

What's important about Christmas? Perhaps we have allowed Christmas to get a little too commercial. Perhaps the event of Jesus' birth has become overshadowed by the hype. Perhaps political correctness run amok has the message leaning more toward Happy Holidays rather than a celebration of when God came to earth. But those are our problems, not God's. So I've put together some reasons why this should be a really important holiday season for us.

Of course, Christmas is a time when family tries to get together. It's a time when we give gifts, when we sing favorite Christmas carols, when we eat too much. And all of those things are good. But those are not the reasons why the birth of Jesus is important. The following reasons give us something meaningful to say to people who, more than at any other time of year, might just be willing to hear a little about Jesus.

Reason number one: God thought that the birth of Jesus was a really important event. It's not like the birth of other famous people in history. Think about George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. People have written books about their childhoods, but not because either of their childhoods were that remarkable. We only have an interest in the birth of a famous person because, as adults, they became famous. Their births in themselves, were really not that special. If they had not become special people, no one would ever have written a book about how they came into the world.

But now think about Jesus' birth. If He had never become famous as an adult, would anyone have noticed His birth?

A group of shepherds noticed a rather large group of angels singing in the sky. Do you think they told anyone? Do you think they were afraid that people would call them crazy? The Bible says that they told everyone. God intended that this particular birth be well publicized – before Jesus was old enough to talk or walk. Although the Bible does not give reasons for this style of announcement, I think I can guess the result. People talked about something special happening – about the Promised One that everyone learned about growing up. People thought about their own relationships with God. And they remembered that something very special was going to happen with this child. Anticipation was in the air. At least for some, that anticipation stayed with them and encouraged them.

Not only did a group of smelly shepherds fill the barn and greet a poor young woman who had given birth just hours before, God's ad campaign was not restricted to a private concert for some working men. God's ad campaign was international. The Bible doesn't say how far east, but at least the Wise Men were from a long way off, and were not part of Jewish culture. God set up some remarkable signs in the sky that guided these men not only to a specific country, but later to a specific house. That's a very strange star.

God prepared for this birth specifically with both ancient prophets and two prophets at that time. Certainly, most of the advance announcements about the Messiah concerned His mission and His nature as an adult. But the birth location was announced seven centuries in advance. Anna and Simeon were planted by God to announce an infant, not an adult, and many, many people were there in the Temple to hear it. And, because Simeon and Anna were prophets of long standing, the infant had instant credibility. Why did Jesus, as an adult, gain such immediate notoriety? For several reasons. One of those reasons was the memory of these events. Anticipation of something great simmered among the people for about thirty years as this infant grew up and these events gave Him credibility when He started His public ministry.

Did you notice in the story that those who came to visit the infant Jesus came to worship? I can discount the worship by the Wise Men as a bunch of ignorant pagans who didn't know better (although the designation Wise Men and their wealth, initiative to travel a long distance,

and education would make that a weak argument), to the Jewish people in attendance, describing them as worshipping the infant was a really big deal. Jewish people were big on “worship the Lord your God only.” They knew that this infant was worthy of worship.

Even though the month and day have been lost to history, Jesus’ birth was treated as a big event by God. We celebrate the birth of our nation as the date when a bunch of men signed a Declaration of Independence in 1776. But the country did not actually exist yet. The entire region was under British occupation and rule. A functioning government under the Articles of Confederation did not come along until 1781, and our present constitution did not happen until 1789. God did a lot more planning and preparation than the separatist colonials, and the birth of the King was orchestrated as a major event. Compared to holidays like the 4th of July, Presidents’ Day (formerly Washington and Lincoln’s birthdays, now lumped together on a Monday), Memorial Day, Veterans’ Day, and Martin Luther King Day, all of which are celebrated on semi-accurate dates, Christmas is bigger, and the date we have chosen works as well as any other.

And, in keeping with God’s habit of using ancient events as illustrations so we can get the point, which is largely the reason for the collection of historical stories in the Old Testament, the birth of Jesus reminds us of how God feels about our spiritual birth. We start out as powerless and helpless infants in Christ, but we are important to God nonetheless. Many times people say at a baptism that the angels are rejoicing. That is a reference to the scene with the shepherds. As new-born babes, we long for the pure milk of the Word. We grow up into the fullness of the stature of Jesus, at which time we are fully ambassadors for Christ, those who seek and save that which was lost. But before we can speak one word, like an infant, we are worthy, in God’s eyes, of a big beginning. Christmas celebrates the birth of the Savior, and it reminds us of our own spiritual re-birth and the great mission that lies ahead for us on this earth until we, too, become living sacrifices.

