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Know When to Hold 'Em, Know When to Fold 'Em  
Making Christmas Traditions a Blessing, Not a Burden

a sermon on Luke 2.8-20  
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This is a Christmas tradition I really like. These children did a wonderful job. They made special memories for all of us – especially their parents – and for themselves. I do not know how long our school has had a Christmas program, probably from the very beginning, in which case this is the 51<sup>st</sup> episode. And of course, children's Christmas programs have a much longer history than our school. Many of us can remember being in programs like this when we were young. When I was five, we had a program at my church, and I broke out in chicken pox during the service. The congregation watched as red spots appeared all over my face while I was singing. After the service a nurse diagnosed me, and I missed the last week of school before Christmas break. Good memories. A few of you adults participated in Westminster's Preschool Christmas program as students when you were little.

This program and other things we do around here at Christmas started me thinking about Christmas traditions. Aristotle said there are only three reasons to do anything: It is a moral duty. It is necessary. It is enjoyable. I say we need to add a fourth: It is tradition. Some things we end up doing year after year after year. Our traditions can be a blessing, a curse, or just plain empty. Some traditions bring us real joy. Other traditions we continue for the sake of other people or because we feel we have to or we never thought about it long enough to realize we could stop – but in any case, they have lost their purpose and they suck life out of us instead of infusing life into us. Still other traditions, we just go through the motions. They are neither fun nor painful, just empty.

How can you make your Christmas traditions a blessing? How can you start new, meaningful traditions? Maybe you have started your own family and you have small children, and now is the time for creating new traditions. Or, your nest is empty or your spouse has died and you are on your own; the old traditions don't work anymore. How do you retire the old traditions and start new ones? And by the way, circumstances force us to drop traditions from time to time, but I believe that when we drop an old Christmas tradition, we do well to pick up a new one. So that is what this sermon is about: how to make the most of your Christmas traditions.

If we are going to make the most of our Christmas traditions, we need a way to tell whether one is worth continuing or not. Often we continue traditions through habit – that’s kind of what *tradition* means; you don’t have to think about it, you just do it. But if we want to stop and think about what we are doing, how can we measure our traditions? I have a simple test with four easy questions.

Question 1: Does your tradition honor the Savior? Our scripture reading explains the significance of Christmas. “I bring you good news of great joy for all the people ... to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord!” We needed a Savior because we are all broken people living in a broken world. We don’t know God, and we don’t even know who we are supposed to be. And even if we did, we are not able to be who we are supposed to be. So we need a Savior. God sent one! Not only did God send us a Savior, he came himself. Jesus is the eternal Son of God – one with the Father – God himself in the flesh. He didn’t send someone else. He came himself, to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. No wonder the angel called his birth “good news of great joy for all the people”! Into our world full of problems and pain – into our lives full of futility and frustration – God sent a Savior!

That’s Christmas. Everything else is window dressing. It may be nice. It may be pretty. But it is not functional. It doesn’t make Christmas. Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world. Therefore, your holiday traditions should honor the Savior. A good example is this Christmas program. Another is the Advent wreath we light at the beginning of worship. Some people have them in their homes. *Worship* is the best Christmas tradition of all. Go to worship on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. If your church does not have a service, or if you do not have a church, you are welcome to come to our Christmas Eve service at 5:30 pm. Worship is the most important Christmas tradition.

And yet there are many other ways to honor the Savior. Among your home decorations you might include a nativity set. We have a Fisher Price set at our house that the boys can play with. By the way, baby Jesus has gone missing from our set. A reward has been offered. Anyone finding our baby Jesus gets a Hot Wheels car.

Have a nativity set. Sing Christmas carols. They honor the Savior. There are just so many ways. The question to ask is: Do your traditions honor the Savior?

Let me add that I am not suggesting every tradition has to be overtly religious. For example, one tradition in your family may be having a family portrait taken during the holidays when everyone is together. That doesn’t have much to do with Jesus, but it is not a bad tradition. There are four questions. This first is the most important. You probably have a lot of traditions. Make sure most of them honor the Savior.

Second question: Does your tradition bring joy to others? I'm thinking now about the shepherds in our reading. The angels frightened them, then amazed them, and finally brought them joy. The shepherds in turn brought joy to others. They went to Bethlehem to see the Christ child. And they did not keep the Good News to themselves. "All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them."

Our traditions should do that – at least some of them should. Here at Westminster we have a couple of traditions that bring joy to others. We fill shoeboxes with toys and send them to needy children through Samaritan's Purse. I love that one because it is something my children can help with. Nobody knows better what a four-year-old boy would like than a four-year-old boy! We also have an angel tree for nursing home patients who would not otherwise receive a Christmas gift. Again, you can find a thousand ways to do this, from giving an anonymous gift to a person in need to inviting a lonely neighbor to have dinner. Do you have traditions that bring joy to others?

