

Seeing Christ in Christmas Traditions

Nothing but wonderful. That's what the Christmas season is.

Wonderful smells from homey kitchens, fresh-cut evergreens and fragrant candles. Wonderful sounds from Christmas carols and seasonal classics such as Handel's "Messiah." Wonderful sights in almost every home and store.

It is particularly wonderful for children. Their faces glow as they take in the different smells, sights and sounds. They ooh and aah at every special trapping, from the decorated trees to outdoor lights, and wonder what Santa will bring them this Christmas.

When I was a child, I was always so excited at this time of year. I could hardly wait to see what surprise Santa had left for me. I associated all the fun of Christmas with the jolly round man in the red suit. This myth was much more enticing than the real Christmas story with its drab colors and gruesome details about Herod sending Roman soldiers to murder all the babies in an attempt to kill Jesus.

Years later, as a teacher in a Christian school, I pondered my childhood memories and thought about how I could relay the wonder, joy and beauty of Christ to the children. I wanted them to experience the Father's indescribable love toward them. I wanted them to know Jesus is the reason for the season and we celebrate because He came to give Himself for us.

However, I knew I would not be able to keep my students from being influenced by the culture, decorating trees and visiting Santa at the mall. So I asked the Lord how I could help them learn to focus on Him in spite of the worldly emphasis.

In response, the Holy Spirit showed me how to use the very

things that sometimes turn people away from Him as a means of pointing them to Him. When we decorated our classroom, He gave me insights about Jesus related to every item we used.

“Children,” I said. “Everything about Christmas points to Jesus.” Then I shared with them what God had taught me.

I told them the word “Christmas” means “a celebration of Christ.” The Christmas tree is shaped like a triangle with its top pointing toward heaven—where Jesus came from and where we will go someday to be with Him. The tree’s shape also speaks of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The lights on the trees and in the neighborhood bring to mind that Jesus is the light of the world. The candles show us that we should be a light to others just as He is the light.

The round shapes of the ornaments and wreaths remind us that God is eternal, with no beginning and no end. The holly wreaths with their prickly leaves are reminiscent of the crown of thorns once placed on Jesus’ head.

The colors of Christmas are red (the blood of Jesus) and green (everlasting life). The glistening snow, pure and white, is a symbol that “though [our] sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow (Is. 1:16b).

The angels are as real today as they were on that first Christmas when they visited the shepherds. Christmas carols enable us to join the choirs of heaven in adoration of Him who is worthy to be praised. Candy canes look like the shepherd’s staff and remind us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The dove stands not only for peace, which God extended to the earth through the sacrifice of His Son, but also for the Holy Spirit, who is our friend, counselor and teacher.

When we taste appetizing holiday foods, we can rejoice in the goodness of the Lord: “O, taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). When we smell sweet fragrances, we can reflect on

the wonderful aroma of His presence—and the fragrance of Christ that we carry in the world (see 2 Cor. 2:14-15).

Yes, we see the secularism—even paganism—in this season. We can shun it and say, “Bah, humbug.” Or we can choose to turn the symbols of the world around and see in them a reflection of the glory of God.

As my students and I learned, looking at them as an expression of His goodness helps to make the season a truly wonderful celebration—not of Santa and gifts, but of Him whose “name shall be called Wonderful” (Is. 9:6).

Prayer Power for the Week of December 11, 2016

This week, ask God to reveal Himself in ways you had not noticed before. Thank Him when He does and rejoice in everything that reflects Him and the wonderful, indescribable gift of His Son. Take time to enjoy His presence and pray for opportunities to share His love with others. Remember those who have lost loved ones through war, crime or natural disasters as well as those who have lost homes and livelihood. Remember Israel and those traveling to the Holy Land during this season. Pray for our president and those in authority with him, as well as our new president-elect as he chooses his Cabinet. Ask God for protection and wisdom for them both as they make decisions affecting the nation and the world (2 Cor. 2:14-15; Is. 9:6; Ps. 34:8). {eo}