The second reason that Christmas is important is that it is about an infant, not a powerful monarch or a charismatic figurehead. God took a tremendous risk by using this method. Certainly, at least once God specifically moved Jesus out of harm’s way – the example being when God told Joseph to get out of Bethlehem and hide out in Egypt to avoid Herod’s murderous plan. We don’t know how many times God had to do something like that to keep Jesus alive for the thirty-something years before His public ministry. God had to deal with infant mortality, which was very high in those days before modern health care. And, as Hebrews says, Jesus was tempted in all points just as we are. I don’t think that was limited to one event in the Wilderness. Jesus was tempted just as we are from the time He was old enough to form coherent thought and make choices. By announcing Jesus’ birth in such a big way, God set Himself up for risk. If God just manipulated every situation to remove the opportunity for making bad choices, then Jesus was never tempted and the Scriptures are wrong to make the claim that Jesus was tempted. God, by the fanfare He chose to bring Jesus into the world, made protecting Jesus just that much more difficult. He had to let Jesus make His own decisions growing up.

Christmas makes Jesus real. God could have skipped this whole section of Jesus’ life. Jesus could have remained anonymous until He was an adult, then burst onto the scene with miracles and great speeches. That would have worked. But God chose to have Jesus grow up in full public view, with relatives talking about his unusual beginning at every family event, with relatives and friends of those who heard from the shepherds and the prophets talking about this great announcement years ago.

God realized no direct benefit by choosing this method. The growing-up years of Jesus, except for one small scene, were not recorded. But the anticipation by those around Jesus was still there. I think that God was illustrating something for us. God takes a great risk on us, too. Sadly, the success rate among those who are born again is not 100%. Some people have convoluted arguments that essentially deny that one can still make choices after becoming a Christian. But if that were true, then temptation would have no meaning. If we cannot choose to commit spiritual suicide, then we no longer have choice, and God is deceiving us by letting us think we do.

But how can we have hope of success, of pleasing God, of being acceptable, if we might still choose unbelief? We can look at Christmas. God turned an infant loose in the world. All the tools necessary for Him to save the world were in place, but He had to choose them. He did. He was successful on the first try.

We are born again just as helpless as Jesus on the day He was born, maybe even worse since we generally are broken when we come to faith. But, all the tools are there. Like Jesus' escape from Bethlehem to Egypt, it appears that God limits the power of evil to give us a fighting chance (as Revelation says, Satan can deceive the nations no longer). And, He promised that we would not face a temptation that we are not able to bear, and further that He will see to it that the way of escape is available. The opportunity for us to be conformed to His image, to be transformed into His glory, is promised in many places. God brought an infant who then had to grow up in a sinful world in order to reach an age when He could bring Good News to all the people. Christmas reminds us that the same is true of our reborn spirits. We can grow up in this sin-filled world and become those who bring Good News to that which is lost. All the tools are there and the power of overwhelming evil is in chains in the abyss. God did not need to take that risk with us. He could have transformed us as we arose from the water. But that is not overcoming, that is being spoiled. God would be re-manufacturing us without our consent, like if He had brought Jesus as a maintenance-free adult robot to parrot pre-recorded messages. Christmas reminds us of the extreme risk God was – and is – willing to take to bring us home.

A third reason that Christmas is important is that Mary and Joseph were poor. In every culture in every century, wealth and power open doors. When people on the top of the heap speak, those lower down the socio-economic scale listen. Jesus did not need to be born into royalty to have this advantage. God could have picked a wealthy but righteous landowner – a prosperous farmer. Jesus could have been born into the family of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They had a modest fishing business with enough cash flow to be significant. And with either of those beginnings, Jesus' illustrations about farming and fishing would have worked just as well if not better. Jesus didn't tell any carpentry parables.

Those with a little more money tend to be able to afford better education for their kids. As an extreme contrast, think about Alexander the Great. Aristotle was his personal tutor. Jesus did not get that kind of advantage. Further, Jesus grew up in a small town, not a major city. So, educational opportunities were limited. Due to the huge expense of scrolls of the Scriptures, small town synagogues probably did not have a complete set. Even if they did, access to the only copies would be carefully regulated. It was not like Jesus could sit in the kitchen and do His Scripture homework.

Christmas is about the celebration of the ordinary. Jesus' poor beginning reaches out to the majority, not the leadership. We need no social advantage to succeed before God. God lived through growing up poor. He identifies with the "have-nots." He is King of the World, but had no financial success. He changed the course of history without a budget.

How many churches decide on their mission budget based on cash flow? To most, the Good News is spread by disposable income. Christmas reminds us that the Good News is carried by people, not programs. Even as spiritual infants, we, too, can grow up to be the savior of the ordinary. Whether we come from low economic status or live in a spiritual wasteland, God makes great things happen from lowly beginnings.

