

LUMINARIA

What's Your Bag?

Text: John 1:6-9, 15

What Is Christmas About?

If someone walked up to you at the supermarket or train station and said: "Excuse me, I've just arrived here from Offthebeatentrackland, and I'm trying to understand the customs you have here in America, especially this "Christmas" holiday of yours. I know it has something to do with BAGS. I've seen pictures of a big man in a red suit carrying a huge *bag* on his back. I see people carrying all sorts of brightly colored *bags* with names on them. I've even been in homes where they have these sock-shaped *bags* hung near their fireplaces. Christmas is clearly all about bags. Have I got that right? Is that what Christmas is about for you?" How would you answer?

Author Steve May writes: "Every year I tell myself that I should keep a list of all the things people say Christmas is supposed to be about — because every year it seems the descriptions get a little more off track. You hear it on talk shows, in Christmas specials, in office conversations, in political speeches, and on and on. You know what I mean. They say things like: 'Giving — isn't that what Christmas is all about?' Or, 'Helping the unfortunate — isn't that what Christmas is all about?' Or, 'Being with family — isn't that what Christmas is all about?'" In one of his "straight-from-the-*Headlines*" routines, Jay Leno even featured an advertisement from a local newspaper that had been placed by the "Center for Dental Implants." The ad says, "The Gift of Chewing Is What the Holidays Are All About."¹

Now, if you're anything like me, then you've likely exercised THAT gift plentifully over the past few weeks. But we know that Christmas is about something much more than strapping on the feed-bag or lugging the shopping bag. It's about something much deeper than filling the charity bag or rounding the family base-bags. As worthy as those investments are, Christians have another kind of bag, a different sort of job, during this sacred season. Let me first set the biblical foundation for this and then picture for you what it might look like for us to take up or lay down this different sort of bag in the days ahead.

The Importance of a Candle

If you are just joining us this morning, we have been exploring together what scholars call the Prologue to the Gospel of John. The Apostle has been telling us that the One born in Bethlehem is the divine "Logos" — the eternal, star-breathing, Universe-sustaining Word of God -- come to inhabit mere "sarx," "**flesh**." He has come, says John, as "**the Light and life**" that men and women so desperately need. He has come to penetrate the deep darkness of sin and death with the glorious light of God's "**grace and truth**." He has come to breathe new life into any who, like Mary, are humble, poor, and hungry enough to receive Him. As John puts it, "**to all who received him, to**

those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God.”

In the center of John’s discourse, the Apostle focuses in on the bizarre reality that many people are not aware of or not appreciative of the radiant gift that God is offering. In verse 5, John says: **“The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.”** A moment later in verse 10, he’s back to hitting this theme again when he says: **“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”** The Apostle is saying in, effect, isn’t it sad that we live in a world where the sin-glasses are so dark, that some people don’t even understand Christ’s light? Isn’t it crazy that the Word made this world and everybody in it... He came to help them... but they either didn’t recognize him or else they outright rejected him? Some people are like accident victims alongside a road who beat away the great surgeon who stops by the roadside to save them.

Many Christians feel that way during the Christmas season. We get discouraged by all the ways in which the true message of Christmas is ignored or pushed away by so many. But that’s why I think it is important for us to make note of what the Apostle writes in verses 6-9. Right in the middle of painting a picture of this great spiritual darkness, the Apostle points us toward the work of a small but steady candle. He tells us of the ministry of Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptizer. Listen to the text: **“There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning [the] light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”**

When I first read this text it seemed like a somewhat random digression. And then it hit me. The Apostle is sending a message to the Christian community, I think. He’s telling us that in the midst of a darkened world, the ministry of those willing to be witnesses to the light matters very much. I’d go so far as to say that God still calls us to do what John the Baptizer did. We’re still sent out as witnesses, to testify concerning the Light. We’re called to live with an unquenching passion that there will come a day when all men and women might somehow come to believe. We’re meant to do all that we can to help people find their way into relationship with the True Light that can give light to everyone, the Light who still seeks to come into every corner of this world.

How We Might Bear Witness to the Light

Have you ever seen those little paper bags that people sometimes put out along their walkway on Christmas Eve? They’re just ordinary paper bags. They’re made of stuff that crinkles, crumples, tears, and biodegrades. But they have some ballast in them, usually sand, that keeps them from tipping over or being blown over. They have a candle in them, usually not a gigantic one, but enough so that it shines through. Those little paper lanterns are called LUMINARIA. When we lived in San Diego, I learned that putting these bags out isn’t just a cheaper way of doing holiday decorations. It is an old

Spanish tradition -- part of a nine-day celebration called a POSADA, the Spanish word for "Inn." The Posada commemorates the trials Mary and Joseph underwent in trying to find a place to stay on their journey to Bethlehem. The Posada marks the mysterious reality that so many in the world will not make a place for their own Savior. And yet amidst the darkness, believers light candles to emblazon the pathway of Jesus, daring to believe He will yet find a way in.

