

Maximizing Christmas

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Preacher: Nathan Rambeck

[0 : 0 0] We're going to start by having kids come up to the front and we're going to talk a little bit about Christmas.

All right, tell you what, why don't we sit down? Oh, all right. Is anybody excited about Christmas? A few of you? Are you excited about Christmas?

Yeah, I see some nods. All right. So what kinds of things do we do for Christmas usually? Open presents. Okay, that's a big one. Anything else?

Do we sing songs ever? What kind of songs do you call Christmas songs? Jingle bells, Christmas carols. Okay, we sang some today, didn't we?

Yeah. But what is Christmas really about? Is it about the presents? Is that what Christmas is about? What is Christmas? What are we celebrating with Christmas? Jesus.

[1 : 1 2] And Christmas is the day that Jesus was born. We're celebrating when he was born. Now there are things that we do, kind of traditions, and every country has different traditions that they have for Christmas.

But some of the ones that you talked about that we do for Christmas, we have giving of gifts. We have presents. Where do you put the presents usually?

Under the tree. Under the tree. And sometimes in the stockings too. Yeah. And then what do we usually put on the Christmas tree? Decorations.

Are there other things? Ornaments. A star. Okay. And then things that shine. What do you call those?

Lights. Lights. Christmas lights. So I've got something special for us today. Do you guys like presents? Okay. There's a little present right over there. Can somebody go grab that one?

[2 : 1 2] The red one? Okay. All right.

Let's check this out. Do you think there's anything inside? Probably. It's got jingle bells on it. All right. Let's see. All right.

What's in here? The first thing we have is, what is it? A Christmas tree. Now this is a little one, right?

There's one behind us that's a lot bigger. But a Christmas tree. So the first thing we'll talk about is just the present itself, right? This is a gift. A lot of times they're wrapped in wrapping paper.

But what do you think Christmas presents represent about Christmas? Christmas. That we got a gift when Jesus came, right? And what was the gift?

[3 : 1 3] It was Jesus, right? Jesus was the gift given to us. And so we open up Christmas presents, and those symbolize, they represent the gift that God gave us, which was Jesus.

And what he did for us. And then we have these Christmas trees. What color is a Christmas tree? Usually. It's usually green. This one's got a little like snow in it or something like that.

But the Christmas trees are green. And they're the kind of trees that are green all year round. We call them evergreen trees. And many trees, right?

What happens in the fall to most trees? The leaves fall off. They die. And they just kind of look dead, right? Even though they're still alive, but they look like they're dead.

But evergreen trees, they look alive all year round. And so the Christmas tree represents that God gave us the gift of eternal life.

[4 : 1 0] That we, if we trust in Jesus, we can live forever. We won't die like most of the trees. But just like the evergreen tree is alive all year round, so we can have eternal life too.

Then there's the thing that we put on the Christmas tree. And I'm going to push a button. You ready? Two, three. What are those? Lights. Do you guys like lights? I love.

All over the town where we live, and lots of towns everywhere, they're lit up with Christmas lights. And do you know that one of the things that Jesus said about himself was that he is like a light. He said, I am the light of the world. He also said he's the resurrection and the life. That's the verse that we were memorizing.

But the world can be a dark place sometimes, right? With sadness and sin and bad things that happen. But Jesus said, I am a light that shines in the darkness.

[5 : 14] And if we trust in him, he can be the light in our life. We've got a few more things. The next one here is, what's that?

A star. Where do we usually put stars? On top of the tree, right? But is there a star related to the story of Jesus? Can you tell me what happened?

Yeah, the wise men, they followed the star, and it took them to Bethlehem where Jesus was born. And they got to see Jesus when he was a baby.

And then the last thing that I have is this. What is that? A candy cane. A candy cane. Good job. And candy cane, do you guys like candy?

Okay, yeah, I do too. Candy cane is a special candy just for Christmas. And did you know that this was back a long time ago? In the country of Germany, they used to have candy.

[6 : 16] And it was just a stick. It wasn't like this. It wasn't curved. It was just a stick. And it was a popular candy for kids. Well, back in Germany, they had these long services for Christmas.

