

CHRISTMAS TIME

LUKE 2:1-20

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Perhaps you've heard the song by John Anderson, entitled, "**Christmas Time**"... "Bells are ringin', jing-, jing- jinglin', Santa's on his way. Bringing toys to girls and boys with him in his sleigh. Snow is fallin', friends are callin', spreadin' Christmas cheer. It's so nice when Christmas Time comes around each year."

Or if you've watched Charlie Brown and Lucy on a Peanuts Christmas special, you've heard the theme song, "Christmas Time is here, happiness and cheer, fun for all that children call their favorite time of year."

Christmas Time, and all its festivities, is also a favorite time of my year! *This year it came a bit late...*

Christmas isn't the same in NZ. It's hard to get in the Christmas spirit with a day at the beach and shrimp on the barbie. "*Down under*" it's a summertime Christmas.

And *summertime* is not what I envision when I think of *Christmas Time*. Here's what comes to my mind...

Tinsel trees, and bright red poinsettias, and lights strung across the face of the house, and egg nog and fruit cakes, and parties with friends and family, and meals with all the fixings, and church services with festive music, and boxes wrapped with shiny bows.

And of course, I think of the true reason for the season... **the Christ in Christmas**. Without Jesus my favorite *holiday* would be nothing but a *hollow day*!

Usually, when we use the phrase "*Christmas Time*" we refer to *a season of the year* - the duration between Thanksgiving and New Year's - and all the holiday activities that get sandwiched into those five weeks.

"*Christmas Time*" is the term used for the celebration that punctuates the end of our yearly calendar.

But this AM, rather than "*Christmas Time*," I want to talk about **Christmas Time**. For over the years I've noticed that Christmas has a strange effect on time.

"*Christmas Time*" creates a time warp. It causes a wrinkle in time. It impacts our perception of time.

When I was younger it seemed that Christmas slowed time down. The days leading up to Christmas morning took forever. It couldn't come soon enough.

I'm sure you've heard the expression, "**Slow as Christmas.**" That makes perfect sense to a child who has to wait 364 long, monotonous, torturous days to once again reach that one, magical morning when dreams come true and wishes are fulfilled.

Time drags on for a kid when he's waiting for that morning when he awakes to an avalanche of toys. *Not even a tortoise with a limp is as slow as Christmas.*

But it's interesting, now that I'm an adult, with kids and even grandkids, Christmas has a different effect on time. "**Christmas Time**" speeds time up. Time flies by!

After Thanksgiving, most of us get sucked up into a mad dash. It's a sprint to the December 25th finish line.

The calendar goes into fast forward. Start decking the halls and decorating the house - purchasing the gifts, and planning the parties - and time sails. *Not even a jack rabbit on no-doz is as fast as Christmas.*

Albert Einstein didn't have to do the math to prove to me that time is relative. All he had to do was point to the Christmas season. Unlike other holidays Christmas tinkers with the 24 hour day, the 7 day week...

"Christmas Time" does strange things to time.

This morning I want to look at what happened to *time* during the Bible's account of the first Christmas... And then challenge us not to misuse time this Christmas...

The first Christmas began with **motion**...

It then slowed down with **mention**...

It came to a screeching halt with **meditation**...

Finally it regained its speed through **magnification**...

Here's a way to chart Christmas *time*... At first there's **motion** - **mention** slows us - **meditation** stops us in our tracks - finally, **magnification** gears us back up...

Here's a thought, every Christmas needs to **begin fast - slow down - stop - then start up again**. Today we'll learn a lesson in Christmas time management...

From the very first Christmas until today, **Christmas Time** has always begun with a flurry of frantic **motion**.

That's how I picture Bethlehem's streets on the night Jesus was born. Jews from all over Israel had come home to register for the census. Downtown Bethlehem was congested. The local inn had no vacancies...

People were angry. There was more pushing and shoving on that first Christmas Eve in Bethlehem than there was on Black Friday at Wal-Mart. And the later it got the more desperate for shelter people became.

Holiday cheer had yet to become part of Christmas. Everyone was looking out for number one. There were few happy campers in Bethlehem. Trust me, *the only smiling face in Bethlehem belonged to the innkeeper!*

In the 1500s there was a monastery in London called **St. Mary of Bethlehem**. Originally, it functioned as a hospital, but over time it was turned into a city-run insane asylum. At one point, city official's charged an admission price that allowed the citizens of London to come in and heckle the inmates. The asylum of St. Mary of Bethlehem became a famous tourist attraction.

Eventually, the name *St. Mary of Bethlehem* was shortened to *Bethlehem*. Later it was further abbreviated to *Bedlam*. Today, the word “*bedlam*” refers to the chaos associated with an insane asylum.

Linguistically, the words “*bedlam*” and “*Bethlehem*” are related - **as they were on that first Christmas.**

The lyrics, “*Oh, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie...*” are from a songwriter’s imagination.

