

Skipping Christmas December 2, 2007

Well, it's that time of year again. While the stores have had Christmas merchandise in them for two or three months already, this is the time we officially recognize the start of the season leading up to Christmas. And it's a time of craziness and increased hassle.

Just try traveling during the holidays. Airports are crowded beyond reason; kids are crying; planes are late; weather can be a challenge. It's just no fun. In fact, I heard someone in the airport mention that there was mistletoe hanging over the check-in counter of a certain airline. When the traveler asked what the mistletoe was doing in such a strange place, the agent said, "it's there so you can kiss your bags good-bye." With the kind of busyness that's typical of the airlines, it's probable that we might never see those bags again, I guess.

A few years ago, John Grisham wrote a rather atypical novel for him—*Skipping Christmas*. It was actually made into a movie with a title that's a bit more palatable—*Christmas With the Kranks*. I realize that it may sound a bit harsh and unrealistic to suggest that skipping Christmas is an option, but I have to be honest with you and say that there are times when I wish I could do just that! Maybe you do, too.

It seems as though we touch on this topic every year when it comes to the Christmas season, but there's a reason. Every year, we hear people complaining about the craziness of the season, and all the stressors that feel so overwhelming. There's the tree to buy and the house to decorate. There's shopping to do in crowded malls after fighting interminable traffic to get there! Then the wrapping follows, and oh, we can't forget the food preparation, and the parties to host. This list goes on and on.

You may have noticed that I left off my list the item that reads "sending Christmas cards." Years ago, I quit sending them—mostly because it took so much time to write notes on the cards to try to stay caught up with folks. I just

didn't have time, and it seemed to be one of the things that we could discard without major consequences.

However, I have to tell you that I experience a twinge of guilt with every card I receive. Every time I think, "How is it they can get their cards out, and I can't?" A card is really a simple thing that means a lot, because it tells someone we care and think about them, and yet I don't do it.

I guess part of the problem with this season is that it is tinged with events of the past that sometimes dampen the joy of the season. My mom and Mike's dad both died just a few days after Christmas, and there's always some point in the course of the holidays when things become a little more somber as we remember how that particular Christmas was, and how they are no longer here with us.

I'm well aware that we aren't the only ones who've gone through that kind of thing, and some of us may be experiencing it for the very first time this year. A relationship has fallen apart, and we're not so sure what to do this year. Someone we love has died, and we're having a hard time finding a shred of joy in life. We feel lonely and isolated, seeing only an empty chair at the table, no gifts under the tree—it all seems so different. How do we keep from comparing today with how it was "then?" How do we get through this time when everyone else seems to be so happy and lighthearted?

I suspect that some of us would like to skip Christmas because we're just down in the dumps. I realize that this information is not always very helpful to know, but the fact is that there is actually a phenomenon referred to as the "holiday blues." There are often various causes for the blues—someone we love is in Iraq; we're worried about money; our job status seems precarious, we're exhausted from caring for an elderly parent.

Often one of the factors, believe it or not, has to do our families. John Stutesman, a clinical psychologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago has said, "**Holidays tend to be about family reunion. They bring up Norman Rockwell images of families drinking eggnog by the fire, singing Christmas Carols.**" In reality, he explains,

family gatherings create stress due to feelings of obligation, varying expectations, and the fear of being criticized no matter what we do. Sometimes our families are enough to cause us to be “blue!” And that’s not Colts blue!

We could probably go on and on naming the many reasons that skipping Christmas wouldn’t be such a bad idea, but if that really isn’t an option, then what? What can transform our dread of the upcoming holidays into something more positive?

I think it begins with being honest with ourselves, and acknowledging that yes, this year is different for whatever reason. Nonetheless, it’s in our hands what that “different” is going to be. If we decide it’s going to be miserable, then the likelihood is that it will be miserable. However, if we decide we don’t want it to be a terrible experience, odds are we’ll find a way to make sure that it isn’t. It has to do with our mindset, our attitude, our perspective.

Then I think it’s important to sort out what’s really important and vital for the holidays, and be willing to drop anything that doesn’t make the list. When we’re in a different place in life, we can sometimes see much more clearly that baking dozens and dozens of cookies isn’t really necessary when we’re the only ones here to eat them—or maybe it is! Whatever the call, it’s a good use of some of our time sorting through all the things we have typically done in the past, and determining what ones really aren’t so meaningful this year. Then we can mark them off, and focus on the things that really matter to us and make a difference for others.

When our inclination is to cancel Christmas, that’s probably a sign that we need to get outside ourselves and focus on anyone we encounter us who could use a helping hand, even in the smallest of ways. For instance, what would it be like if we decided that this Christmas season, we were going to give out three compliments each day? Maybe we can offer to help some of our charitable recipients by donating a suit for a woman who’s searching for a job, or taking some of our cast-off furniture to someone who’s sleeping on the floor. Maybe we know

someone who’s having a tough time, and we have a few minutes to stop by and visit. How about popping some popcorn for the neighbors, and get acquainted with those we don’t know?

It’s important to be aware that every year, there are some of us who would like to skip Christmas, but the reality is that, when we feel that way, that’s precisely the time we need Christmas the most. At some point in time, I clipped out a column that Lori Borgman wrote that made that very point. I’m not sure I could say it any better than she did, so I’ll just share the words she wrote:

“Think twice before you cancel Christmas. That baby in the manger didn’t come to make sure that retailers had a robust season at the cash register. Nor did he come to put frost on our windows and pink in our cheeks. Christ didn’t come to create a picture perfect Currier and Ives memory.

“Christ came for three-dimensional people—people with thin skin, blind spots and pent-up anger. He came for people who hurt and suffer and struggle. He came for people who get depressed at holiday time. He came for those who have everything, but feel empty inside and are scared to admit it. He came for human beings who mangle relationships and turn priorities upside down.”

And then Lori Bergman continued by saying that God sent Jesus to offer a helping hand. And she concluded with these words: Some say when people open their hearts to Christmas, the son of God works wonders. He eases the pain and suffering. Some say he’s been known to yank the knot right out of a chain. Others say he has gently dried tears, softened hearts and sat beside them in the dark. Still others claim, when they have opened their hearts, that he has showered them with priceless gifts—treasures like faith, hope and love.”

Having thought about her words has caused me to rethink my earlier desire to skip Christmas. I don’t think I want to do that after all. What about you?

Closing:

Our Bible passage this morning comes in two versions—Today’s English Version and The Message. This is the

moment when the angel tells the shepherds watching their flocks in the fields that God's love has come to be real on this earth. I'll just share what The Message says: **"Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide."**

That's the good news of Christmas. We don't need to be afraid of what is to come, because God's love will ease the pain, and dry our tears, soften our hearts, and showed us with faith, hope and love. That's good reason not to skip Christmas.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.