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The Year Without a Santa Claus – 12.20.9 - Re-worked from December 18, 2005 and DECEMBER 6, 1998

[Video clip](#) – from the beginning through 3:18

Santa Claus cancels Christmas. If he is the central figure of the Christmas story, then I guess Santa can cancel Christmas.

That clip is from *The Year Without a Santa Claus*, an animated TV Christmas special from 1974 with Mickey Rooney voicing Santa Claus. It was very important to me as a youngster. I was too old to actually believe in St. Nick when it came out, but the Santa story was inseparable from Christmas. I couldn't imagine any year without a Santa Claus.

The premise of the TV show is that one year, Santa got tired of all the hassles and headaches surrounding his annual chore and decided to just stay home with his family on Christmas Eve. This of course sent a shock-wave around the world as everyone realized how selfish they'd been, expecting Santa to do all the giving. And there was an outpouring of good will toward the burned-out Kris Kringle.

The highlights of the movie are the two musical numbers by Cold Miser and his brother Heat Miser, two strange and arrogant individuals who are in charge of the weather, each of whom is surrounded by servants who look like miniature versions of their master. ("Friends call me Heat Miser; whatever I touch; starts to melt in my clutch; I'm too much!") In the spirit of Christmas, even these rival siblings cooperate and trade off snow in the south for springtime at the North Pole.

For a while in the show, it looks like this will be the year Santa stays home, and everyone sends him a present. But in spite of the value of that message, no child watching a Christmas special in 1974 or now would regard that as a happy ending, so... when a little girl sings to Santa a tear-jerking rendition of "I'll Have a Blue Christmas Without You," the big guy changes his mind and made his rounds after all. As a kid watching that, I was relieved. As far as I could tell, Christmas without the "right jolly old elf" was pointless. Wasn't Santa Claus the reason for the season?

I've got nothing against Santa Claus. (I don't agree with the sentiment expressed in this photo, for example). In *The Lion, Witch and Wardrobe*, the kids who visit Narnia find it under the curse of the white witch, a land where it's "always winter and never Christmas", an apt picture of the unredeemed life and world. The first sign that the witch's spell is breaking is that Father Christmas finally shows up. I think the Santa idea is fun; it gives everybody a chance to do a little make-believe, to bring some delight into the lives of little children, and to just have a good time.

But just think about Santa's difficulties in 2009. He has to keep up with technology to keep the kids happy. Time was when the elves could make a million simple Teddy bears and rocking horses. Now he has to be able to do a knock-off of the iPhone and the Xbox 360.

Then there are all the homes not designed for Reindeer landings. Santa used to be able to count on 45 or 50 feet of runway, and then a chimney to go down. Those days are over.

Then there is the increased security everywhere in the world making it difficult for a guy like Santa to get around the world in a single night.

More than anything, when you think of the thousands of dollars' worth of high tech and

trendy gifts people today expect of Santa, it's odd that such a character ever came to be associated with the birthday of the One who was born in a stable in Bethlehem. What does the one thing have to do with the other?

Let's look back at that first Christmas as recorded by **Matthew** (starting with **1:18**). If ever there was a "year without a Santa Claus," this was it:

Matthew 1:18-25 - This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" --which means, "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

For us, Christmas means soft, twinkling lights, sentimental music, cards with sweet messages, cookies, family, emotional warmth, and of course, Santa. But if you strip away the haze of your preconceived notions, the year Christ was actually born was a very dark, unfriendly, frightening year for the two people most affected by God's arrival - Joseph and Mary. For this teenage couple, that year was a time of...

Scandal - Mary was pledged to marry Joseph, a young Jewish carpenter. Like most young couples, Joseph probably had dreams and plans that included a home, children, happiness, grandchildren one day, and growing old together. Perhaps they had known one another for years, and had been planning and dreaming like this for quite awhile.

But that year, suddenly, Joseph's dreams seemed to shatter. His soon-to-be bride was pregnant; though they were engaged, they were not yet married and they had not been together intimately. It could mean but one thing - Mary had been unfaithful to him. Perhaps her character wasn't what he thought it was; or maybe she just made a mistake. But for a time, the dream died. He couldn't marry her now, he thought. But being a righteous man, and not wanting to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. You can read some of my thoughts on this in today's opening devotion for **The Christmas Path**.

But all the sudden, Joseph's plans were interrupted by an angelic vision: "Joseph, it's not what you think. Don't be afraid. Take Mary home as your wife; the child she bears is the son of God. Joseph, you name him 'Jesus' (a common name, the Greek form of Joshua, which means "the Lord saves"). You name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." Nothing but a heavenly visitation could have convinced Joseph, I'm sure. Did Mary try? I don't know. If she did, how ridiculous it must have sounded. But now he knew.

Still, it must have been a year of scandal. For although Mary first heard of this miraculous birth through an angel, and Joseph was later informed by an angel, few others received a heavenly announcement. So you know what people must have thought. At a time like this, the members of your own family can be the most unkind. Is that why, as Luke's Gospel says, Mary went away for three months and stayed with her relative Elizabeth? Is that why, as Luke says,

Joseph took Mary along with him when he was required to report to Bethlehem for the census? Usually only the head of the house had to go. It was dangerous to take along a pregnant woman. It would have been better and more customary to leave her with her family. But maybe that's the last place she wanted to be, what with all the talk. For Mary and Joseph, that first year was a year of scandal. Then, it was also a year of...

