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Missing Back When

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Watch out! I've been listening to a country music radio station again. You know what that means. When I do that, at least one of those country songs is going to be the inspiration for at least one sermon. Here it is!

I don't know who sings this song. I don't even know its real title. I call it, *I Miss Back When*. The fellow starts out singing, "Don't you remember" a simpler, less complicated time. Don't you remember "ten, two, and four" and what those numbers meant? Don't you remember when the whole family used to sit down at the table for dinner? Then, he goes on to sing the tag line of his song.

(I have to caution you here. All the words I'm going to say are absolutely pure and wholesome. I do not take responsibility for how you interpret them.)

He sings, "Back when a hoe was a hoe, and coke was a coke, and crack was what you did when you were cracking jokes. I miss back when... Back when the wind was all that blew.... and when you said 'I'm down with that, it meant you had the flu. I miss back when..."

That's sort of a Christmas song, isn't it? At least it's the song I hear a lot of people singing this time of year. They miss back when Christmas was really Christmas, they say. Back when there wasn't so much commercialism. Back when the holidays were cheerier. Back when the Christmas season was merrier. They miss back when.

How about you? Do you miss back when?

The men and women who started our denomination, the Christian Church Disciples of Christ, started a new church because they missed back when. They wanted a church that went back to the real Christianity, back to the New Testament way of doing things. They wanted to restore the church to back when...

- back before all the trappings of secular society intruded into the church and changed things around...
- they wanted to go back and wipe out all the heathen influences that had crept in over the years...
- they wanted to take the church back to when Jesus walked upon this earth.

This is the time of year when we all start missing back when. The holiday season pulls at our heart strings, and we start missing all the good things we remember from years long gone by. And it's a natural part of this longing to want to go back when times were more simple, less hectic, not so busy - we want to go back when Christmas was really Christmas.

U.S. News and World Report¹ back in 1996 reported that 96 per cent of all Americans celebrate Christmas in some form every year. And for many of those Americans, Christmas triggers a longing to go back when, back to some dimly remembered Christmas that's thought to be better than today...

- a nostalgia for a time when the Yuletide was more pious and more peaceful...
- when it was free of all the gaudy commercialism we've got today... - when it was more focused on the birth of the Savior and less on the 20 per cent off sale at Lord and Taylors.

Oh yes, at Christmas we all miss back when. We have a hazy memory of a better day, and we want to go back when times were better, back when the holidays were more holy, back when Christmas brought more joy.

The only problems is, as biblical historians are increasingly discovering - that purer, simpler, more spiritual back when is more a product of our imagination than it is of historical fact. We may not like it, but the truth is: Christmas has never been an entirely religious affair. Many of our most popular traditions are modern inventions.

Do you miss back when Christmas wasn't celebrated at all?

In 1620 the Pilgrims landed in America. They came to bring pure Christianity to this wild and un-converted land. And one of the first laws they

¹ December 23, 2996 issue.

enacted was to ban the celebration of Christmas in New England. Cotton Mather, the most influential and important clergyman in America during its earliest days, described the Christmas merrymaking as “an affront unto the grace of God.” Cotton and his Pilgrim pals pointed out that Christmas was nothing but a pagan festival covered with a Christian veneer.

One hundred years later in 1725, Anglican minister Henry Bourne wrote that the way most people behaved at Christmas was “a scandal to religion and an encouraging of wickedness.” Christmas, he said, was “a pretense for drunkenness and rioting and wantonness.”

No matter how much we wish it were different, when we look “back when” we discover that there never was a time when Christmas existed as an unsullied domestic idyll, immune to the taint of commercialism.

Do you miss back when celebrating Christmas was a sin?

If you look far enough back, you’ll see that the earliest Christians never, ever, celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ. They not only ignored his birth. A third century church father, Origen (a man most of you have never heard of, but a man who was one of the most important church leaders and formulators of the Christian faith and worship practice), Origen called it a sin just to think about celebrating Jesus’ birthday.

What do you think our more conservative, bible-believing brethren down south would think about that - the ones who are calling for a boycott of all stores that don’t include the words “Merry Christmas” on their advertisements, the ones who are trying to pass laws to put banners up on their town office buildings declaring “Merry Christmas”? What would they think of our early church fathers?

Do you think they miss back when nobody had any idea on what day Jesus Christ was born?

There is no record of the date, absolutely no clue given in the scripture. It wasn’t until the year A.D. 354 (that’s three and a half centuries AFTER Jesus) - it wasn’t until then that December 25 was mentioned in any connection with Jesus’ birth. Back when they picked that day, that picked it because it was already the most popular, the most fun, the most celebrated pagan holiday. Even if that were the date, and it probably is not, the calendar has changed so much over the intervening centuries. Who knows what day that old calendar date of December 25 would really be?

I don’t think any of us really want to go back to those days. We’re happy celebrating Christmas. We find meaning there - spiritual, holy,

inspiring meaning. So, I think it's another kind of back when that we're missing.

Let me take you back through my three favorite Christmas stories, and see what we can learn together about the real meaning of Christmas.

American novelist Moss Hart² grew up poor in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. His father had trouble finding work. The only way they could make ends meet was to rent out rooms in their dingy little house. One of their tenants was an old woman.

She was eccentric. She was selfish. She was hard to get along with. Nevertheless, Moss Hart grew to love her. She was the only one in the house who had enough money to buy sweets and treats. On Christmas, she was the only one who could afford to bring in a tree and presents.

When Moss was around ten years old, just two days before Christmas, that old woman and Moss' father got in an argument. He kicked her out of the house. With her gone, there would be no Christmas, no presents, no happiness or joy at all. Moss was heart-broken. He hated his father.

