the absence of trouble—but the very presence of God with us is the new song in our hearts. It is a time of renewed hope because...

3. Jesus, the Good News

The angel of the Lord told Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:20-21).

The Good News is that at last a Savior came to save men and women from sin. The Good News is that Jesus is that Savior, the one and only one who fulfills all the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus Christ is the central theme of that first Christmas—the manger, the shepherds rejoicing, the angels singing, the star, the Wise Men, the gifts, the kneeling, the joy, the hope, the excitement, the wonder of it all—all because of Him.

Christmas is a time of renewed hope—not hope that the government will solve all our problems. It won't! It will just keep muddling along as usual. Not hope in the stock market, or our jobs or our military might.

Christian hope is Jesus Christ. It is the assurance that in spite of all our bungling, God will bring order out of the chaos of our lives. This is the hope and promise of Christmas.

The Good News is that Jesus came to save people from their sins. Universal health care has been the main agenda of our new president. Our doctors spend their time constantly treating the consequences of sin. But no doctor in the world can treat sin itself.

No psychiatrist in the world can cure sin, though they continually treat the symptoms of sin. They may help a sinner live with their sin, but they cannot get rid of the disease.

Only Jesus Christ can heal the disease of sin. This is 'good news.' This is what Christmas is about. This is what Easter is about. This is what Jesus is about. The Good News is that Jesus was born to die for us to take care of our sin disease.

God's grace is greater than our sins. Christmas leads to the cross. At the cross sin was taken care of. The cross of Jesus Christ is the cure for all who believe—offered, paid for and administered by a loving God.

Christmas is a reminder from God himself that we are not alone. Jesus was born. He lived a perfect life—showing us how to live in love with one another. He suffered and died for us. In the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we see God's reconciling love. His love rescues us from separation and loneliness.

Application:

The Christmas message has not changed after 2000 years. Jesus Christ is here. He still forgives sins, renews our faith and heals our spiritual wounds. This is a time of renewed hope. In spite of the world's headlines and the personal battles going on in your life, Jesus Christ is alive. Open yourself to Jesus and go into the New Year with Him as your Savior and Friend.

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