Bethlehem was anything but “*still*” on the night Jesus was born. It was sheer *bedlam* that first Christmas Eve.

Of course, today, you don’t have to go to Bethlehem to experience bedlam. A trip to Wal-Mart or the local mall will prove my point. Between parties and shopping Christmas is still a swirl of motion, turmoil, and chaos.

It reminds me of the family that got a late start on putting up their Christmas decorations.

The little boy, remembering the nativity scene they went on the mantle, asked, “*Mom, when are we going to set up the activity scene.*” For many folks Christmas is more an *activity scene* than it is a *nativity scene*.

Once, two men in a beach community had the brilliant idea of going sailing a few days before Christmas - instead of mall shopping with their wives.

They were sailing along when suddenly a storm popped up on the ocean. The waves sank their boat...

As they swam to a nearby island they had to fight off hungry sharks... On the beach they dodged poisonous darts shot at them by the primitive natives...

Finally, after ducking behind a rock, and finding a little safety, one of the men says to his buddy, “Well, today didn’t turn out like we’d planned, but look on the bright side, at least we didn’t have to go Christmas shopping at the mall.” *Shipwreck or mall Christmas shopping?* What man wouldn’t pick shipwreck!

Christmas time can certainly be a stressful time...

Did you know that the average American family will spend \$801 on gifts this holiday season? And for many families that’s extra spending they can hardly afford.

You’ve heard of “*Black Friday*” and “*Cyber Monday...*” Now there’s also “**Red Tuesday**” - it’s the day when many Americans wake up further in debt.

Some people find themselves months into the New Year still trying to pay off their Christmas purchases. I’ve heard it said, “If you don’t think Christmas lasts all year long, it means you don’t have a credit card.”

It reminds me of the little boy who went to see Santa Claus. After going through his long list of gift requests, his father - wanting to teach his son to be polite - asked him, “*Now son, what do you want to say to Santa?*”

The kid turned, and shouted, “**Just charge it!**”

And in between all the buying and charging at Christmas... *we eat. We eat a lot!* Here’s another stressful statistic. Between Thanksgiving and New Years the average

American gains 5-7 pounds... *and then probably charges for the new clothes they need.*

Is it any wonder that more heart attacks occur in the months of December and January - peaking between Christmas Day and New Years - than any other time?

For most folks Christmas is a hurried and harried time. Emotional strain, anxiety, loneliness, financial pressures intensify at *Christmas time*. Did you realize that more nervous breakdowns occur around the Christmas holidays than at any other time of the year!

And even for the person who knows Jesus - and is trying to keep his priorities in order - the celebration of Christmas can still be a time full of hustle and bustle.

Notice what Luke says of the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem... verse 8, **“Now there were in the same country, shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”** This is what makes Christmas such a busy time - even for believers in Jesus - we’re trying to *keep watch over OUR flocks...*

That includes neighbors we want to befriend... co-workers we’d like to acknowledge... church friends we had hoped to help... Certainly, our spouse and children are part of our flock. There’s nothing wrong with giving gifts and tokens of love to the members of our flock.

But notice in verse 9 what happens to the night shift shepherds who are keeping watch over their flocks...

“And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.” These busy shepherds get **slowed down** by an angel’s visit, and the **mention** of a Savior.

One Christmas several years ago, my son, Mack, and I got slowed down by an angel at **Christmas Time**.

It was at the Waffle House of all places... I’ll bet you didn’t know angels visited the Waffle House? *They do!*

We’d just finished our breakfast, and were about to pay our bill, when we saw our waitress race off into the back room - *tears were streaming down her cheeks*.

When I asked her co-worker what was wrong, I heard a wonderful story... The waitress was a single mom, with 3 sons. One of her regular customers knew her situation, and had just left a \$100 tip on his \$7 bill.

His kindness made the woman cry... *and it slowed me down*. It reminded me of what Christmas is about.

Here’s what happens to time at Christmas... It begins with **motion** - but then the **mention** of the Savior - the reason for the season... slows us down...

I love the message of the angel... “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

And as if that wasn't enough to get the shepherds' attention, verse 13 says the angel was joined by "a multitude of the heavenly host... praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!'" Those who *kept watch* over their flocks, *were now watching God at work!*

They'd received a message from heaven - *the mention of a Savior...* and it took their attention off their flocks - and slowed them down - and focused them on the Father in heaven and His work among men.

And I believe, this happens every Christmas to those who have ears to hear... God has ways of visiting us and reminding us of His love and grace... that He's the Savior of the flock we care about... that He's penetrated our darkness with good tidings of great joy, and peace on earth, and good will toward men...

God's Christmas revelations - *His still small voice* - comes to us through a generous patron at the Waffle House - or the innocent comments of a child - or a word in a sermon - or a line from a Christmas carol...