You know how kids get bored sometimes? Well, there was a man. He had this great idea. So he took one of these candy sticks. It was just straight. And he said, I'm going to bend the end into the shape of a cane.

And it will be like the shepherd's staff from the story of Jesus. Remember the shepherds in the story of Jesus? And then I'll give them to the kids. And it will help them pay attention during the church service.

Do you ever have trouble paying attention during church services? Yeah, me too. Well, I wanted to read you all a story. Is that okay? You guys like stories?

This one, this story is called The Legend of the Candy Cane. Now, this is not a true story. It's a made-up story. But it's a fun one anyway.

[7 : 17] That tells, that points to how the candy cane can symbolize the things that God did for us. So here's how the story goes. One dreary evening in the depths of November, a stranger rode into town.

He stopped his horse in front of a lonely storefront. The windows were boarded shut and the door was locked fast. But the man looked at it, smiled, and said, it will do.

There's pictures, by the way. All through the gray short days and the long dark nights of November, the man worked. The townspeople could hear the faint pam, pam, pam of his hammer and the snish, snish, snish of his saw.

They could smell the sweet, clean scent of new lumber and the deep, oily smell of new paint. But no one knew who the man was or what he was doing. There he is, working inside that storefront.

The mayor hoped he was a doctor to heal his illness. The young wives hoped he was a tailor to make beautiful dresses. The farmers hoped he was a trader to exchange their grain for goods.

[8 : 24] But the children had the strongest, deepest wish of all, a wish they did not tell their parents. A deep, quiet, secret wish that none of them said out loud.

No one spoke to the man. No one asked if he needed help. They just waited and watched and wondered and wished. There's the people waiting.

But one small girl watched and wondered, waited and wished longer than she could stand. And one snowy day, she knocked at the stranger's door. Hello, she said.

My name is Lucy. Do you need some help? The man smiled warmly and he nodded. Then he opened the door and Lucy stepped inside. A long counter ran down the side of the room.

Bare shells filled the opposite walls. In the back were dozens and dozens of barrels and crates. Could you help me unpack? The man asked. There's Lucy. Lucy's heart sank at the sight of all the boxes.

[9 : 26] What if they were only barrels of nails and bags of flour? But she removed her dripping boots and hung her coat on a peg. On stocking feet, she crossed the rough wooden floor and knelt beside a crate.

Please open it, the man urged. Slowly, Lucy put her hand into the box and pulled out an object wrapped in tissue. Round and heavy, it almost slipped through her fingers. Lucy trembled a little as she unwrapped it. It was a glass jar. Lucy gave the man a puzzled look. Go on, his nod said.

So she unpacked another glass jar and another and another until she was completely surrounded by jars of all shapes and sizes, tall and thin, round and squat, jars with lids and jars without. Now, the man said, for something to put inside. And he pulled over a huge crate stamped with a strange big word.

[10 : 28] What do you think's inside the box? As Lucy unpacked, her eyes lit up. It was candy. Her favorite candy, gumdrops.

Try some, the man said. She popped one in her mouth. Now she could hardly unwrap fast enough. Peppermint sticks, taffy, lollipops, chewing gum. Anybody like chewing gum? Wide-eyed, she looked at the man. We wished, Lucy said. Yes, I know, said the man, and here it is. Welcome to Sonneman's Candy Store. I am John Sonneman.

Look at all that candy. Soon, the small store was filled with candies gleaming in their glass jars. Raspberry suckers and tiny, tiny lemon drops. Brightly colored jawbreakers and long tangles of licorice. Pink and white peppermints for church. And butterscotch balls for company. Then in the very last package, in the very last crate, was a candy Lucy had never seen before.

[11 : 29] A red and white striped candy stick with a crook on the end. What is this? Lucy asked. This, Mr. Sonneman explained, is a candy cane.

It's a very special Christmas candy. Why, Lucy asked. Well, tell me, Mr. Sonneman said. What letter does it look like? A J.