Unsettling Attention - When they arrived in Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary were just part of the human rabble busting that city open that week. The Roman Emperor Augustus had disrupted the entire world by requiring everyone to go to their city of origin to be counted. You know the story. There was no room for them in the inn, and so Jesus was born probably in a stable - certainly, his first crib was a manger - a feeding trough for cattle and donkeys. When God was born, there were more animals than people present to witness his arrival.

But then, they began to be the focus of unsettling attention. **Matthew 2:1-2** tells of an incident that happened some time after the birth of Jesus but in the same vicinity - ***After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*** We talked about these guys a little last week in the context of the slaughter of the innocent children that Herod would carry out as a result of their visit, but let me say a few words about them. Magi weren't from the recognized people of God - that is, they weren't Jewish. They were from Persia, and we think they were astrologers or even wizards (we think of them as kings, but they weren't kings; they may have been royal magicians in a Persian king's court). Perhaps they first heard of the Hebrew God and the expected Savior when the Israelites were captives in their land. Like the shepherds, they were open to God. They were seekers. Their methods may have been suspect, but in this case, God honored their heart. They saw his star and came to worship him.

Matthew 2:3-12 - ***When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:***

***"`But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"***

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. How unsettling their visit must have been to the young couple trying to care for this new baby. It says that Herod, the Roman governor, was troubled at their visit and all of Jerusalem with him. No doubt the Magi attracted lots of attention when they came into town. Large entourage. Lots of

wealth. The symbols of a foreign power. They come to Bethlehem seeking the king of the Jews. Herod called himself the king of the Jews. Was this a competitor that was born; a rebel movement he knew nothing about, perhaps seeking to put on the throne some long lost descendent of David?

And now this entourage descended on Mary and Joseph. What could this mean? Who all is interested in their child? What will happen next? The year Jesus was born was a year of unsettling attention. Then, it was a year of...

Confronting the Forces of Evil – Matthew 2:13-18 - When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

***"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."***

Mary and Joseph have gone from being just a part of the nameless rabble in Bethlehem who couldn't find a room to having the attention of the ruler and his murdering army. History apart from Scripture gives us no record of this slaughter of innocents, but it surely fits in with what we know of Herod's character. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian writes that Herod was afflicted with "distemper which greatly increased upon him after a severe manner...his bowels were also ulcerated" and he had "difficulty breathing, which was very loathsome on account of the stench of his breath." Naturally, then, he was in a bad mood most of the time! Herod was also known for rampant paranoia which caused him to execute his wife (whom he dearly loved) and his two sons. Mary and Joseph did not ask for celebrity, but now they are the object of this madman's rage. Last week we saw the tragic irony that, though Jesus was born to save the people of this world, his birth brought about the death of all the young boys in a whole town, and the life-long grief of their parents. But that's why he had to come. A world like that needs a Savior!

I have already referenced an old TV show. How about an old movie? The entry of Jesus into this world reminds me of the situation of John Conner in the *Terminator* movies (especially the first two). John Conner is the one who will lead the resistance in the future, so the forces of evil, the machines, keep sending back cyborgs from the future to kill him, and in the effort they kill all sorts of other innocent people, and John and his mother have to live life on the run, and in a confusing twist, they are chased by and later aided by the Governor of California. There isn't a lot of romance or warm-fuzzies or soft lights or sleigh bells in those movies, but they parallel the entry of our Savior into this world.

But look what has evolved. This holiday, which still bears Christ's name, has morphed beyond recognition. Lights and holly, bells and stockings, eggnog and fruitcake, Bing Crosby and

Danny Kaye, trees and candy canes, shopping, shopping, and more shopping - and of course, the Big Guy.

This Christmas Eve, many American families will gather around their tree and, out of a desire to inject some tradition into their Christmas, someone in the family will read aloud the traditional Christmas story. **Luke 2? Matthew 1-2?** No. Clement Clarke Moore's poem originally titled "A Visit From Saint Nicholas," now known mostly by its first line, "*'Twas the Night Before Christmas*," a poem that is responsible for giving us much of our descriptive knowledge about Santa Claus. Christmas in America is, for many, a secular holiday - complete with a patron saint, and a received text.

But since we really do believe that Christmas means something very different, I'd like to suggest that we prove it. Maybe this year in your family should be "the year without a Santa Claus," or at least the year (the first of many) where his role is greatly reduced, where it is stressed that Santa is just for fun, but Christ is real! Give some gifts, but also teach your children to give to others - a visit to an older person, a toy to a friend who doesn't have as much, some money to a missionary. We like to talk about the joy of giving to others in a way that doesn't benefit us. Let's actually try it, and find that it really is there.

So take the opportunity Christmas offers to celebrate Christ. As a family give to someone outside your family who needs it. Read and take part in The Christmas Path. Come to church on Christmas Eve. Gather together and read the Christmas story - the real one. Make this holiday one that centers on the one who came to save us all from our sins.

INVITATION