



Living with the Incarnation

How can we avoid the “Christmas miss” and authentically celebrate the birth of Jesus? DAVID BECK

Two mornings after Christmas I settled into my favorite chair, enjoying a cup of tea and taking in the peaceful cheer of the Christmas tree. The house was quiet. The sun wasn't up yet, and the tree beamed with the soft glow of dozens of white lights. Its branches were festooned with garland and a variety of ornaments that celebrated Jesus's birth, as well as Santa Claus, Rudolph, and our children. I thought back to Christmas morning when the kids had made their annual morning dash to the tree. A warm Christmas afterglow was in full swing.

Then, like a cold fog rolling in, a sinking awareness settled over me. Something was missing. We had gotten Christmas “done”—all the gifts were purchased,

wrapped, mailed, assembled, and opened. We had attended the necessary parties, plays, and musicals. We had expressed fond wishes to our relatives and friends. And yet something was out of place. I set down my cup and began to think. The Christmas afterglow had been extinguished.

I had encountered this hollow feeling in previous years, and I knew it as a common Christmas complaint. We enter December with visions of Christmas being “the most wonderful time of the year,” filling our hearts with worship and warmth. Then, like Wile E. Coyote ending up in bandages every time he chases the Roadrunner, we wake up after Christmas exhausted, out of

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sync with God, and overextended on our credit cards. I call this the “Christmas miss.” Rather than becoming more deeply connected with God and others, we become more disconnected.

More than once I have raced through Christmas and then looked back on the season, alarmed that much of December was a blur because I was only partially present. The more I had attended to my cluttered task list and schedule, the less I had attended to my relationships with God and people. Commercialization isn’t the deepest problem with Christmas. It’s that we become spiritually and relationally dysfunctional for a season. It’s no wonder we find ourselves talking about recovering a true Christmas spirit, or getting in touch with the reason for the season, or unplugging from the Christmas “machine.”

I had experienced these problems during previous Christmases. What made this particular

morning different was that the solution began to come into focus. It wasn’t about buying fewer presents or cutting parties out of our calendar. It was about shaping life around the theological essence of the Christmas

season—the incarnation, when God the Son became a human being. Over the years since that morning, I have found that the “Christmas miss” is always a threat, but it can be overcome by engaging more deeply with God’s story.

One of the standard Christmas images is a stable scene, with Mary and Joseph looking affectionately upon baby Jesus. Overhead is a nighttime canopy of stars with one extraordinarily bright star shining a beam of light down on the family. This is a quaint picture until we stop to think about the astonishing reality it conveys. In *The Jesus I Never Knew* Philip Yancey writes, “The God who roared, who could order armies and empires about like pawns on a chessboard, this God emerged in Palestine as a baby who could not speak or eat solid food or control his bladder, who depended on a teenager for shelter, food, and love.”

Though the metaphysics of God becoming human boggle our best thinkers, more astonishing still is the love God expressed. God created all things and crowned creation by fashioning human beings after his own image, only to have us rebel against him. He asked that we love him, but he received rejection instead. Even then God did not back off. Quite the opposite. He responded

to our rejection by pursuing us all the more. The almighty God entered into the human fray by becoming one of us.

As Paul explains in Philippians 2:6-8, this meant God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, both emptied himself of his divine rights and privileges, and humbled himself to submit first to the grime and struggle of human life and ultimately to the pain and gore of human death by crucifixion. Let other religions say what they will about God. There is no greater story of transcendent love than the incarnation. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:9-11, TNIV).

The word *advent* means “coming.” Thus, Advent should be a celebration and imitation of the coming of God to dwell among us (John 1:14). Turning around our experience of Christmas means absorbing the story of the incarnation. We let it soak into our bones by reading it, thinking about it, praying over it, and living out what we learn. Certain themes bubble to the surface. They become the themes of a renewed celebration of Christmas.