A J. A J. J, she said. Yes, Mr. Sonneman smiled. J for Jesus, who was born on Christmas Day. Now turn it over. What does it remind you of? Lucy turned the candy in her hand. She peered down intently. I know, she said finally. It looks like a shepherd's staff.

Who were the first to find out about Jesus' birth, Mr. Sonneman asked. Shepherds in the field, Lucy answered, watching over their flocks by night. There's pictures of the shepherds.

[12 : 36] But Mr. Sonneman, what are the stripes for, Lucy asked. The man's eyes grew sad. The prophet Isaiah said that by his stripes, we are healed.

Before he died on the cross, Jesus was whipped. He bled terribly. The red reminds us of his suffering and his blood. But then, Mr. Sonneman continued, the candy is white as well.

When we give our lives to Jesus, his blood washes away our sins, making us white and pure as snow. That, he said, is the story of the candy cane.

Is it a secret? Lucy asked. Mr. Sonneman looked at her for a long moment. It's a story that needs to be told, he said. Will you help me share it?

There's a picture of Jesus. It was now the depths of December. The town was whipped round by blizzard winds. For days, the sun hid itself.

[13 : 42] But every morning, Mr. Sonneman and Lucy ventured out. They wore heavy woolen coats and bright hand-knit scarves. And in their stiff, mittened fingers, they each held a bag.

They went to every house in town. They traveled to every farm in the country. They knocked on every door in every home. They told the story. They left a small gift. And they gave an invitation. There they go. Looks cold, doesn't it? In the afternoon of Christmas Eve, the sun finally broke through the clouds.

And Sonneman's candy store finally or officially opened. The mayor came feeling better than he'd felt in days. The young wives came dressed in beautiful smiles. The farmers came eager to trade grain for Christmas gifts.

The children ran in dizzy circles. Yes, their wish had come true. Yes, they had come to share in the opening of the candy store. But they shared something more.

[14 : 41] Something bigger. Something better. On that Christmas Eve, they shared the story of the candy cane. They told of the miracle of Christ's birth, the misery of his death, and the mercy of his love.

Did you like that story? That's the story of the candy cane. Now, it's just a made-up story. But we can tell that story, too, to people who don't know about Jesus.

And we can use the candy cane to help do that. Isn't that neat? Would you guys like a candy cane? Okay, here you go. These candy canes break easily.

I'll try to find one that's not broken. There you go. All right, Adam, you get a candy cane, too. All right, well, thanks for joining me up here.

Oh, wait, I forgot. Do you all want a star as well? A Christmas star? There you go. There you go, buddy.

[15 : 50] You get one, too. All right, thanks for joining me. You guys can go back to your seats. All right. Got some candy canes.

Now the kids can get all sugared up. you know Christmas is a favorite holiday for many of us and not just us not even just Christians right it's actually a favorite holiday for many who are not even believers I mean what's not to like right you have the beautiful decorations the lights the great food the great Christmas music the Christmas carols the presents and then of course the candy lots of candy during Christmas but like I said Christmas is this holiday in fact I believe it's the most celebrated holiday in the whole world of all the holidays that are out there and there are many you know we have all the holidays in our country but then every other country has their own holidays but Christmas is the one that's celebrated by the most people in all the world in fact I read that there are 160 countries in the world that celebrate Christmas 160 countries that celebrate Christmas as an official public holiday and there are even more that celebrate it unofficially just a few different ways that people celebrate Christmas in other parts of the world we have our Christmas traditions we talked about them here this morning with presents and trees and Christmas carols a few of the countries I've been to or even lived in I lived in Germany for a while they have a fun Christmas tradition they call the Weihnachtsmarkt it's the Christmas market and it's a great Christmas market where you can sell all kinds of gifts and decorations they have all kinds of great foods that you can buy and eat and actually in Germany Germany is the originator of the Christmas tree that we all enjoy one of the interesting things about Germany is that they actually start their Christmas season on Christmas Eve when do we start ours?

the day after Thanksgiving right? from Thanksgiving until Christmas and then usually the day after Christmas or maybe we wait till the new year we take down all the decorations well in Germany they don't get started until Christmas Eve that's when they put up their Christmas tree and also start opening their gifts but they typically recognize those famous 12 days of Christmas and will celebrate all the way into the new year and sometimes even well into January New Zealand is another country that has some different ways that they celebrate instead of having like the turkey and ham and the indoor feast they have a feast outside on the beach they barbecue seafood typically as you may know it's in the southern part of the hemisphere southern part of the world and so it's warm weather down there during Christmas they also have a day I remember when I went 20 years ago to New Zealand they talked about Boxing Day and I said well what in the world is that?