But when God makes *mention* of the purpose of His coming it's time to *slow down and think it through.*

I believe God looks for ways and moments where He can slow us down and bring Christmas to our hearts.

Once, a successful businessman was speeding to work in the Christmas present he'd purchased for himself - *a new Jag*. Suddenly, a brick came out of nowhere and smashed the side panel of his sports car.

He slammed on brakes, jumped out of the car, and pounced on the kid who was the culprit. He shouted and screamed, “*What do you think you’re doing?*”

The little boy replied, “Sir, I’m sorry... but I didn’t know what else to do. I threw the brick because no one else would stop. It’s my brother, sir. He’s hurt. My brother rolled off the curb, and fell out of his wheelchair into a ditch. And I can’t lift him up by myself. Sir, will you help me get my brother back into his wheelchair?”

The businessman picked up the little boy’s crippled brother, and wiped off his wounds - then he sat him back into his wheelchair. And as the man walk back to his new car, tears started streaming down his face.

The encounter reminded him that Christmas is about the love of Jesus, and showing that love to others.

It’s interesting, the rich man never did repair his car. He left the dent in the door panel, as a reminder to himself not to go through life so fast that someone in need has to throw a brick at you to get your attention.

Christmas time needs to slow us all down.

Christmas time starts with a flurry – in the beginning there’s lots of *motion*. But then the *mention* of Jesus, and the meaning of Christmas, slows time down...

And as we get closer to the manger we’re called to actually stop - *to meditate and worship*. Managing Christmas is about *motion, mention*, then **meditation**.

In one of Bill Keane's Family Circus comic strips the children are setting up the nativity set when little Dolly holds up the baby Jesus and shouts, "Here's the star of Bethlehem." *And Jesus is the star of the show.*

Jesus is the real star of Bethlehem!

Christmas time begins with *motion* and a myriad of activities... Hopefully at some point in time the *mention* of the message - the spirit of the season - will slow us down, and make us think... that's when there comes a moment when we stop, look past it all, and worship!

Christmas time climaxes with us gazing on *the Star!*

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright kept the first heavier than air flying machine aloft for an amazing 59 seconds. The two brothers were ecstatic!

They sent a telegram with the news to their sister in Dayton, Ohio. The telegram read, "First sustained flight today 59 seconds. Hope to be home by Christmas."

The sister too was excited about their invention. She ran to the newspaper office, and handed the telegram to the editor. The next day the headline read, "Popular Local Bicycle Merchants to be Home for the Holidays."

The newspaper editor had missed the point...

Yes, the Wright boys would be home for Christmas, but the world had just been introduced to air travel.

And what happened to the editor is exactly what happens to the person who experiences the *motion* of Christmas - maybe even hears the *mention* of Christ...

But if you don't stop at the manger and **meditate** on the Star of Christmas... you completely miss the point!

And understand, the Baby in the manger, is a reason for long, and exhaustive, and thorough **meditation**...

If ever there was an event worthy to ponder, and probe, and contemplate it's this... Christmas generates thoughts so deep you'll never touch bottom...

God in swaddling clothes...

The Infinite constrained in human threads...

The voice that spoke light into existence, and caused mountains to tremble, was reduced to a coo and a cry.

Why did the Almighty make Himself vulnerable?

Why did the man-maker make Himself into a man?

Why did the King become a pauper?

Why climb down from a throne to be laid in a trough?

Why did the God who dwells in inapproachable light appear under the lampshade of humanity?

Why was omniscience set aside for innocence?

And what does God in the flesh, say about God in the world?... His desires? His heart? His plans for us?

These are the questions that fuel the imagination of everyone who comes to the manger and gazes on the Star of Bethlehem. Jesus prompts our **meditation**.

I love Mary's reaction to all that happened on that first Christmas morning... Verse 19 tells us, "**Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.**"

And let me make another observation about those who stop their activity and meditate at the manger...

In their meditation they find peace and rest.

Christmas *time* starts with **speed**... it slows down when we hear God's message and we take **heed**... then it stops us and provides the rest we **need**...

The **motion** tires us... The **mention** startles us... but the **meditation** invigorates us. We lay our tired selves in the arms of God, and rest in the safety of His strength.

Ruth Graham once penned the following... "**God rest you merry, gentlemen...**" and **in these pressured days I, too, would seek to be so blessed by Him, who still conveys His merriment, along with rest. So I would beg, on tired knees, "God rest me merry, please..."**

And God does rest us! There's merriment at the manger. There's recovery at the manger. There's food for our soul, and fresh vision for our life, at the manger.

Isn't it interesting, Jesus was laid in a stone-hewn feed trough. A manger is the place where cows and sheep come to eat and drink. It holds food and water.