Third question: Does your tradition build relationships? My earlier example of the family photo would fit in here. Bringing family together – difficult as that may be in some cases; family doesn't always get along well – can make for good traditions and good memories. Christmas is not limited to family, though. You can bring neighbors together. Bring church family together. Friends too. When you are examining your traditions or trying to create new ones, an important question to ask is: Does it build relationships?

Fourth question: Is it *fun*? I can only think of one tradition that you ought to do even if you do not enjoy it: worship. Perhaps for some reason you do not feel like worshipping. Do it anyway. Personally, I can't see that. If you don't enjoy the Christmas Eve service – singing the songs, hearing the Christmas story, the Lord's Supper, the candlelight – if you don't enjoy that, I worry about you. I do realize that in certain cases, say the death of a spouse or child, the occasion can be difficult or painful. So you miss a year. Just don't make it a habit. And participate in worship on other occasions.

Other than that, though, why bother with traditions that drain your energy if you don't enjoy them? I am going to confess something, and you may think I'm some kind of Grinch. Our Christmas tree is only 24 inches tall. It's a little fiber optic deal that came pre-decorated. All you do is take it out of the box, plug it in, and turn it on. It's actually quite lovely, especially at night. Rosalyn and I bought it for our first Christmas, and we still use it. I'm not a big tree-in-the-house, hang-on-the-ornaments person. To some people, this would be almost blasphemous. They pick the perfect live tree every year, cut it down themselves, and all that. That's OK. Do what works for you. If you are honoring the Savior, bringing joy to others, and building relationships – well, why worry about anything else? Do those things in ways that work for you. Christmas ought to be fun. We have a Savior! Good news of great joy! That's a reason to celebrate. When you celebrate, you're supposed to have fun.

Again, if you are grieving, you may not want to have fun. That's OK. Just remember that you do not have to continue traditions that make you miserable. Do the things that help, not the things that hurt.

Well, that's it: my simple metric for measuring Christmas traditions. Does it honor the Savior? Does it bring joy to others? Does it build relationships? Is it fun? If you answer "no" to all these questions, don't you think it is time to find a new tradition? If you can answer yes to just a couple, even one, you may have something worth preserving. The same test works as you are trying to create new traditions.

How do you create a new tradition? In the Presbyterian Church we have a simple formula: If you do something the same way twice, that's a tradition! I'm only joking ... I hope ... but there is always truth in humor. The truth here is: You do something to honor the Savior, bring joy to others, build relationships, and/or have fun. You like it enough to do it again next year. You keep doing it. That's a tradition. I suppose that if Samaritan's Purse keeps the shoebox ministry going, my boys will grow up doing that, and when they are men, they will call that one of our traditions. Find something good and stick with it.

There are several times in life when starting new traditions is important. One is when you start a family and have children. You want to give them good roots. You might continue traditions from your family of origin. You can invent new ones too. Of course, not everyone marries, and not all married people have children. Moving into the world on your own, you need new traditions. Marriage, you need new traditions. Divorce, you need new traditions. When your children grow up and leave home, you need new traditions. When your spouse dies and you are alone, you need new traditions, especially ones that connect you with family and other people. Grief makes the holidays painful, but you *can* find a measure of joy, for you have a risen, living Savior. Even as we face death, we know it is not the end. Christ has promised eternal life to everyone who believes in him.

The same circumstances that cause us to create new traditions sometimes make us give up traditions we cherish. You can let go of old traditions. They may not be practical anymore. Or they just don't work. I encourage you, when you let go of a worn out tradition, replace it with a new one if you can. If it hurts to let go, but you have to, remember that you have a Savior. Take comfort in him and find new ways to honor him.

Let me close now with the story of baby Jesus in a nutshell. No, not the Christmas story. This is a literal nutshell. It illustrates everything that is right with Christmas traditions. One of our teachers, Ms. Carol, sent her daughter to our preschool. Sally Sorocak was her teacher. One year the students made a Christmas ornament. They

took one of those little plastic babies, like you would find in a king cake. They glued the baby into one half of a walnut shell. The half shell made a manger. I think they painted the shell gold. They glued in baby Jesus, and added a string so it could hang on a tree. For the past 32 years, Ms. Carol has hung that ornament on her tree every year. She was talking about having her students make the same craft this year. I hope they were able to do that. That's a small tradition, but it is sweet. It strengthens the bond between mother and daughter. And it honors the Savior.

God bless you this Christmas. May you know the joy of the Savior. And may the things you do draw you closer to him and to the people who matter most. Amen.

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