Boxing Day? it sounds like you have people you know try to punch each other out but Boxing Day is actually about gifts and it has it's a tradition that goes way way back to when gifts were given for the poor and the collection boxes would be opened up unboxed on the day after Christmas I believe and so that's how they do their gifts on the day after Christmas in New Zealand so the day after Christmas is called Boxing Day in the Philippines which is another country I've lived in they have something called the Giant Lantern Festival and they'll have all these lanterns that they will make all kinds of beautiful shapes and sizes throughout the Christmas season and they'll illuminate them all around Mexico has their own they kind of celebrate from December 16th through Christmas Eve well they'll do all kinds of it says this the communities will reenact Mary and Joseph's search for shelter in Bethlehem there will be processions that move throughout the neighborhoods stopping at homes to sing and also request lodging each night ends with a celebration including prayers, music and of course pinatas but interestingly enough even minority Christian countries countries where Christianity is not the majority have ways that they celebrate Christmas when I lived in Vietnam I was surprised when I saw Christmas trees for sale in the different markets during during December people would buy Christmas trees and decorate them I also found out that some Christian households typically Christian families Catholic families usually would put up large nativity scenes right outside their house and draw crowds of people all around in Saigon there's a huge Catholic church and they put on a big Christmas Eve mass with a large production that draws many many people including those who are not believers Japan Japan is one of the most interesting or funniest that I've heard of in Japan it is traditional on Christmas Day to go to a restaurant does

anybody know which one?

[22 : 12] Kentucky Fried Chicken so back in the 70's some some marketing guy or some marketing person came up with this brilliant idea to market KFC as a Christmas tradition in Japan and so that kind of took off and now today in Japan on Christmas Day thousands and thousands of people go to KFC to order a special meal and eat fried chicken for Christmas even though they don't celebrate the birth of Christ per se but they celebrate Christmas in that way Christmas has been celebrated for hundreds over what 1600 years now or 1700 years it was first I guess made a holiday by one of the popes back in the 4th century so just 300 years after Christ and Pope Julius decided to mark December 25th as the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus the resurrection of Jesus had been celebrated many years before that but that was the first time that Christmas was set up as a day to celebrate the birth of Jesus after that that celebration became you know filled with festivities and feasting and gifts and helping the needy the poor filled with music but over time it ended up becoming kind of a rowdy celebration especially during the middle ages there was a lot of mixing of both secular and religious traditions sounds kind of familiar doesn't it back and then during the protestant reformation just a few hundred years ago there was somewhat of a backlash against the rowdiness the secularization of Christmas and it became less common or less popular to celebrate Christmas as a holiday in fact the Puritans who were kind of descendants of the reformers were famous for actually forbidding the celebration of Christmas in their own circles and even when the Puritans came to America there was one state or one colony I should say that actually banned legally banned the celebration of Christmas does anybody know what state that was it was the state of Massachusetts it was on the books you are not allowed to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts for about 20 years back in the 1700s I believe the Christmas traditions that we are more familiar with today kind of started around the 1800s those kinds of things were popularized and Christmas became more popular I guess and traditional as part of both England and in America through the writings of Charles Dickens what was his famous story A Christmas Carol and also by a guy named Washington Irving who wrote some short stories back in the 1800s as well today we have like they did in the Middle Ages kind of a mix of both sacred and secular tradition there's lots of Santa Claus and reindeer and elves lots of Christmas romance right Hallmark movies Mariah Carey singing for the hundredth time this season about all I want for Christmas is you and a lot of these things you know they're innocent enough we also have the more commercialization of Christmas Christmas has been a money maker for many years it's a time to go shopping get your

