

After the Lights Come Down

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A nighttime drive through my neighborhood is almost blinding: lighted Santas, reindeer, elves, trains, soldiers, gingerbread figures, snowmen. Even the occasional nativity scene includes enough voltage for a stage production, and often as not, Santa Claus takes his place alongside magi and shepherds.

Home and business owners outline trees and shrubberies with clear and multi-colored light strands. Mailboxes, functional and practical eleven months out of the year, become another opportunity to herald the season with greenery and bows. Wreaths hang from doors, candles brighten windowsills and yard signs remind Santa to "Stop here!"

Even the psychic reader along the main highway of my weekday commute has decorated the building's exterior with seasonal lights and inflatable Santa and Grinch figures. What does Christmas mean there, I wonder?

Physical reminders of Christmas are everywhere now. But what about next month? Next year?

It's after we take down the lights and store the decorations that we really have opportunities to demonstrate our understanding of the Christmas event. It's then that the rest of the world can more clearly see whether the God who became incarnate now lives within us.

What matters about Christmas is not how we decorate the outside, but what we allow God to do on the inside, in our hearts.

We keep the true light of Christmas burning throughout the year when we:

-Work toward the common good with those whose views and practices differ from ours. We compromise where we can and avoid silly disagreements over things that are simply unimportant in the broad scheme of things.

-Listen to and share stories of ways God is growing the kingdom, one person at a time. God's plan and activity in the world are much greater than our limited experiences reveal. Both our lives and God's kingdom are enriched when we broaden our perspectives.

-Cheerfully and gratefully serve wherever God places us. Every place is a place where God is at work, and each person can be a conduit of God's creative and redemptive love.

-Take positive actions that help eliminate chronic global poverty and hunger. Genuine Christian faith reveals and demonstrates itself in loving, practical actions.

-Express Christian faith in creative ways. There are infinite ways to tell "the old, old story."

-Look beyond appearances and see people as God sees them. On the heart of each person we can trace the fingerprints of God.

-Become risk-takers for the gospel's sake, much like the seeking magi and bewildered shepherds who followed the star.

-Overcome cultural, racial, linguistic, economic and political barriers. Ignoring difficult realities only gives them greater room to grow. Naming and defining them is the first step toward eliminating them.

-Resolve conflicts productively and healthily, following the Jesus model.

-Give faithfully and unselfishly, demonstrating our gratitude that God has supplied all our needs and our trust that God will continue to do so.

-Build a Christian community on planks of unity and sharing, a spiritual base where everyone feels at home.

-Recognize that the gospel speaks to all languages and cultures. Whether they recognize it or not, whether they know the meaning of Christmas or not, Jesus came for everyone. When we act like he belongs only to us, we tarnish the message of Christmas.

While we enjoy Christmas lights and decorations for a few weeks each year, what

pleases and brings joy to God are hearts changed for a lifetime by the one whose birth we celebrate.

Merry Christmas.

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