

Day Nineteen

Scripture:

Malachi 4:6

Reflection:

Christmas and families – the two seem to go together naturally. We can hardly think of Christmas memories without recalling times with parents or grandparents or children or grandchildren. In some families, it is one of the few times everyone manages to get together.

Of course, many of the traditions of Christmas are about families getting together or with old European customs. Many of these have little to do with the actual Christmas story of the Bible. You can be pretty sure it was not a white Christmas in Bethlehem. No evergreen trees with lights and decorations were used in the New Testament church. And, of course, no Santa Claus was ho-ho-ho-ing on the rooftop of the stable. Many of our Christmas traditions are not biblical. Some of them, like mistletoe, started out as pagan practices. That might be why for many centuries some, including the Mayflower Pilgrims, have refused to celebrate Christmas. Even now, some churches do not think we should make Christmas a part of our lives.

But, to admit something is not biblical does not automatically make it wrong. Birthdays are not biblical. Anniversaries are not biblical. And, pointing out something once had a pagan origin does not say people have to change it. Nobody told Apollos (an early Christian leader

with the same name as a Greek god) to change his name. Christmas is one of those rare times when kids get out of school, and adults get off work. Cars are packed, and people drive cross country for family gatherings.

As we increasingly have family members scattered all over the country (or all over the globe), Christmas is one of the things that pulls people back together. The traditions of food and candies and silly songs are all part of what gives this time of year its power to bring healing into families. It helps us mark the passing of time, as children grow up, get married, and then return with little children of their own.

Four hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Malachi predicts that the coming of the messianic age will bring families together. This new era will be introduced by the arrival of Elijah. Malachi is not describing some reincarnation of the Old Testament figure. This would be a prophet who would embody the spirit and power of Elijah. That prophet, of course, is John the Baptist (Matthew 11:14). This new era would bring parents and children closer together. Here is a startling thought: What if this final prophecy in the Old Testament is not just a prophecy about John the Baptist? What if it is also a prophecy about Christmas. Christmas will bring families together.

And so, although we would not usually think of it as a particularly religious Christmas song, Malachi would not be surprised to find out his prophecy would one day have people singing:

Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays,
'Cause no matter how far away you roam,
When you pine for the sunshine of a friendly gaze,
For the holidays, you can't beat home, sweet home.

Family:

Materials: Spread out pictures from past Christmases on the table. Include those from recent years and some from many years ago.

Let's play a word game. I'll say a word, and then you quickly say something that word makes you think about.] Let's try this one: Chocolate (let everyone say something). Okay, now let's try: Broccoli (everyone also says what they think about). Now, here is an important one: Christmas. (The answers might include things like presents, turkey, tree, pumpkin pie, and so forth. Take the answers and talk about how Christmas time brings families together.)

Point out the recent pictures and talk about last Christmas: Let people pick out what they see in the photographs. Have people changed? Do they still have any of those clothes or toys? What do they remember about the food?

Now, look at the older pictures and talk about Christmas years ago. Point out people who were younger. It is okay to talk about people who have died and are not here anymore.

Finally, end up focusing on how Christmas is both about things that seem to be the same year after year (some of the decorations, the kinds of food we eat, the people we can be with). Also, talk about how Christmas is a time when we can see how things have changed. Children get bigger. Some new babies show up. Some other people might be in heaven.

Today's Jesse Tree ornament is a very special verse. It is on the very last page of the Old Testament. It is also special because God says that the coming of John the Baptist (that's who Malachi means when he says "Elijah") and Jesus will bring families together. Jesus will help parents love children and children love parents. That's one reason we love to give gifts to people at Christmas. We want them to know that we love them.

Who in your family would you like to tell how much you love them? How do you think you might want to tell them or show them? (Depending on the ages of your children, you might have them decide to give people gifts or to scribble out Christmas messages or whatever)

Prayer:

In today's prayer time, praise God for what Christmas means for your family. Ask God to help make this Christmas a great family time. Of course, the things you need to say will depend on your own family. But, in general, what are the good things you want to happen this Christmas? Are there some struggles or challenges your family is facing to bring before the Lord.