Black Friday deals like I said many of these things can be innocent enough they're many of them are fine in and of themselves but they can become a distraction right a distraction from the real meaning of Christmas and for many who celebrate Christmas Christmas doesn't have anything to do with the birth of Jesus Christ at all it's just about presents and getting together with family and maybe doing some good deeds or things like that and it can be frustrating I think to us Christians to see the commercialization the secularization of Christmas but I think there's an opportunity that we should try not to miss when it comes to Christmas we can maximize the benefits the opportunities that we have both with our families and then even outside our families to share Jesus with the world I think the Christmas season is a huge opportunity we have opportunities to share Jesus to share the real meaning of Christmas with our families with our friends with our neighbors and even with strangers you know early on in the very beginning of the church there wasn't such a thing as Christmas people didn't celebrate Christian holidays they didn't celebrate the birth of Christ it wasn't part of the culture there were other things celebrated right by the pagans of that day but even Paul the apostle used those pagan cultural things to point people to Jesus does anybody remember that time when Jesus went to a place we call today Mars Hill

[28 : 20] I'm going to read that passage for us just to get it into our minds it says this is in Acts 17 verse 16 now while Paul waited for them at Athens so he's in Athens big city his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him and said what does this babbling want to say others said he seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection and they took him and brought him to the Areopagus that's Mars Hill saying may we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak for you are bringing some strange things to our ears therefore we want to know what these things

mean for all the

Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said men of Athens I perceive that in all things you are very religious for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship I even found an altar with this inscription to the unknown God so he found something a hook something that he could kind of seek his teeth into a hook of interest that they had that he could use as a platform to tell them about Jesus therefore the one whom you worship without knowing him I proclaim to you God who made the world and everything in it since he is Lord of heaven and earth does not dwell in temples made with hands there were temples all around in these Greek cities especially in Athens nor is he worshipped with men's hands as though he needed anything since he gives to all life breath and all things and he has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings so that they should seek the Lord in the hope that they might grope for him and find him though he is not far from each one of us for in him we live and move and have our being as also some of your own poets have said for we also for we are also his offspring again another hook they're poets therefore since we are the offspring of

God we ought not to think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone something shaped by art and man's devising truly these times of ignorance God overlooked but now commands all men everywhere to repent because he has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained he has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead if you know the story that started off this hubbub of talk about this whole idea of resurrection from the dead what is he talking about no one's ever been risen from the dead before but we see that Paul used these pagan practices pagan cultural things and religions as a way to point people as a platform to point people to Jesus and can we use an actual

Christian holiday as secular as it has become to also point people to Jesus and just a few examples we just read this book about the legend of the candy cane in which John Summerman the candy store owner used that little candy cane that many people were familiar with to point people and tell them about Jesus and what he accomplished for the world we can point people to Jesus in our own homes our own children our own families our grandchildren through the ways that we decorate our homes there's lots of ways that we can decorate lots of messages we could decorate with Santa Claus is coming to town right we could decorate with God with us Emmanuel we can point to the symbols of Christmas like we did this morning encourage generosity through gift giving and point people to the gift of Jesus

Christ to the world we can share Jesus in public ways one simple one is just to say Merry Christmas you know that's been a somewhat of a controversial thing as of late I don't think it's been as controversial lately it seems that more people are are fine with saying Merry Christmas these days another way is singing Christmas carols ever done that gone sing Christmas carols in public we've done that before many times in fact I didn't go this time but the family went and sang Christmas carols in a neighborhood down in Wilmington just the other day and what other time of year can you show up to strangers homes knock on their door and sing to them about Jesus and what he did for them but at Christmas time people are happy to have you come to their doors most of the time not always sometimes there's grumps out there scrooges we could call it but most of the time people are happy to have you come and sing to them about

