

Text: [Luke 3:1-18 \(CEB\)](#)

Date: November 26, 2023

Title: “Keeping Christmas Holy”: Keeping Christmas Series, Advent 1

Theme: At Christmas, holiness has everything to do with practical actions that demonstrate our care and commitment to the world Jesus came to save.

1

Since everyone was home, we thought on Friday that we would start putting up Christmas trees

We do three, so it takes a bit of time and the more hands the better

Of course, we put on some Christmas music while we decorated

I was struck by how many Christmas songs are basically all about the “vibe” of Christmas

The sights and sounds, how it feels

“It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” is obviously one

“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” is another

Though I still have yet to meet anyone who tells ghost stories as part of their Christmas tradition

No one ever talks about some of the practicalities of the holiday

I mean, a “White Christmas” means someone’s going to be shoveling the sidewalk, right?

And no one ever writes songs about cleaning the bathrooms because people are coming over, do they?

We were at the hardware store over the weekend to pick up our trees

And I overheard a conversation between two friends that went something like this:

“I feel like all I’ve been doing is dishes for like a week”

“Tell me about it. I mean, we only had like 9 people over, and still...”

They were talking about Thanksgiving, but this is true at Christmas too

You don’t get that Christmas vibe without putting in the Christmas effort

You want cookies?

Someone’s gotta measure and mix and roll and bake and frost

And then clean-up after

2

Often, I feel like in the church we present holiness as being synonymous
with prayer and contemplation

In particular, during these high holy seasons, like Advent and Christmas –
it would be easy to take away from most of our sermons the idea that,
unless we're about deep prayer and introspection,
we're missing out on the meaning of the season

Don't get me wrong – quiet time with God is always good
But for most of us, December is a difficult time to find it
There's too much to do!

And let's be honest – there are a lot of us in the church, regardless of the
season, who find much more meaning in doing than in praying

People like me don't always do the best job of honoring that
If you're familiar with the story from Luke 10 about Martha and Mary, this
will make sense to you:

We tend to lift up the spirituality of Mary the pray-er over that of Martha the
do-er

But today I'm wondering: what if holiness at Christmastime is about
something more than gathering around the Nativity scene

To ponder this thing that *God* has done

What if holiness looks more like *us doing something* in the world?

3

John the Baptist is about the farthest thing from sentimental that I can
imagine

He does not care one bit about the vibe of your Christmas,

>>you brood of vipers!

(His words, not mine)

He is not interested in chestnuts roasting on an open fire

Or a sleigh ride together with you

He just wants to know: What are you going to do about it?

How are YOU going to live differently as a result of knowing Jesus?

John is portrayed as a return to the prophets of old

Even the way he's introduced: "In the fifteenth year of the rule of the Emperor Tiberius... God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness"

Reminds us of the way all the Old Testament prophetic books begin

And one of the most common themes of the prophets of Israel was the inability of religious words and gestures alone to save us
The prophets were often very critical of religious practices of their day – over and over again, they reminded us that
>religious ritual without righteous living means nothing to God¹

The people who come to hear John preach in the wilderness already seem acutely aware of this

When John says, "Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives," they're right there with him

They respond: "Ok, what do you want us to do?"

"Well, if you have two shirts, share with someone who has none"
When tax collectors ask, he says, "take no more than you need to"
When soldiers ask, he says, "stop harassing people and shaking them down"

For John, no one is exempt from the challenge God puts before us
To put righteous living before religious ritual

John doesn't believe in making gingerbread houses
He believes in packing baskets of food
And handing out warm hats and gloves to those who don't have them
That's what John contributes to the way we celebrate Christmas
He shows up every year to remind us that holiness is practical

Every bit as practical as making sure the dishes are done
Or the cookies are frosted
Or the sidewalk is cleared

4

This may come as a big relief to some of you
Who feel like you can't sit still long enough to contemplate much of anything

I'm not saying it isn't important to cultivate that skill
All of us need to learn to be and not just do

But keeping Christmas in a holy way has got to mean something more than
just going to church on Christmas Eve
It's got to be about the things that represent the change Christ came to
bring to the world

So shouldn't the birth of the Prince of Peace lead us to, I don't know,
practice peacemaking?
Shouldn't we try and make amends where we've experienced broken
relationships?
That's one example

Or, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus,
shouldn't remembering that his family was poor,
that lowly shepherds were the first to hear the good news of his arrival,
Lead us to ask ourselves how can we help someone whose family is
struggling this Christmas?

We call Jesus the "Light of the World"
I mean, we put so much stock in the idea that we literally pass candles out
on Christmas Eve to symbolize how the light grows
Shouldn't we try and figure out how to share hope with someone who is
hurting this December?

5

The world is not changed by the celebration of Christmas
Unless our celebrations of Christmas genuinely seek to change the world
By changing our behavior first

Keeping Christmas holy is about something more than setting aside a few
hours to worship, or a few hours to pray during Advent
It's about something more than skipping "All I Want for Christmas Is You" in
favor of "Joy to the World"

Because Christmas is more than a vibe, it's more than a feeling
It's a set of concrete actions that demonstrate what you really believe about
who Jesus is and why it matters that he's come

The world isn't changed by a sappy, sentimental celebration that's more
about curating a vibe than about the caring for the people Jesus
came to save

There's work required to celebrate every holiday and every holy day
Christmas is no different
So celebrate Christmas like John the Baptist
With practical expressions of holy living

That's how the world will know that Christ has been born once more
That's how we keep Christmas well

Amen.

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¹ You can see this, for example, in Micah 6, Amos 5, or in Isaiah 58, among other passages.