A friend of mine was once asked if he celebrated Christmas “in the Christian sense”—that is, whether he wrapped Christmas around the person of Jesus. When we are ragged, disconnected, partially absent, and unloving, those are signs that we are wrapping Christmas around material goods and packed calendars and not around the person of Jesus.

When we get caught in the “Christmas miss,” we encounter three recurring problems:

- We get disconnected from God.
- We are absent from people at a heart-to-heart level.
- We fall into a materialistically driven neglect of people’s deepest needs.

The incarnation story hits each of these problems head-on:

- In place of disconnection, the incarnation brings God and humanity together.
- Far from absent, Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14).
- Rather than neglect us, God shows us his astounding love.

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With these themes in place, let us make specific connections about how we live this out. Rather than attempting to draw God into our manic yuletide whirlwinds, we are to be drawn into God's Christmas story. What can follow from the incarnation story is a plan for repenting of our recurring yuletide sins and experiencing renewal in our relationship with God and others. The plan has a three-part structure.

- Instead of disconnection from God, Christmas will be a season of ongoing *prayer*.
- Instead of absence from others, Christmas will be a season of *presence*, in which we are fully engaged with people.
- Instead of neglect of others, Christmas will be a season of *participation* in God's love for them.

Prayer, presence, and participation in God's love—those are the main contours of living the Christmas story. They express a countercultural “no” to the forces that drive us away from God and others in the Christmas season. They convey a determined “yes” to the essence of what the season is all about. When we live this way in the Christmas season, we find that the story of the incarnation shapes our thought life, reconnects us with God, renews our families, breathes life into our relationships with those around us, and warms our souls. This is what most of us long for when we head into the Christmas season.

Let's get more specific still by identifying some practices designed to lead us into living the Christmas story.

It's a sad fact. Over the years I have invested a lot more energy into maintaining our family Christmas traditions than practicing spiritual disciplines for Christmastime. I have lived my family's story more than the Christmas story. What follows are practices to reverse that trend. These practices might be referred to as “low impact, high yield.” They are low impact because they do not require us to stop shopping for gifts or attending social engagements. They don't take large chunks of time out of our schedules—unless we choose that. However, these practices are high yield in that they are designed to nourish a connection to God and others that is a true celebration of the Jesus story.

Let me suggest the following practices:

PRAYER

Practicing the presence of God—This means carrying on an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day that emphasizes love and humble surrender to him. Yes, you can pray and

shop at the same time!

PRESENCE

Listening—In Jesus, God made eye contact with us. Nothing says “I'm here, and I care about you” like listening attentively to someone.

Listening during the Christmas season means overruling our schedules for a short time and pausing to give someone our full attention.

Walking together—Walking is a simple way to check out of our holiday schedules, pause with someone, and give him or her our full attention as we take a stroll together. It is a way of imitating Jesus, who was God walking among us.

Being there—Jesus is Immanuel, God who came here to be with us. We live the Christmas story by going to where redemption or reconciliation is needed. Being there allows us to connect more fully with others.

PARTICIPATION IN GOD'S LOVE

Blessing—God the Son became human so we might enjoy God's blessing. We can live this story by being generous with blessing. Blessing is giving verbal gifts that reach into someone's soul and outlast any gift we could purchase from a store.

Reconciling—The incarnation of Christ made it possible for us to be reconciled to God. Nothing makes Christmas sweeter and more memorable than being reconciled to the people in our lives.

Including—When God the Son became one of us, he brought us with him into fellowship with the Father. We can live the Christmas story by including others, especially others we might not normally include.

In the incarnation God did not simply send us a greeting card from a nearby zip code. He became one of us in order to draw us to himself. God could not have come closer, and his love could not have been stronger.

When we wrap ourselves around the Christmas story, the gifts we give and receive during the Christmas season undergo a significant and life-changing shift. We may enjoy store-bought items, but we treasure the spiritual and relational renewal that comes from living the Christmas story.

Each of these seven practices yields gifts that last. Being renewed in our relationships with God and people—these gifts never end up in a garage sale or on the curb. They follow us even into the age to come, for they are the essence of heaven. ■