

Shayne Looper: A Christmas case of mistaken identity

By Shayne Looper More Content Now You either love Christmas or you hate it, or you do both at different times. The playwright George Bernard Shaw clearly hated it. He wrote, "Christmas is forced upon a reluctant and disgusted nation by the shopkeepers and the press; on its own merits it would wither and shrivel in the fiery breath of universal hatred."

Christopher Hitchens was another Christmas-hater. He referred to it as a "moral and aesthetic nightmare." His ambition was "to write an anti-Christmas column that becomes fiercer every year ...;" James S. Henry wrote that "the Grinch has it right," and called Christmas "a short-run-oriented economic experiment that has been tried and found wanting."

Christmas is brought up on the same charges annually: Greed, corruption, misappropriation of funds, and contributing to the delinquency of minors. And Christmas is annually found guilty in the court of public appeal, not just by intellectuals and atheists but by our neighbors and friends who sit down the pew from us. They say, "I can't wait until Christmas is over. The whole thing is just insane."

If I were the public defender assigned to represent Christmas, I would begin my defense by admitting that a crime has taken place. Shaw was not wrong: The corporate shopkeepers have bullied and lied and coerced people into misappropriation of funds. Monies that should have been used to save for college or pay taxes have been spent on ridiculous and transitory Christmas gifts that will be forgotten or lost before Easter.

I'll even agree with Hitchens. For many people, Christmas is a moral nightmare. When the Black Friday gang tramples and swears and engages in hand-to-hand combat in order to get Tickle-Me-Elmo for their 2-year-olds, the moral universe has turned upside-down.

I will not deny the fact that these crimes and moral outrages have taken place. But I will deny that Christmas was the perpetrator. This has clearly been a case of mistaken identity.

Christmas bears no responsibility for the secular frenzy that takes place each December. It is not the Spirit of Christmas but the spirit of greed that stirs up the ravenous appetite for more and bigger gifts. It is not the Spirit of Christmas that causes mini-van driving moms to bust jaws over some Walmart door-buster. Christmas has never forced people - or even invited them - into the feverish pursuit of holiday perfection that characterizes December in America.

It is not Christmas that does these things, but an imposter. Christmas was and still is the celebration of the birth of the savior God sent humanity. Christmas is like the commemoration of D-Day in France: A grateful celebration of a rescue. But this invasion took place in Bethlehem not Normandy, and liberation came through a baby not an army.

We celebrate Christmas because it marks the beginning (from our perspective, not God's) of the most remarkable and costly rescue effort in history. Jesus was born, it will be remembered, to "save his people from their sins." The oppression under which humanity suffers, though often external, is principally internal; though sometimes physical, is always spiritual. Humans are in bondage and in need of liberation. The birth of Jesus marks the coming of the liberator.

Christmas, like D-Day, was an opening volley. There would be pushback and various campaigns. There would be allies and adversaries and, in the end, a decisive battle. But Christmas remains the watershed moment that marks not only the liberation of humanity but of all creation.

Imagine if the same kind of commercialization that surrounds Christmas was part of the annual celebration of D-Day. Try to envision the French and U.S. presidents, the crown prince of England and dignitaries from all over the world gathered at the American cemetery in Normandy. While the Archbishop of Rouen says an invocation, hawkers peddle souvenirs. People ring bells and ask for money. Raffle tickets are circulated. Crowds gather not to remember the invasion and its heroes but to buy worthless trinkets and vote on the best decorated veteran.

None of that would change what happened on Utah Beach, nor could you blame the gauche celebration on the men who landed there. Likewise, our Christmas celebration doesn't change what happened in Bethlehem, and you certainly can't blame the baby for it. That's not on him. It's on us.

- Shayne Looper is the pastor of Lockwood Community Church in Branch County, Michigan. Read more at shaynelooper.com.

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