John the Baptizer was a Luminaria. He was not in himself the True Light. He was made of stuff that crinkled. But he had the ballast of God's Word in him and the flame of the Holy Spirit in him and God used him to prepare the way of the Lord by bearing witness to the Light. What if that was our bag this Christmas too? What if followers of Jesus everywhere became less concerned with cursing the darkness or with grieving all the ways the true meaning of Christmas is not recognized or Christ is not received or is outright rejected and resolved to put their imagination and energy instead into being witnesses to the Light. What could that look like in practice? Let me offer ten quick ideas – the first few close to home and the others spreading out. Try a few out or come up with your own.

1. If you live with other people, before you go to bed on Christmas Eve, crawl into bed or sit by the fire, and read the timeless story. I don't mean "Twas the Night Before Christmas." If you want to read that first, that's fine. But end with Luke chapter 2 or maybe John chapter 1. If there are others there, invite them to each read a part or say what struck them in the text. If no one else is home, pick up the phone and do this with someone else that you know.

2. If you've got small children, then before you tear into the presents Christmas morning, sing Happy Birthday to Jesus. I know it sounds a bit hokey. It's a very small act of witness, but your kids will not forget this. They may be doing it with your grandkids some day. Thank Jesus that on the celebration of HIS birthday, somehow WE have been showered with so many party favors.

3. Somewhere in the middle of the morning or day, go back and read the first five verses of John chapter 1 again. Stop and pray: "God, thank you that you made everything from which these presents are made. Thank you for the light of Your love for us that shines through the love of the people who gave us these gifts. Those people wouldn't exist if you hadn't made them.

4. Come by the Live Nativity and spend a few moments standing or kneeling in front of it and praising God for coming to earth. Ask Him to make a home in your heart the way he entered that stable. Remember his words: "**Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.**"² Ask Him to show you what is blocking Him from occupying you further. If people stare at you as they drive by, don't be self-conscious. You're just a candle in a bag.

5. Sometime in the next few days, write down on a piece of paper a brief testimony as to how God has "enlightened" your life. John said of Jesus, "**we beheld his glory, full**

of grace and truth."³ Make a bulleted list of the major truths or amazing graces Christ has shone on you. Put the list in a box, wrap it up nicely, and give it to someone younger this Christmas or next Christmas. It may help light another flame.

6. Next year, send a Christmas card instead of a holiday card, if that isn't already your habit. If it's going to someone Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Atheist, or Californian (I can say that, I came from California) simply write in, "Christ fills my heart with love and admiration for you." I don't think anyone will find that offensive. They may even be drawn to the Source of that light.

7. Ask people where they are spending Christmas. If you find someone on their own, let him or her know that there's room at your Inn. They will not forget this. Your kids, if they're in your home, will not forget this. It will witness to the one who said: "**Whatever you do for someone in need, you do for me.**"⁴

8. Invite someone who may not have a church home to come with you to one of the Christmas Eve services here or near to where you'll be. This past week, I invited the lady at the Container Store, the woman at the McDonald's drive-thru, the clerk at Blockbuster's, the gal who cut my hair. Can you cover the dry-cleaner, the grocery-store check-out person, or the kid serving coffee at Starbucks? Then, whatever church we attend on Christmas Eve, let's be especially kind to people in the parking lot... Let's make room for someone in the pew... Let's smile and say hello to everyone we can there. You never know who is checking out church for the first time or for the first in a long time to see if there really is any light and love there. "**Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,**" said the writer to the Hebrews, "**for by so doing some have entertained angels unawares.**"⁵ What if by our witness we at least gave the impression that our church is the sort of place where angels might choose to hang out?

9. Give a gift to someone who has absolutely no reason to expect it from you. I've told some of you that for years, my grandmother made a long pilgrimage on Christmas Eve out to see my great-grandmother. She had to pass through four toll-booths on her way. At each one, she'd pull up to one of the booths that had a live toll-collector, give the person there a bottle of wine or champagne with a red ribbon around the neck, and wish them a Merry Christmas. Now I am NOT advocating advancing the cause of alcoholism or encouraging you to intoxicate the local toll-collectors. But what if some of us found some *harmless* way to give a gift with no strings attached to somebody who would never expect it. What if we said on the card or with our own lips: "I don't mean to sound weird, but what Jesus has done for me stills shocks and surprises me. It's all such amazing grace. I keep looking for ways to pass grace on." The Apostle John writes in chapter 1 verse 16: "**From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.**"

10. Do this kind of thing again and again, all year-long. Keep lighting candles and placing them, one after another, wherever the shadows fall. There may come a day, if the Lord tarries, when the path of witness is so winsome and widespread that darkness

hardly has a place to hide – and thousands more have experienced Christ’s light coming inside.

Isn’t it funny? It turns out that Christmas IS about the bags, after all. What’s yours going to be?

¹ Steve May, “What Christmas Is All About,” *Preaching Today*.

² Revelation 3:20

³ John 1:14

⁴ Matthew 25:40

⁵ Hebrews 13:2