

I'm thinking of redesigning Christmas. The whole thing. It's never worked for me. Even as a child, it was a set-up, let-down day, with weeks of talk of Santa and of presents and of aunts and uncles and a Christmas goose, and the "Oh yes, and by the way, remember, it's all about the baby Jesus."

By four o'clock on Christmas afternoon, I always wanted to tug somebody's sleeve and say, "Excuse me, is this what all the fuss has been about?"

The advertisements tell me, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season," but I don't buy it. How does a 45-day holiday devoted to the buying of and paying for presents celebrate the Eternal God of all creation come to earth as man?

Perhaps the best gift of the Christmases I see is that they stir up a strong longing in us, a wistfulness we can't quite name. After we have opened all the presents, strewn the wrappings out across the floor, our children sit back, look around and the question asks itself: "Is that it? Is that all there is?" We want more. We should want more. We should not be satisfied with this kind of Christmas.

We sell our children short. We sell our Savior short. We generate such hectic hubbub, string so much tinsel and so many lights, wrap up so very many *things*, that we lose sight of Christ in the confusion. In children's minds, the baby Jesus gets lost in piles of presents, buried in mistletoe and tinsel.

What do the Gospel writers do with Christmas? Two don't even mention it. Mark hits the ground running with the camel-hair clad John the Baptist spelling out the reason Christ was born; he baptizes Christ, and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. And that's just the first twelve verses. The Gospel of John starts out with the Word—The Word that is the everlasting King.

I read the other Gospels for hints of Christmas. I find worship and astonished awe, angels in the heav-



ens and an old, old man whose first wish is to die, content now that he has seen salvation with his own two eyes. The shepherds return to the cold, dark hills. The kings go home. There is fear and flight into Egypt, a mass slaughter of newborns and the unfolding of a story that can only astound us.

Rethinking Christmas

There is, I think, a different Christmas we might give our children, a different Christmas we might give ourselves, telling the old, old story a new way.

Let's say to our children, "Listen up. You won't believe it! Are you ready? Hold on to your hats and fasten your seat belts. Tonight we celebrate a baby's birth—a baby who was, is and will be Christ the Lord, and this thing we call Christmas is just the tip of the iceberg,

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the tiny crack in the cosmos where the Eternal God of heaven takes on the size and shape and sorrow of a man and comes to earth. Get ready. Pray. Give thanks to God."

Then whisper to them: "And later, when it's very late, midnight maybe, we'll bundle up and drive out to a hillside in the country—the hills and fields will be jam packed—and we'll look up at the heavens and sing praises to God. With angels sent from heaven. *Glory to God in the highest*. If you listen, you can hear them. We'll wait and listen. We'll remember, and we'll worship—outside—in the dark of night and think about the light that came to earth to shatter darkness."

"Then we'll go home, and we'll get a special calendar and mark it with a thick black magic marker to count the days, through the whole mean month of January, snowy February, March and sometimes part of April until the day of celebration. Resurrection morning; the triumph of a reason for this dark, cold Christmas night. A night of awe and of expectation—the beginning, that opens up the story that's the start of the promise now to be fulfilled. God's promise to you and you and you...and me."

On Christmas, we should make promises to our children. Covenant to tell them, every day, the story of that Christ-child's life and wonders as he walked the earth.

We should help our children count the days, the hours and the minutes—through the winter weeks—to the day when the whole thing comes together on the morning of the Lord's triumphant resurrection—victory over sin and death—two long days after dying on a cross the day the very earth quaked and rattled, the sky went black as night and men rose up from the dead and walked the streets of town.

We can teach our children awe and wonder—not of flying reindeer and Santas who hang out at shopping malls—but of the glory and holiness of the eternal majesty who became a baby in a manger. We can share with them the awe-struck joy that the God of heaven sent his Son to the earth—not to remain a baby, but to grow to be a man, to die and rise up from the dead and live forever so that we can, too.

Now THAT'S the Christmas story! □

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