

How Does Christmas Work?

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – January 1, 2023

Isaiah 63:7-9 and Matthew 2:13-23

You know about the shepherds and the angels and the wisemen from the East. You are familiar with Joseph and Mary and the “little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay.” These characters are known to us all, and our visions of them leave us with a warm and fuzzy feeling.

But maybe you suspect that there is more than sweetness to this story. Scratch the surface of any Christmas card image, and you are going to uncover greed and passion, danger, and death.

How does Christmas really work?

One place to begin to answer this question is the Internet, which conveniently enough includes a site called “How Christmas Works” by Stuff You Should Know. It is a one-stop shop for all your questions about the holiday.

Questions like, “Why do people give each other presents on Christmas day?” or “Is December 25 really the day Jesus was born?”

Then there is the mistletoe mystery. What does it have to do with the Christmas story? Absolutely nothing.

And how about the 12 days of Christmas? What is that about? Aren’t there like about 30 days of Christmas, from Thanksgiving until Christmas Day?

Of course, there are answers to these questions for those who are truly interested. The point is, a cultural and religious tradition like Christmas takes years, even centuries, of formation until it becomes the event it is today. Christmas works, and it works via these **traditions** and **legends** and **customs** that have evolved over time.

What happens is that all these cultural traditions help us to “put on” Christmas. To do it right.

But how does it work? Really work? Is there a lingering, lasting effect that Christmas produces in us and for us?

Could we throw a monkey wrench into the whole business that would cause Christmas not to work?

Actually, Christmas almost did not happen. Dig beneath the peaceful picture of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, and you are going to find surprises. Take a closer look at the gospel of Matthew, and you will be stunned by the danger and death that permeate the original Christmas story. You want to talk about catastrophe theory, you can start right here. Christmas should never have happened at all.

You don't, for example, take your pregnant wife – nine months pregnant with God – put her on a mule, and pack her off on a 90-mile road trip.

Second, if you do, you arrange for lodging and do not just hope there will be a room in the inn.

Third, the child is born in a manger. Think about it. How do children survive those days? Answer is, back then, a lot did not. Jesus did. It was not a sterile environment to have a child. This was not your typical birthing center.

And then there are the wise men who hit a roadblock as they attempt to gain access to Jesus. Sure, the star in the sky is a big help as they make their way to Jerusalem, but once they arrive in the capital they run smack into King Herod, who is already working on an exit strategy in case this new “King” is not found – and killed. To make sure, scores of male children are killed in what today is known as the “Slaughter of the Innocents.”

So, Christmas almost did not come off then – and it often doesn't come off at all for us now.

Of course, we go through the motions. The presents, the Christmas cards, the shopping, the food, the parties, and so on.

But that's not Christmas. That's the holidays.

Like the wise men, we must take a detour around these dangers. If we are going to gain access to Jesus, we are challenged to find another way. The wise men protected Jesus by evading the expectations of Herod, and we should follow this same path. Our access to Jesus may require eliminating some of the Christmas expectations that can elevate our anxiety.

Fact is, we do not need to obsess about holiday decorations, and insist that our houses be stuffed with green holly branches and red poinsettia plants. But even if we scale back our expectations and downsize our decorations, we are still going to face some dangers as we make our way through the season. Life has a

way of shattering our serenity, even when we do our best to keep the chaos under control.

So how does Christmas work?

It works when we remember that Christmas now, as then, is a dangerous business. It is dangerous because it evokes dreams and hopes. There's a scene in the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, where Andy says to his best friend, "Hope is a dangerous thing. The reality is that we're in here, and hope is out there."

Christmas is not easy, and in fact it can be costly, because it demands that we put "the hopes and fears of all the years" to work. It calls on us to give muscle to our aspirations and dreams. And that's not easy. But if we do it, Christmas works.

Christmas works when we shatter the false gods of materialism and the idols of ambition, and the demons of self-importance, and set up the Christ child as the promise and priority of our lives. When Christ is the center of our daily living, then the other demons will fade away.

Finally, we honor Christmas when we allow it to take us to a foreign land. The text today tells us about the flight of the holy family into Egypt. Jesus often leads us into unknown territory. We find ourselves in uncharted waters. But that is what Christmas is about, letting Jesus take our hand and lead us along our journey.

Tony Compolo tells the story about a deacon in his church who wasn't "deaconing." He just didn't do what he was supposed to do as a deacon.

One day he said to the deacon, "I have a group of young people who go to the retirement home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the home and at least do that?" The deacon agreed.

The first Sunday the deacon was at the retirement center, he was in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and here was this man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the man's hand and he held it all during the service. The next month that was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the deacon's hand each month.

Then the man was not there. The deacon inquired and he was told, “Oh he’s down the hall, right hand side, third door. He’s dying. He’s unconscious, but if you want to go and pray over his body, that should be all right.”

The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging out all over the place. The deacon took the man’s hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings.

As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon’s hand, and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks.

He stumbled out of the room and as he did, he bumped into a woman. She said, “He’s been waiting for you. He said that he did not want to die until he had a chance to hold the hand of Jesus once more.”

The deacon was so amazed at this. He said, “What do you mean?”

She said, “Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for the whole hour. I do not want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus once more.”

Christmas works when we let Jesus take us into unfamiliar territory – a nursing home, a neighbor’s home, or into something even more bizarre, like an attitude adjustment, a generous spirit, a helping hand. Whatever.

So, when the carols have been stilled, when the star-topped tree is taken down, when the family and friends have gone home, when we are back to our schedules, the real work of Christmas begins. To welcome the refugee, to heal the broken planet, to feed the hungry, to build bridges of trust and not walls of fear, to share our gifts, to seek justice and peace for all people, and to bring Christ’s light into all the world.

The point is that whenever and wherever we go, we are the hand of Jesus to others, and when that happens –Christmas happens. Christmas works! Amen.