On Christmas Eve, his father said to Moss, "Let's take a walk." He had never suggested any thing like that before. He and Moss walked to 149th Street. Moss knew that was the street in his neighborhood where all the big store were, where pushcarts lined the sidewalks selling toys.

Hope leapt in his heart. His father was taking him out to buy him a present! Years later, Moss Hart wrote the story down.

"It was a bad year for me... and I wanted a Christmas present terribly. Not a present, merely, but a symbol, a token... I needed a sign from my father or mother that they cared for me..."

"We hurried on, our heads bent against the wind, to the cluster of lights on 149th Street... There were all sorts of things that I wanted... I said, 'Look at that chemistry set' or 'there's a stamp album' or 'look at that printing press!' Each time, my father would ask the price. Then, without a word, we would move on to the next pushcart..."

"... soon I looked up and saw we were nearing the end of the line... My father looked up, too, and I heard him jingle some coins in his pocket. In a flash I knew it all. He'd gotten together about seventy-five cents to buy me a Christmas present, and he hadn't dared to say so in case there was nothing to be had for so small a sum.

² From Pulpit Digest, December 1973, p. 48.

“As I looked up at him, I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes... I wanted to throw my arms around him and say, ‘It doesn’t matter, I understand. Being here with you is better than a chemistry set or a printing press. I love you.’ But instead, we stood shivering beside each other for a moment, and then turned away from the last two pushcarts and started silently back home.

“I never told him how close I felt to him that night... and I knew that we were just two lonely people struggling to reach each other.”

Don’t you dare live long enough to miss back when you had the opportunity to reach out and touch someone you love. This Christmas don’t miss out on what might be your last chance.

You all know the story of Wallace Purling. Wallace was nine years old, but still in the second grade. He had trouble keeping up. He was big and clumsy and slow. Some of the other kids called him “stupid.” But big, dumb Wallace always tried to be helpful. He had a heart of gold.

The Christmas when he was nine years old, Wallace wanted to be a shepherd in his school play. He wanted to play the flute. But his teacher had another idea. Because he was so much bigger than all the other children, she wanted him to play the part of the Innkeeper who refused to let Joseph and Mary inside.

The evening of the pageant the crowd gathered. The music started. Joseph and Mary headed out on their journey. Wallace stood in the wings, watching in fascination.

Then, Joseph appeared at Wallace’s cardboard door. Joseph slowly and tenderly guided his little Mary to a seat outside the door. Joseph knocked on the door.

“What do ya want?” Wallace yelled as he opened the door and looked down on Joseph.

“We seek lodging,” the little Joseph announced.

“Seek it somewhere else,” Wallace replied in a gruff voice. “This place is full!”

“Sir,” the little, meek Joseph pleaded, “we have asked everywhere else. We have traveled far. Please make room for us.”

“No can do,” Wallace announced right on cue.

“But look at my wife,” Joseph whined, “she’s heavy with child. Can’t you find a place for us?”

Wallace looked down at Mary. There was a long pause. Everybody thought Wallace had forgotten his lines. Eventually he came through, “No, be gone!” he yelled.

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary. Mary laid her head on Joseph’s shoulder. The two of them slowly turned around and started walking away.

Wallace stood there with his mouth open. His forehead wrinkled up in worry. Tears filled his eyes. And this was when that Christmas pageant became different from all the others. “Wait a minute,” Wallace called out, “bring Mary back here!” Wallace’s face broke out in a great big smile and he said, “You can have my room.”

Some of the people who were watching that night thought Wallace had ruined the pageant. What about you?

Don’t you miss back when a child could teach you, when innocence could win, when caring came natural? Don’t you miss back when? If you do, you have the power to bring it back.

Joe and Alice were a young couple, newly married, new to the city, new to the neighborhood, new to the church. They were in a Sunday School class the Sunday before Christmas. Members of the class were remembering back when their fondest Christmas memories were made.

Alice spoke up. Her Joe has a story to tell. Make him tell it.

Joe was embarrassed. He didn’t want to talk in front of these people, but his wife’s persistence made him open up.

“It’s not anything, really,” he said, “just a kid’s story. I was about ten years old, and Christmas morning was great. My folks always went overboard, and I had more than I really needed, toys of all kinds. It was a pretty day, and I went outside to play, and along came my friend Davey.

“Davey only lived two blocks away from us, but in that little town, it was two blocks in the wrong direction. His house was small and run down. His family didn’t have anything. But Davey and I were friends. We played together a lot. And of all things, Davey came over to my house that Christmas morning with a present for me.

“It was a red fire truck, one that had real hoses on it and everything. I was real embarrassed because I hadn’t gotten him anything at all... We played with the fire truck a while, and the other stuff I had gotten for Christmas, and then Davey left.”

Joe turned to his wife. “Do I have to tell this?” he asked. “Go on,” she said.

“Well, about an hour later, after Davey had left, my friend Bill came over. He’d gotten about as much for Christmas as I had, and had brought some of it over to show me. But right off, before we could get to playing, he said, ‘Listen, Joe, I came by Davey’s house early this morning, and you wouldn’t believe it! They didn’t have a Christmas tree or anything. Nothing! And you won’t believe this either, they only gave Davey one present. Just one. And all it was was just a crummy little red fire truck.’”

That was the end of Joe’s story. Everyone sat silently. “Well,” Joe said, “that really is the end of my story. But you know, there hasn’t been a Christmas since that I haven’t remembered Davey and that silly little truck.”

He looked around and added, “I can’t help but feel that somebody was trying to tell me something that day.”

What do you think? Do you miss back when a gift meant more than what it cost?

Don’t miss it this Christmas. The best gift of all: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”