

## Christmas at the Movies

### *A Charlie Brown Christmas*

In 1965, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* first aired on television. The director, Bill Melendez, told Charles Schultze, the *Peanuts* creator: “We can’t do this; it’s too religious.”

Schultze responded: “Bill, if we don’t do it, who else can? We’re the only ones who can do it.”

This December marked the 49<sup>th</sup> consecutive year that *A Charlie Brown Christmas* aired on nationwide television. It comes at a time when there are increasingly widespread attempts to eliminate any Christmas message from the public arena – whether singing Christmas carols, displays of manger scenes, etc.

The question remains: “Where does one find the true meaning of Christmas?” Let me personalize the question: “Where will you find the true meaning of Christmas this year?”

The first discovery for Charlie Brown is that the true meaning of Christmas is not found in the busyness of Christmas.

Is Christmas busy for you? – Shopping, baking, cleaning, wrapping, entertaining? It’s really easy to define our Christmas by the level of our busyness and activities.

The formula in our mind is this: Busyness = Success of the season. If I am not occupied 100 percent of the time, I somehow missed something. For some, busyness keeps them from having to think much about the meaning of Christmas.

Now, there’s nothing wrong with Christmas activities and involvement. The danger is when they begin to define the meaning of Christmas for us. Here are some suggestions for you to consider:

- 1) Don’t get lost in the busyness of activities. It’s a choice you make.
- 2) Set aside some time for reflection, for sleep, for the important things like focused time with your family.
- 3) Don’t let your schedule dictate the next four weeks. Plan wisely, appropriately.

4) Maybe say “no” to some things to prevent overload.

Remember the story of Mary and Martha in the New Testament? Jesus came to visit them at their home one day. Martha was all distracted and consumed with preparations and serving. By the way – all good things!

But Mary sat at Jesus’ feet, listening to him teach. Martha, a bit overwhelmed with all the activities, said to Jesus, “Lord, tell Mary to help me!”

Jesus replied, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset over all the details. But there is only one thing that is necessary. Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

May I ask you: What are you going to choose this Christmas season?

Well, if the meaning of Christmas isn’t in the busyness of the season, what about the stuff of Christmas? Charlie Brown finds that his sister is consumed with her list for Santa. But for him, it just can’t be the true meaning of Christmas.

How much is the meaning of Christmas wrapped up in our spending?

- We are not going to be outdone by our neighbor, or our brother-in-law
- Or, buying just for the sake of appeasing someone – trying to buy love or buy peace

Remember that after Christmas in December comes judgment day in January. Someone has cleverly put new words to the old tune: *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. It goes like this:

O little Bank Americard  
You bring me Christmas cheer  
Without your clout I have no doubt  
No gifts I’d send this year

Your credit line allows me  
To run up bills quite large  
And when I’m through exhausting you  
I’ll use my Master Charge

(Then we sing in January)

O little Bank Americard  
You bring me discontent  
I calculate your interest rate  
Is over twelve percent

Each month you cry for payment  
My letter box bombards  
I'm one more sap caught in your trap  
Next year I'll just send cards.

What can you do this Christmas? Suggestions:

- 1) Set a plan – how much will you spend? How much can you afford to spend? Plan, then don't feel guilty.
- 2) Watch out for just “emotional” buying. I could go bankrupt this Christmas if I spent on my little grandson proportional to how much I love him! But then, on the day of his dad's birth, I did go out and buy him a train set☺
- 3) Set aside money for when the bills come due. Or better yet, pay cash as much as possible.
- 3) Look for bargains, or maybe even make some gifts.

Here's another idea – instead of one more gift, how about giving to help others. In 2006, five pastors decided to make Christmas a revolutionary event by encouraging their church communities to Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More and Love All . The response was overwhelming and the *Advent Conspiracy* was born.

The suggested beneficiaries of the *Advent Conspiracy* are Living Water International and International Justice Mission – where our own John Lax works.

Again, it comes down to choices – to our values. Jesus told the rich man: “Take care...for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Most everything in our culture promotes commercialism as the meaning of Christmas. What are you going to choose?

What about people in our lives? Will they dictate the meaning of Christmas? Charlie Brown discovers there seems no way to please Lucy!

Is the true meaning of Christmas just pleasing other people? I know that Christmas can be a stressful time in relationships. With all the pressures of gifting and entertaining, you are thrown in with people you might not necessarily like or get along with well. Suggestions:

1) Love them as Christ loves you – unconditionally. Act in a loving way towards them because of who you are in Christ – not because they deserve it or are worthy of it.

2) Thicken your skin. Choose not to be hyper-sensitive. Don't read something into every comment or moment of silence – like Lucy did.

3) Guard your expectations. We all envision the perfect family get-together, perfect relatives, perfect kids or parents, perfect dinner and entertaining, perfect gifts. Listen folks, perfect doesn't exist! Temper your expectations with reality.

People disappoint; people will let you down. People will be people. Most times they cannot, they will not live up to your expectations.

4) Don't take yourself too seriously. Relax; loosen up a bit; laugh at yourself and life.

Choose not to allow people to rob you of Christmas joy.

What about Christmas traditions? Charlie Brown discovers that traditions alone don't hold the secret to the meaning of Christmas.

Do you need to check off Christmas traditions or you feel that Christmas is a failure? We need just a certain kind of tree, the right amount of lights. "We're on a schedule here people!" When you eat, when you open gifts, etc.

Traditions can bring joy and a sense of continuity and connectedness. They can also bring disappointment, failed expectations, stress, and so on.

Traditions: we all have them. But, here's a word of caution: if something doesn't go quite right – don't attach the meaning of Christmas to your traditions.

So, where do we find the true meaning of Christmas? If it's not in the busyness of the season, or the "stuff" of Christmas, or in people, or in the Christmas traditions, then where? Linus tells Charlie Brown the answer: he quotes the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those  
with whom he is pleased!"

Christmas is all about God keeping a promise – to send a Savior. You see, the real meaning of Christmas is not found in the cradle; it is found at the Cross. The Apostle Paul put it this way:

"But God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" – *Romans 5:8*

The shepherds heard this explanation of the meaning of the first Christmas: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."