

CYBER COLUMN by John Duncan: Wishing for Christmas

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CYBER COLUMN: Wishing for Christmas

By John Duncan

I'm sitting here under the old oak tree, wishing for Christmas. Here in our town, it feels like Christmas. Ice, sleet and snow fell from the sky. Winter's chill thrills the air. Giving swells in my heart. And Christmas soon comes!

The old preacher Philips Brooks in the 1800s said, "The earth has grown old with its burden of care, but at Christmas it is always young." How true. When it snowed here recently, I wished for inches, white covering the earth like a cotton blanket. I longed for the snow to pile up so I could grab the neighborhood kids and slide on boxes, throw snowballs and fix hot chocolate. I also wanted to run down to Blockbuster and rent three movies, *Elf* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, just hear those infamous movie lines: "I know him! I know him!" and "It's always winter but never Christmas" and "See (George) Bailey, you've had a wonderful life!" Ah, Christmas soon comes!

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Christmas is about the birth of Christ, to be sure, as a star hung over

Bethlehem, wise men and shepherds and a pregnant Mary riding a donkey and Joseph in his wide-eyed innocence. Christmas is portrayed so many ways, from *It's Christmas, Charlie Brown* to *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Rein Deer* to *Santa Claus I, II*, and now *III* to *The Miracle on 34th Street* to the local church pageant with bathrobes and broomsticks and fresh-faced children as shepherds and wise men to million-dollar extravaganzas with enough glitz and glitter to sparkle beyond anything Hollywood could do. From the programs and pageants to the Christmas lights on my street, you cannot help but love Christmas. It soon comes!

But for all Christmas is, it's an emotional time. Every year, I send a letter to families that lose loved ones. As one lady who lost her husband said recently, "I am not looking forward to Christmas!" Christmas is an emotional time because of separation—families separated by war, divorce and geography. Christmas is an emotional time because of the sentiment that goes with it. I never really knew my great grandmother, "Big Mama" as we called her, and I am not sure why we called her that, but she lived with us for a period of time after my mother recovered from a car wreck. I can remember that she gave me an electric helicopter and that was before X-box, iPod and all the electronic jazz kids have today. I was 5 years old, and the sentimental memory still lives in my mind and heart.

Christmas also bears the mark of hope—for a new year, for a fresh start, for a gift, for the joy of giving, for the wonder of Christ in all he means when we pause in peace to reflect and anticipate who Christ is and the core values of Christmas—peace, love, joy, Emmanuel and "he has come to save us from our sins." Christmas soon comes!

As a pastor, people, memory and reflection filter through my mind at Christmas. "Doc," my friend and chiropractor, would always call at Christmas, take our family out to eat, and we'd drive around and look at Christmas lights. "Snap, crackle, pop" my back would go when he fixed it from time to time and especially that one time when I could barely walk

after playing basketball. "Padre," he would say, "get your self down here to the office, and I'll have you playing again in a couple of days!" I limped painfully into his office and he snapped, crackled and popped me and I played basketball two days later. Miracle it was! Christmas is about the Miracle, and it soon comes!

I think of Christmas, and I remember Phyllis, "the Philistine" as she signed her letters to me. Throughout the year, she called needing something. She had troubles in her life, too numerous to count. She depended on the church. It was her life and once upon a time a place for her to find comfort. I saw her before she died recently. Barely able to speak, tubes running through the veins, her voice weak as hospice cared for her, and she thanked me and the church for helping her and apologized for all the trouble she caused. Granted she did cause trouble once in awhile, but the church was about all she had. Every Christmas, Phyllis was one of those people we made sure we helped. She wrote a poem before her death and sent it to me in a letter. Here it is, titled, "Some People":

Some people come into our lives and quickly go.

Some people move our souls to dance. They awaken us to new understanding with the passing of their wisdom.

Some people make the sky more beautiful to gaze upon. They stay in our lives for awhile, leave footprints on our hearts, and we are never, ever, the same.

She signed it: "Freedom butterfly" and wrote it on butterfly stationery. It was the Philistine's way of saying thank you and her way of expressing a wish that she was ready to go and be with Jesus, free from pain and life as she agonizingly knew it. Christmas conjures up the footprints of Mary and

Joseph and Jesus and those indelibly left on our hearts and a time to reflect on “some people” in this wonderful thing called life. Christmas is about the Footprint, and it soon comes!