And worshippers who stop at the Bethlehem manger and occupy themselves with Jesus also find food for the spirit - water for the soul. There's rest for the weary.

That first Christmas Eve was full of labor...

Joseph labored to get a pregnant Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The manger was his rest stop.

Mary labored in childbirth. When she laid the Baby in the manger she finally rested from her labor pains...

The shepherds spent the day laboring, or keeping watch over their flocks... When they arrived at the manger they also found it to be a place of rest...

And let me guarantee you, when you come to the Christmas manger, and meditate on what all it means... you too will find God's peace and rest.

As the angel promised, *"Peace on earth... goodwill toward men."* The meaning of Christmas breeds peace for the troubled. *God has come... Hope has come...*

In fact, when this Baby gets old enough to talk, He invites us, in Matthew 11:28-30, *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Despite the bedlam at Christmas the holiday eventually winds down. Late on Christmas Eve, and then on Christmas Day... the stores close, restaurants lock their doors, businesses and offices take a break...

Our hectic lives slow down and time stops. There's a point every Christmas when time seems suspended...

Maybe it's at midnight on Christmas Eve, after you've assembled the toys - or perhaps late Christmas afternoon after the presents have all been opened and the kids are occupied with their new gifts... *but there's always a point where life stops and it gets very quiet.*

This year, when that moment arrives *don't look for something else to do!* God wants your heart to pay a visit to the manger, and marvel again at the Baby.

Take time to rest from your labors, and **meditate** on what God has done in Christ - *and worship Jesus!*

We're not told how long the shepherds stopped at the manger... Was it minutes, or hours - or all night, or even a day or so? We can only speculate... **But eventually the shepherds moved on.... Life goes on...**

Sheep have needs, and shepherds are called *to watch their flocks*, as well as visit the King's manger.

The time finally came for the shepherds to resume their sheep duties, and their daily responsibilities.

Eventually, even Joseph and Mary moved out of the stable, and left behind the manger... Despite the wonder of that night, the sun came up the next morning, and the next, and the next... *Life goes on...*

It's ironic, even if your baby is the Son of God, and gets announced by angels... once He's born there's still diapers to change, and feedings to administer.

Even the Son of God cried when He was hungry, and got diaper rash if He wasn't regularly changed.

For Joseph and Mary, Christmas was this amazing blend of the *miraculous and supernatural* - butted right up against the *mundane and ordinary and everyday*...

And that's the way **Christmas Time**, and the *Christian life*, plays out for us all! The worship leader who sings with angels and ushers us into the heavenlies has to wake up tomorrow, and fight the traffic to get to work.

I'm reminded of this every Sunday. Garbage pick up on my street is Monday morning. So after standing for God, filled with the Spirit, proclaiming biblical truth, acting as God's mouthpiece Sunday AM and night - *my last act of the day is to roll the garbage to the street*.

This is what happened that first Christmas. Everyone at the manger - who was privy to a miracle - eventually had to leave and return to their regular responsibilities.

But no one who visited that manger was ever the same... The Baby in the manger left a permanent mark on all those who had come to mediated on Him.

I imagine the shepherds remained shepherds, but they were shepherds with a new mission - not only did they keep sheep, they proclaimed the divine news.

Realize, the test to see if you've truly been in the Christmas spirit... *is the lingering aftertaste*. Do the Christmas truths carry on in your heart through the winter, spring, summer, and fall. *Or do you just forget...*

Mary could never, ever forget. Again, verse 19, “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

But the shepherds too were never the same. Verse 20, “The shepherds returned, glorifying, and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen...”

Christmas time slowed down with the mention of what God was up to... it came to a screeching halt, a suspended moment of meditation... but it's closing act was an eruption of praise, witness, and **magnification**.

You come to the manger to ponder, but you leave *Christmas Time* to praise and proclaim the King!

Here's how *Christmas Time* should progress...

At first, the hands on the clock spin like a pinwheel in the breeze... but then those hands slow down with the mention of Jesus and the meaning of the season.

Finally the hands of time stop as we meditate and worship the Incarnate King Jesus... but eventually you hear the tick-tock, tick-tock of responsibility again...

You're needed to tighten a screw on the new bike...

Or the family is hungry and clamors for food...

Responsibility calls and you leave the manger for the kitchen, or the tool shed, or work the next day... but if you've really seen the Star you're never the same!

If we managed our *Christmas time* well, we'll leave the season rested, assured, excited, and renewed...

We'll return to our responsibilities - but now with a fresh love, and a new hope, and a stronger faith.

You can't truly leave the Christmas manger without praising God for all the things you've heard and seen!

Christmas *time*... there's *motion*, there's *mention*, there's *meditation*, and ultimately there's *magnification*.

Again, in the words of John Anderson's Christmas carol... "It's so nice when Christmas Time comes around each year." And my prayer for us all this *Christmas time*, is that we'll make the most of our *time*.