And a fourth reason that Christmas is important, God chose to start Jesus out in a difficult family situation. We have romanticized the whole manger thing. Why was Jesus born in a stable? Most people think no further than “because there was no room for them at the inn.” Keep going down that track and ask the next question. Why was Joseph trying to get a room at the inn? He travelled a long way with a late-term pregnant wife and he went to Motel Six? Where was he going? Bethlehem. Why? Because everyone had to go to the town of his extended family in order to be taxed. They didn’t have Social Security numbers. The only way the Romans knew to tax everyone was to use the family genealogy book. Joseph was in the Bethlehem book because he was of the family of David. Many of his relatives lived there; he was related to almost everyone in that town. Jewish culture dictated that you take not just family into your home, but even strangers. That’s why the motel business did not take off in Israel. The inns were for foreign travelers from cultures other than Jewish who were not accustomed to being taken home. Joseph went to the inn. Out of the many relatives he had in Bethlehem, none of them invited him to stay in their homes – or even their barns. The thing about Mary being pregnant before the wedding apparently had gotten out. Certainly, many extended family members would be descending on the residents of Bethlehem. Surely, space was at a premium. But, obviously, a relative giving birth should have moved Mary and Joseph up the priority list.

Christmas reminds us that God is with us even in difficult situations that are totally misunderstood by observers. In fact, we probably should expect similar treatment.

Do you suppose that either Mary or Joseph said anything about how this baby came about? God told Elizabeth, and she prophesied. People heard it. But, how would you react if your cousin said that their out-of-wedlock baby was by the Holy Spirit. The out-of-wedlock part they could understand. It happens. But to lay the blame on the Holy Spirit is over the top.

When we start out as reborn spirits, how we came to be born again looks a little odd to those around us. It’s outside the normal way things are done. Conventional church methods for becoming a Christian tend to leave out the miraculous promises of receiving the indwelling Spirit when you believe. It has become more of a membership thing, which is unfortunate. Miraculous changes are supposed to be seen almost immediately. I say “almost” because the average person generally is not told very much before demands start being made. A lot of people get scared off because they only see authority figures giving orders rather than the promise of the indwelling Spirit which is our tool belt for major character renovation. That is not to say that a difficult beginning is required. I feel safe in assuming that the vast majority of the early Christians were born again without looking too unconventional, except for following this poor itinerant teacher whom the government had executed for sedition. But Christmas reminds us that our rebirth happens sometimes in socially inept ways. Sometimes social outcasts see the light, and that’s a good thing. Sometimes really nice people see the light, and become radically nicer.

On top of the embarrassing beginning, Joseph finally settled his new family in Nazareth. That was not his family zone. Joseph had to be a tradesman because he was not anywhere near his ancestral farmland. And he was never going to get any farmland because of the inheritance rules. He would always be a hand-to-mouth kind of provider. Since, at the beginning of the story, Joseph started out in Nazareth, he may or may not have had other family there, but,

certainly, not many. His extended family was down south. He was an outsider to at least the vast majority in Nazareth.

Christmas should remind us that God appeals to the lonely, the disenfranchised, the outcast, the downtrodden. You can find conflicting opinions about whether depression and suicide rates go up or down during December. But I think we can all agree that the opportunity for being disappointed is greater. We want the family to get together during Christmas. Sometimes, for reasons ranging from distance to scheduling conflicts, the much anticipated and desired family time doesn't happen. That is disappointing. People want their family time to be joyous. Sometimes there is a family member who just spoils it for everyone. That is disappointing. People rain on my parade with bad attitudes and their own frustrations, and while that is no different than any other time of year, it is more disappointing at Christmas.

God chose a disappointing family situation into which to bring Jesus. God can relate to our disappointments. Look at all that God has done to save people from themselves, and the vast majority doesn't care. God knows disappointment; we are on the same page. Disappointment is real, but it does not need to be debilitating. God took a difficult family situation and built the Kingdom on it. We can look to Christmas as the way to overcome life's disappointments. God did. Mary and Joseph and Jesus did.

These are some of the important reasons for Christmas. We have a greater than ordinary opportunity to get people's attention in this season.

To those who are perhaps too commercially focused, we can remind them that God's international ad campaign makes commercials ranging from Macy's to Budweiser look pretty small. God had a point to make and He made it in a big way.

To those who are still babes in Christ, we can use Christmas to illustrate that Jesus started off as a baby, too, that He had to go through all the temptations and trials of growing up, but He made it by faith, by the power of God. As Peter put it, we are kept by the power of God as we grow up into His image.

To those who feel powerless and insignificant in the Kingdom, we can use Christmas to illustrate that Jesus started off poor, lived poor, and ended poor. His faith gave Him all the joy one could possibly have.

To those who are in difficult situations, difficult family, difficult backgrounds, disappointed with life, we can point out that God chose just that kind of start for Jesus. We are in good company. Difficulty and disappointment are real, but they cannot keep us from the joy that arises from the successes of faith. Our lives are worthwhile as we become transformed into His image.