

**Festival of Lessons and Carols
Who Owns Christmas?**

Isaiah 9: 2-7
Luke 2: 8-20

Luke 1: 26-35
John 1: 1-18

Luke 1: 39-56
Titus 3: 4-7

Luke 2: 1-7

A child was born for us, a rose ever blooming:

A child from the One who has shown strength with his arm,
who has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
who has brought down the mighty from their thrones,
who has lifted up the lowly and filled them with good things.

It happened one night in Bethlehem –

Mary, Joseph and the Babe lying in the manger –
and shepherds came, summoned by the angels,
to see this thing that had come to pass:

This child, this blessed child who was the Word,
the Word that was with God, the Word that was God,
the Light that shines in darkness and is not overcome by that darkness.

This child, through whom the goodness and loving kindness of God came to us.

That's the Christmas story – according to the scripture we have read today. But?

Is it quite the story we have been hearing on most days recently?

Is it at the center of the modern American Christmas?

Is the church losing control of the story?

Is Christmas ceasing to be a Christian holiday?

Well, yes.

Or on second thought, maybe not: Perhaps it was not ours to begin with.

Christmas was invented three or four centuries after the birth of Jesus,
in part to compete with pagan cults,
especially that of Mithras, the ancient Persian god of light
and that of Sol Invictus, the invincible sun god,
each of which had holy days connected to the winter solstice.

The church needed something to counter the Romans' obscene celebration
of Saturnalia¹ in honor of Saturn, god of agriculture and fertility,
who promised new crops with the coming of warmer days.

So the Christians chose the 25th of December to celebrate Jesus' birth
to redirect the energy of the pagan festivals toward worship of the Christ.

¹ December 17-23.

But the attempt has never been entirely successful.
Pagan evergreens symbolizing fertility, gift giving, and partying
were carried right over into Christmas.

Throughout the Middle Ages, merry making remained more common than piety.

By the sixteenth century, Christmas had come to mean
dancing, singing, gambling, feasting and drinking.
A century later, revelers took up trick or treating
going from house to house demanding food or drink.

One of their songs went like this:
“We’ve come here to claim our right,
And if you don’t open up your door,
We will lay you flat upon the floor.”

Is it a surprise that our worthy Calvinist ancestors were unenthusiastic for Christmas?

The Pilgrims spent their first December 25 on Cape Cod
constructing a building for common use.

Oliver Cromwell’s Parliament made Christmas a day of penitence in 1647
and banned it altogether in 1652.

If God had wanted us to celebrate Christmas, the members of Parliament said,
he would have provided a date for it in scripture.

Things changed in the nineteenth century and Christmas as we know it came into being.

The tradition of gift giving was revived.
Santa Claus was invented as an icon of commerce.
Victorian sentimentality shaped the image of the holiday.
Caroling became popular.
Modern charity took shape.
Christmas cards began to be printed.
The Dutch custom of hanging stockings was adopted.
Christmas trees were imported from Germany.
And more recently, Advent wreaths were added.

Harriet Beecher Stowe remembered a time

when children were satisfied with one token gift, but by 1850 innocence was lost.

“There were worlds of money wasted,” she wrote,
“... in getting things that nobody wants,
and nobody cares for after they are got.”

Christmas past begins to sound familiar, doesn’t it.

We have a choice of traditions that we can adopt.

But lost in too many of them is emphasis on the birth of the savior.

How then do we return to the biblical understanding of the coming of the Christ child?

And do we have to do so by giving up all celebration?

Do we have to become refugees from our own culture?

I certainly hope not. Surely joy and celebration are integral parts of the Christmas story.
They certainly come through in Isaiah's prophecy,
in Luke's telling of the annunciation and the birth and the shepherds,
in John's great poetic words of theological understanding,
in the letter to Titus of God's goodness and loving kindness.

So what is joy?

Whatever else it is, it is deeper than fun or entertainment or jollity.
It is more profound than even happiness.
Each of these may be experienced in joy,
but it is more fundamental than any of them.
Joy is founded on well-being, a sense of identity, of knowing who one is.
Christian joy would add of knowing whose one is.
It is in Christ that we have our identity, our security.
Joy is not something we control; it controls us.
We can choose pleasure, fun, excitement, entertainment.
Joy comes as a gift of God, or else it doesn't come at all.

Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher,
was overcome with the sense of joy.

When he died, this note was found on him:
"In the year of grace 1654, Monday 23 November ...
from about half-past ten in the evening
till about half an hour after midnight:
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob.
Not of the philosophers and the learned –
Certitude. Certitude. Emotion.
Joy! ... Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy ...
My God ... let me not be separated from thee for ever."

Our Lord, born that night in Bethlehem, to overturn the order of creation,
to bring down the mighty and to fill the hungry,
to bring good news to the lowest, even to shepherds,
God himself come to us.

We have heard the angels message
and we can celebrate with family and friends;
we can enjoy life and company;
we can have fun and jollity;
because under girding it all we have the joy brought by Jesus the Christ child.

With thanks to Sara Sklaroff, **Civilization** (December, 1996), pp. 54-55.