

Rev. David J. Huber
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Jesus was born quietly. Born to a people under occupation by the Roman Empire. Born to a poor teenager from a conquered nation with a backwoods religion (in Rome's eyes), in an animal feed trough in an inn in a hinterland village geographically, politically, and economically oblivious to imperial notice. The Prince of Peace arrived without rumbling mountains or booming voice. You would have missed it if you weren't paying attention. And unless you were a pagan eastern magi, you weren't.

It's easy to forget that first Christmas went unrecognized because it is so in-your-face today. One store in the mall had their ornament display up in June! Western history is so entwined with Christianity that Christmas is unavoidable. Even corporate boards talk about Christmas and holiday shopping. Christmas winds up for six anxious months then explodes its arrival. The quiet of a birth cannot compete against such noise.

Our attention is drawn toward tinsel and high expectations of the "perfect Christmas": everyone dressed perfectly, the meal perfectly glorious and rich, the presents excessive and perfect, perfectly appreciated because they were so perfectly chosen with perfect deliberation and the receivers are perfectly grateful and the children say, "This is the best Christmas ever!" because it topped last year's excess. Or call it a failure if it didn't. The best Christmas ever was the first one. Why try to top it? This anxiety is not healthy. It is the manufacture of a first-world people who can afford perfection and feel cheated if they don't get it. And if they can't afford it, they can sell themselves to Caesar by swiping his magical plastic card with the 16 digits and 30% pound-of-flesh tariff.

If there is a "War on Christmas", is it not clerks saying "happy holidays" waging it, it is us Christians trying to one-up Christmas by domesticating it with consumerist nostalgic sentimentalism. We have Norman-Rockwelled Christmas to be about our wants, not God's peace-filled act of loving

incarnation. The message of buying peace competes with Christmas' message that peace has been freely born to us.

Maybe the stores have done us a favor with "happy holidays" by dissociating our savior's birth from an economic transaction. Perhaps by lowering the clamor we will be better equipped to step off Madison Avenue's anxiety-causing treadmill of empty (and expensive!) promises. And once off, discover Christ's peace was there all along. The quietly manger-born Christ who lived for others and went to the cross in refusal of his religious leaders' and Caesar's dehumanizing narratives. The Christ who responds to "be busy, buy, spend, hoard, expect everything!" with "Slow down. Buy only what you need. Spend less. Give generously. Expect nothing."

We can be more moderate and intentional about our expectations and spending. We can proclaim through action that racking up debt does not honor our Liberator's birth. That expecting perfection, stressing out, and piles of stuff under the tree are not a Christmas utopia. That our value comes from being made by God, not by what we spend, receive, or do.

I say this not to attack anyone for how you celebrate nor to call for a monastic disengagement seasonal enjoyment. Thanks to the aforementioned store, my Christmas tree's cup overfloweth with cultural idols from Star Wars and Star Trek. Maybe such frippery sends a poor message, but I like it, as you surely like many of the things that you do. But I say this as a pastor. I see holiday stress and anxiety from needless burdens both self-imposed and loaded by others. It's not spiritually healthy and a disservice to Christmas. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, not Prince of Anxiety.

Every year, Jesus is born, regardless of our preparations. Enjoy Madison Avenue's offerings without being defined by it. Be defined not by presents but by Jesus' peaceful counter-narrative of presence. Presence in the moment that allows peaceful mindfulness and attention to the quiet birth of a savior. Happy holidays to all, and to my Christian brothers and sisters, may you have a peaceful, merry – and imperfect! – Christmas.