Then I remember Frank. Frank had cancer, smoked like an incinerator and had no money, no family and no etiquette. He died a pauper. The church paid \$959 for his funeral. And Frank left letters notes and gifts. One Christmas, he left me wooden church with a cross. I still have the church. One cold December day, he dropped it off at the church. He wrote mysterious words on notes:

-“Friends are what makes humanity eternal, love is God made visible;”

-“Beauty is the image that you can see even though you may close your eyes;”

-“A moment of anxiety becomes a moment of adoration when our eyes are fixed on him.”

Frank drove an old beat-up blue Cadillac, “my welfare Cadillac” he once laughingly called it, planted flowers at the church and watered them one spring and died one cold February day while I was reading to him in the nursing home. I read the Psalms, and he cried and slipped into glory, and I will never forget it. The Christmas before he died, I took him a red poinsettia from the church. He struggled to breathe, could barely talk, but you would have thought I had delivered a brand new Cadillac or a gift of the pearl of great price. He thanked me and cried and asked me to beg God for his mercy. That Frank, some people stick in your heart and brain like peanut butter to a jar. Christmas is about Mercy of God dripping into our hearts like a salty tear on the wounds of life, and it soon comes!

Then there was Daniel. It was Christmas evening, and my wife baked

chocolate-chip cookies, and I went by the oil lube place where Daniel lived. He got kicked out of his house. He slept at his work. Never mind that Daniel had this pit bull dog that scared me to death one summer day when he asked me to come to his house. I arrived, we talked about the trials of his life, and then he stripped his shirt off, pointed to scars from some Mafia fight he had down in Miami, and he yelled at the top of his lungs. I prayed like mad, and he would not let me leave. Daniel calmed down, and then I did all I knew to do—share the gospel. Daniel wept, accepted Christ, fell to his knees and hugged me, and by God's grace I raced past the pit bull dog and darted back to church. Sometimes in the ministry, the drama is too much too handle, but by God's grace you survive. Daniel himself was a survivor. When I delivered the cookies that Christmas Eve at 9 p.m., Daniel was drunk as a skunk, lonely, alone on a wide sea and thanked me for the cookies and begged me to come in. He took the cookies, and I wished him a Merry Christmas. The last time I saw Daniel was at a convenience store when he walked over to my car, I rolled down the window, and he muttered, "Pray for old Daniel; he's in the lion's den again!" I have not seen Daniel since that moment, but I wonder about him. "Old Daniel's in the lion's den again" rolls around my brain like a marble spinning down a cylinder. All I have been left to do is wonder about Daniel and his lion's den. Christmas is about a Person who came to save some people, all people, you and me in the person of Jesus. And Christmas soon comes. I sense the wonder!

Christmas soon comes, and all I am left to do is wonder. Jacob Niles tramped the Appalachian Mountains in search of folk music in 1925. He moved to New York and with inspired creativity, he used the folk music of the mountains to write this Christmas song entitled "I Wonder As I Wander,"

I wonder as I wander out under the sky, How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.

For poor on'ry people like you and I...

I wonder as I wonder out under the sky.

When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall,

With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.

But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall,

And the promise of ages it then did recall.

If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,

A star in the sky, or a bird on a wing,

Or all of God's angels in heav'n for to sing,

He surely could have it, 'cause he was the King.

I'm sitting here under the old oak tree, wishing for Christmas, agreeing with Jacob Niles, remembering the sentiment and the Savior and a cast of characters, Mary and Joseph and Doc and Phyllis the Philistine and Frank and Daniel in the lion's den. Christmas soon comes! I love the Miracle of it all and the Mystery and the Mercy. O, how I love the Mercy, and the Joy. All I can do is sit here and wonder as I wander. Sense the Wonder and drink in the Joy! Merry Christmas!

John Duncan is pastor of Lakeside Baptist Church in Granbury, Texas, and the writer of numerous articles in various journals and magazines. You can respond to his column by e-mailing him at jduncan@lakesidebc.org.

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