

Voices: Less ‘Silent Night,’ more ‘Christmas Vacation’

December 6, 2017

Advent is upon us, and, with it, innumerable opportunities for us to sidestep the world in favor of a more palatable one. For it is not just the Christmas sales and the gallons of eggnog that threaten to lull Christians to sleep; it is our forgetting that Christmas is a time when all times are called to account.

So much of our celebrating of Christmas exists *not* to trouble us, to flow easily into our calendar’s other events and cycles: Christmas as the most important quarter of the economic year, winter as the apex of the seasons, winter break as the reset between Fall and Spring semesters.

And our Christmas celebrations are not immune from this: the shopping, which is different in degree but not kind from the rest of the year; the food we eat is not different but more abundant.

And if this is all this is — a time to celebrate in the way we normally do, only more so — is it time to abolish the name *Christmas*? If Christmas has become a time like any other time, only more so, then maybe we should just quit.

Blowing up Christmas

As a theologian and ethicist, one of my favorite Christmas films is the 1980s classic “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation.” It begins, as a lot of Christmas films do, with some sort of crisis, which mushrooms into a major crisis, resolving all things by the end of Christmas.

And in that sense, it’s part of the problem, for “Christmas Vacation” begins

and ends with a pretty minor problem: wanting to throw the best family Christmas celebration ever.

What it does differently, however, is that by halfway through the film, the veneer has been ripped off. Without giving away the plot too much, things continue to hurtle downhill as the patriarch Clark Griswold attempts to hold things together.

And finally, toward the end of the film, in one of the most memorable Christmas scenes of all time, Clark snaps, letting forth a tirade which functions not just as a comic high point, but as a judgment upon the whole film. For the film is built on the premise that most people live out their Christmas season: this is like the rest of the year, only more so — more food, more family, more stuff, more waste, more animosity and more frustration.

It is only in the last tirade that this understanding is blown up: families reconcile, crimes are forgiven, business models are reconfigured.

The difference Christmas makes

To read the Christmas stories of Scripture is to read the aftermath of a bomb going off: pagan princes who seek a Jewish king, lowly shepherds visited by God's holy messengers, a king who kills 3000 children, a young family fleeing into exile in Egypt.

But such is the aftermath of God entering the story: Egyptian gods are brought down, waters are parted, fire erupts from heaven. To celebrate Christmas as simply like the rest of the time, only more so, is to miss Christmas entirely.

Christmas, if it is anything, is a celebration of the impossible possibility that God is among us, and that, in that, everything — *everything* — is different.

Things cannot, in light of Christmas, be the same: for God has come among us and thrown around the living room furniture, that everything might be different.

That is the gospel; that, and nothing less, is Christmas.

Myles Werntz is assistant professor of Christian ethics and practical theology and the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary in Abilene. Email him at Myles.Werntz@hsutx.edu.