



So, I am not the best in the gift department for Christmas. That requires writing ideas down on-the-spot when someone mentions a specific item out-loud or a level of sentimentality or really sitting down and thinking about all the possibilities for people, none of which are in my wheelhouse, to say the least. And yet, last year, my wife, Sarah, and I, and one of our nieces were rummaging through a garage down on the family farm in northwest Ohio, and we found this pile of old VHS tapes amidst dirt and grime and some far-too-fresh evidence of pesky varmints. Nevertheless, we dragged those tapes out and

sifted through them one-by-one. There emerged a few past Christmas family gatherings and some church Christmas programs as well. I immediately thought that would pull at the sentimental heart strings for my mom, especially, so I brought those tapes back to this corner of Ohio and had them converted to DVDs (being the momma's boy and all).

I remember bringing home the finished product and watching one December 25 morning from decades ago. And to be honest, it was rather eerie to see that video on the screen, as if people were being brought back to life inside that television, including grandfathers, who are no longer with us. Or, for those of us still around: how much some of us have changed in terms of our outward appearance, but personalities still so shockingly similar to now. I won't tell you how truly embarrassing it was to watch myself rifle through presents selfishly seeking out mine alone. There were just so many memories packed inside those moving images, all wrapped in countless layers of emotions from love to sadness and pure heart-warming serenity.

However, during this whole process of getting old deteriorating VHS tapes cleaned up and restored to some passable level of digital quality, a gift that I thought would be the biggest hit of all for a holiday that's so jam-packed with the most intoxicating nostalgia and sentimentality to the max; except, it was also that holiday last year when Sarah and I felt it was best to inform the family that two additions would be joining as grandchildren ten and eleven for my parents. Yes, the DVDs were nice and all, with those memories bringing smiles and nice, warm fuzzy feelings to go along with it; but it was new life, the future that truly unleashed relentless excitement. And so, I wonder if that is what Christmas, this holy night, needs to be about as well.

Yes, this is the holiday that soothingly invites us to look back not just at Bethlehem with the help of the Gospel of Luke. This is the night that provides us the heart-warming time and space to look back with awe on packed-sanctuaries with enough candlelight to overwhelm entire city blocks, to crave the mornings of our youth when we ran down the stairs without a single care in the world and Nat King Cole playing in the background and the entrancing wafting smells from the kitchen; the days when we thought all was completely well with the entire universe. This most precious night has its way of making us yearn to dig deep and find the past we so desperately adore, and insist on entrenching ourselves there throughout these evening hours and doing our absolute best to hold onto those moments with the tightest grip imaginable into the next day and beyond.

Except, Christ didn't seem interested to stay in the past. The Messiah did not want to stay in a cutesy baby form, so all of us can go there with our nice, warm fuzzy feelings to fill all of Bethlehem. There was a future of hope that had to be molded with a Savior who was infatuated with relentless new life. This is the Lord who, for some reason, utterly craves to get into the thick of our dirt and grime and fresh evidence of our fears and guilts and worries galore, and drag us out into the ultimate refreshment of grace and mercy and unstoppable love for all times and places.

Yes, this is the night celebrating a most wonderful past event in which God proved just how much we were and continue to be loved. Without that holy night, without a transformational Good Friday afternoon, without an eternal-altering Easter Sunday morning, who knows what the future would hold? However, tonight is also about those whose past they would rather not relive in any form at all. Tonight, is also for those whose family stories are tragic. This is the night for the people who need reassured that they have a beautiful present and future, because God can stare down any past and still love the person anyway.

This is about the God who is infatuated with our present and future, too. This is about the God who came to fill our future not with disdain and fear and worry, but with hope and captivating energy and a belief that good can and will most certainly come. This is the God who will more than invite us to read through the past events of Christ coming among us and showing us what true and absolutely mind-boggling love looks like, but will insist we turn the pages into our own life, that way we be authors of peace and compassion, ourselves, to bring but a glimpse of the holy night in Bethlehem into our own homes. This is the night for those who are not so sure they are worthy of Christ coming into their life for Christmas, or any day for that matter, and making you realize that the Messiah has already knocked the door down of your guilt and fear and your wonderings of whether you're good enough; knocked it all down and setup the most important manger scene of all: not the one in Bethlehem long ago, but in the depths of your heart.

Yes, that eventual DVD product reminded our family of loved ones we continue to miss, not to mention simpler times in our minds, at least. It's safe to say there was also plenty of Christ in that living room from long ago that not even death would stand a chance against for our cherished loved ones. However, this Christmas story is about even Greater News: that there is just as much Emmanuel, God with us, now as there ever has been. There will be just as much Jesus Christ in the next generation too, as if this Messiah showed up into our world with so much love that he absolutely refused to ever leave us. And for that Greatest News of this most holy night, we certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!