[34 : 31] Jesus and what he did for them we don't sing jingle bells we sing about that silent night when Jesus was born or the little town in Bethlehem where he was born or the first Noel which tells the story of Jesus so well we can leave little Christmas tracks in fact I don't know if any of you have noticed we have them kind of littered out throughout the hallway that you can take and take home with you pass out those tracks or just leave them in different places around town take them to the library find a place to put them where somebody will find them leave them at the post office or the dentist office or wherever it might be Christmas or what's this all about we can also share Jesus with our neighbors and our loved ones some of us have family members that don't know

Jesus don't know him as their Lord anyway at family feasts that we are invited to or maybe neighborly feasts we can pray and acknowledge the gift of Jesus in our prayers or sometimes when we are at a family's house and maybe they're not praying people we could ask them do you mind if I pray and it's kind of hard you know it's kind of hard for people to say no when you ask them that especially on Christmas and when you pray you can give thanks to God for the gift of Jesus and

what he accomplished for the world sharing the gospel in our prayers with our co-workers or other people that we know in the ins and outs of what we do in life we can ask people what does Christmas mean to you and find out their perspective do they have an understanding of what Jesus did why he came and what he did for them and based on their answer you can share your perspective what you believe about what Jesus did for you and for them you know many people because of there's so much fantasy right related to Christmas these days and so a lot of people might consider the religious themes of Christmas those are also fantasy things that were made up but we can share with them the story of reality tell them about sin ask them do you know what sin is talk to them about judgment just like Paul did on Mars Hill he talked about a day when all men will be judged by God for the deeds that they've done in the body you can ask them do you think that people will ultimately be held accountable for the bad things that they've done in this life and then you can ask them well what about you you can encourage them to read the Bible say hey have you ever actually read the Christmas story point them to Luke say hey you can read the Christmas story in Luke and hey while you're at it maybe just continue on all the way to the end and he might take you up on that offer you know because of Christmas specifically Jesus has been made famous all over the world but did you know that even with all the people who know about Christmas and know about Jesus there are still millions even among those who celebrate Christmas who don't know what Jesus did they don't know why he came they don't know what he accomplished for them and they need somebody who will tell them who will tell them the story not the fantasies that the secular world has made up about Christmas but the true story about what God did for the world who were the first evangelists of Christmas it was the angels right the angels who came to the shepherds and we can tell a story like they told and what was their message to the shepherds they said I bring you good tidings of great joy good news which will be to all people for there is born to you this day in the city of David a savior who was Christ the Lord Jesus came as a savior there's a lot of people who don't know or understand why men why mankind would even need a savior saved from what and so they need somebody to tell them just like Paul told those Greeks there in [39 : 58] Athens at Mars Hill and he said to them there is a day that is coming God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained and he's given assurance of all these things by raising him from the dead people need to know that there is a day coming when God will judge the world in righteousness and these people do not know or understand why exactly Jesus was crucified on a cross but they need someone to tell them just like Jesus told Nicodemus when he said for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life or like Paul told the Romans when he said that

God demonstrates his own love towards us and that while we were still sinners Christ died for us or like Paul told the Ephesians when he said in him in Jesus we have redemption we've been purchased through his blood we have the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace this is the message that the world needs to hear and they need someone to tell them many will ignore the message they'll pay no attention they'll pay no heed some will listen and they'll reject the message but there are some who will receive it as the good news that it is and when that happens the lamb who was slain will receive the reward that he suffered for the people that he died for when they trust in him so let's take opportunities and it's not just

Christmas right there are opportunities all around us Christmas is just one of them we have Easter in the spring we even can use Halloween of all things right as a platform to tell people about Jesus let's use each opportunity that we have to tell others the story about what God did for us amen all right let's stand up as we finish and I'll I'll end in a word of prayer father just like John Somerman and Lucy went out and told people the story using that little platform of a little piece of candy called a candy cane we that kind of thing takes courage we ask that you would give us that same courage to tell others around us whether it's family friends strangers those around us about the story of what you accomplished for us that you came down from heaven gave up all your divine privileges to become a man to become as a servant a slave even that you might lay down your life for us for our sins that we might live forever as part of your family again give us the courage to speak boldly about these things to all those around us we ask these things in Jesus mighty name amen