

## The Gift of an Uncommon Christmas

Rev. Dan Schumacher

In a recent sermon, one of my favorite preachers, Brett Younger, started by saying:

“I’m not sure this is a good idea, but I made a list of things I’m missing this Christmas.

I miss my parents. They’re 88 and 87. They’re doing ok, but they’re 88 and 87... and the doctors in their part of Mississippi don’t inspire confidence. My parents were *great* parents for a kid at Christmas. For folks in their income bracket, they spent way too much on toys each year. For the last thirty years, Carol and I have gone to their house the week after Christmas. Mom knows we can’t come this year, but she keeps talking about how she wishes we could be there, which just makes it harder. We’ll call on Christmas, but mom has a hard time hearing on the phone, and she doesn’t do FaceTime or Zoom... or anything invented this century.

I miss my sons... this will be the first time in 27 years without the four of us together. For the last ten years, when they’d ask what I want for Christmas. I’d give them the same answer: I want four tickets to something fun. We’ve been to lots of ball games, plays, movies – but this year we’ll be on a phone app called “House Party” where you can play games like Password, Pictionary, Trivial Pursuit – but it is *not* the same as being around the kitchen table...”

Speaking of what he misses at church, Younger said, “I miss singing together. Now singing is one of the worst things you can do in terms of spreading the virus, and we need to be smart and caring and not sing until it’s safe... but I really miss singing together” (“Joy Like the First Christmas,” *Plymouth Church*, Dec. 13, 2020).

I do, too. I know I gave Christmas music a hard time in my sermon last Sunday, but I was talking about songs like, “Dominic, the Donkey” and “All I Want for Christmas is You.”

I wasn’t talking about singing “Joy to the World” with you... or “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” ... or “Silent Night.”

The other day on our Sunday morning Zoom Fellowship, Paul Petta shared that he planned that night to go wander down to the Pioneer’s Museum to see the light show that they project onto the side of the building each year. It’s an annual tradition for him. And as he shared that, it occurred to me that I have not walked the streets of our downtown in 9 months. Christen and I used to do the Jack Quinn’s Run Club every Tuesday evening, so we’d at least run through the streets of downtown once a week!

In that moment, I also realized that I haven’t seen the skating rink in Acacia Park, I haven’t window-shopped local businesses for Christmas gifts, I haven’t eaten in one of our downtown restaurants. I love our downtown, but I haven’t been down there in a while. I miss downtown.

And though I'm still in the church several days a week, I miss our events. No day of decorating the sanctuary for Christmas and hearing Jim Howard curse under his breath at the lights on the giant tree. No Christmas Brunch. No children's program. No Lessons and Carols service. No singing together. And our Christmas Eve Candlelight service is happening in our parking lot of all places!

I don't know about you, but in some ways, this feels like the least Christmas-y Christmas I can remember.

What you are missing this year? What feels like it's been lost, been removed from your Christmas expectations this year?

Eugene Peterson used to tell the story of what he called "The Treeless Christmas of 1939. It's the story of when, based on her sense of conviction surrounding a passage from Jeremiah, Peterson's mother banned Christmas trees from the house for a year.

Sometimes the right passage read at the right moment brings new light to a topic. That year, she came across a passage that read:

*Thus says the Lord:  
"Learn not the way of the nations,  
nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens  
because the nations are dismayed at them,  
for the customs of the peoples are false.*

Now up to this point, you might be wondering what this has to do with a Christmas tree. But if we keep reading, we'll hear something that sounds like one of our traditions.

*A tree from the forest is cut down,  
and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman.  
People deck it with silver and gold;  
they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. (Jer. 10:1-5)*

It doesn't require much imagination to see how it sounds a whole lot like what we do at Christmas. We go out in the forest and cut down a tree... or somebody does any way, and we pick it up at Lowes. The bottom is worked with an axe to make it flat — only we use a chainsaw these days. We deck our trees with all sorts of gold globes and silver tinsel. And through the years, many folks used two boards nailed to the bottom of the tree to prop it up.

"The customs of the peoples are false," said the prophet, so Peterson's mom banned the Christmas tree that year.

He says:

“I was embarrassed — humiliated was more like it — humiliated as only seven-year-olds can be humiliated. Abased. Mortified. I was terrified of what my friends in the neighborhood would think. They would think we were too poor to have a tree. They would think I was being punished for some unspeakable sin, and so deprived of a tree. They would think we didn’t care about one another and didn’t have any fun in our house. They would feel sorry for us. They would feel superior to us.”

He said it was a neighborhood ritual among the kids to go into each other’s houses and look at one another’s trees. But that year, he kept all his friends out for fear they would see the bare, treeless room.

He said he never told his mom how he felt or what he just knew the whole neighborhood was saying about those Petersons. He just carried his humiliation secretly, as children so often do.

On Christmas Day, his big Norwegian family came over. His Uncle Ernie was the first to notice and to remark. “Evelyn,” he roared, “Where the hell is the Christmas tree? How are we going to have a Norwegian Christmas without a tree?”

“No tree this year, brother,” she replied. “Just Jesus.”

Peterson said he just knew it was going to tear the family apart. No tree? No tree! How could they even celebrate Christmas without a tree.

“Next year,” he said, “the tree was back.” But years later — some thirty years after his mother had died — he reflected back on that treeless Christmas of 1939 and said:

“The feelings I had that Christmas when I was seven years old may have been the most authentically Christmas feelings I have ever had, or will have: the experience of humiliation, of being misunderstood, of being an outsider. Mary was pregnant out of wedlock. Joseph was an apparent cuckold. Jesus was born in poverty — everything involved in God becoming flesh was counter to the culture[’s expectations]” (*The Pastor*, 50-55).

And now, Peterson’s reflection has got me thinking. Maybe the things we are missing this year — not being with family, not observing our little traditions, not singing together — are the very avenue by which we might experience a more authentic Christmas.

The loss of our expectations can have a strange way of opening us up to the quiet and unexpected hope of salvation that was born unto us on that first Christmas day.

Lean into it, First Baptist family. The tree will be back next year, I promise.

And merry Christmas!