

Down Home: The ghosts of Christmas (just) past

January 2, 2015

If I told you I'm still haunted by Christmas shopping, that would be an overstatement. But I definitely sense somebody looking over my shoulder.

Throughout the years, Christmas shopping often felt like a nightmare.

Sometimes, I figured I had a better chance of winning the lottery than finding a decent space in the mall parking lot. I don't even buy lottery tickets.

Then, when I finally entered the mall, I realized parking was the easy part. The joint was filled with hazards in the run-up to Christmas. Young parents with strollers. Children running amok. Aggressive speed-shoppers. Go-slow-and-clog-the-escalator pokey shoppers. Piped-in holiday music that sounds like a cardboard smoothie for the ears. Irritated sales clerks. Picked-over products.

Jesus just got fed-up and left

Talk about ruining the Christmas spirit. By the time I finished my mall shopping, I usually decided nobody "took the Christ out of Christmas." Jesus just got fed-up and left.

This year, I joined a bazillion of my fellow countrypeople and shoppers worldwide. I picked up my laptop and shopped from the comfort of my recliner. I haven't seen final statistics, but analysts predicted online shopping this year would top the record set in 2013 [by 15.5 percent](#).

To be fair, I must admit Joanna, my wife, does most of our Christmas shopping. She draws up the lists and keeps track of how much we've spent

on every family member. She also buys most of the stuff. This year, I think she did the majority of her shopping online, too. I'm surprised she's not on a first-name basis with the delivery-truck drivers in our corner of Dallas County.

We also eased our burden by starting early. On vacation, we picked up stocking-stuffers for our daughters and sons-in-law. When we drove out to Nashville to visit our younger daughter, Molly, we stopped at a toy store to shop for our grandson, Ezra, whose mom is our older daughter, Lindsay.

But after Thanksgiving, we realized we better get busy if we were going to get our shopping done. We felt a unique urgency, because we didn't know when Molly would deliver her first baby, but we wanted to be ready.

Of course, I shopped for Jo. But I also drew the assignment of gathering gifts for several of the guys on our list. And since we're oldyweds, I helped Jo by ordering some of my own Christmas gifts.

When it comes to shopping, the Internet is a thing of beauty. Just type in what you're looking for—like “men's shirts”—and ta-da! More shirts than you can shake a collar stay at.

Going online

You might think shopping online is cut-and-dried. Search for the item you want to buy, click on the picture of it to put it in your digital “shopping cart,” fill out the forms for your billing and shipping addresses, type in your credit card information. And you're done.

You would be wrong.

For the next several weeks, you get regular emails. The first ones come from the company that sold you the stuff. And then they come from the shipping company that is delivering the stuff. They arrive with frequent

regularity, and they can be annoying. But I took comfort in knowing the gifts were in transit and would arrive before Christmas.

But that's not all.

Here's the creepy part: I'm reading an article from a newspaper or magazine on my laptop, and the company that sold me gifts for my dad and one of my sons-in-law is still trying to sell me sweaters and shirts. The very same sweaters and shirts I already bought.

And then I'm on another website, and the Bible-seller is there, too, asking me to buy another Bible.

This goes on and on.

Oh, I realize I could open a file in my computer and purge things called my "cookies" and my "cache," and these merchants probably would lose track of me. But now it's kind of a spooky game. Where will old merchant-shopper-Internet relationships appear next? And what will they try to sell?

The ever-present nature of all these tailored ads reminds me of a lesson my dad used to drill.

You never know...

"Son," he'd say, "you better behave wherever you go, because you never know when someone who knows you will show up."

For awhile, I figured that was just a old dads' tale—something he made up to keep me in line when he wasn't around. But then we traveled from our home in Texas to the Royal Gorge in Colorado. We walked across the suspension bridge to see the other side—which looked a whole lot like the first side, by the way. As we returned, we looked up and into the eyes of the Zielke family, who lived about five blocks from our home.

After we exchanged pleasantries and headed on across the bridge, Daddy looked over at me. He didn't elaborate. He just asked one question: "See what I mean?"

I still recall that lesson when I think I'm on my own. Even when I'm far from home. And I'm awfully glad I only bought shirts and sweaters and a Bible online this Christmas.