

Text: Lk 2.1-20

For our afternoon service, I was searching for a topic. I wasn't sure I wanted to start with another "Ask the Pastor" topic, so I was looking around. I went to the *Christianity Today* site and searched their articles for one on Christmas.

I discovered one from last year, called "Is Christmas a 'Western' Holiday in Asia?" The author compiled reports from people in various Asian countries about how Christmas is practiced in their locales.

The reports were all quite similar, in a broad outline, but there are unique things in each country. I thought these stories might be worth taking a look at the practices and then using that story to think about our own practices.

The first country mentioned in the article was Taiwan, the island nation off the coast of Mainland China. The Taiwanese have a long history of rivalry with China. The old Chinese government, led by Chiang Kai Shek fled there during the Mao revolution. Mainland China claims the nation for itself, whereas Taiwan considers itself to be the true government of China.

Meanwhile, both regions have progressed from the starting point, developing their own culture and history.

We are going to think about the connection of Taiwanese culture with Western culture especially with respect to Christmas.

Then we will read a portion of the Christmas story, and think about what should be our attitude towards Christmas in our country.

I. The culture of Christmas in Taiwan**A. The general culture**

"Christmas is known as a Western holiday to the general public in Taiwan. Because it is heavily influenced by its highly commercialized image from Western media and enterprises, such as the Black Friday sales, Christmas has been celebrated here as a holiday that comes with grand shopping events and fancy meals at fine restaurants."¹

¹ Wen-Chuan Lin, assistant professor of church music at Taiwan Graduate School of Theology in Isobel Ong, "Is Christmas a 'Western' Holiday in Asia?," Magazine, Christianity Today,

1. Population: mostly Buddhist
2. Knowledge of Christmas

“most children know about Santa Claus and might even know a Christmas song or two! Parents of children at popular English schools expect a full Christmas festival, complete with gift exchanges, singing, and of course, a visit to the school from Santa! Many schools will perform a kind of Christmas pageant or play with sugar plum fairies, reindeer, snowflakes, elves and other Christmas characters singing on stage for parents.”²

3. Pop culture more influential than Christianity: the Western materialism fully embraced “as a warm-up to Lunar New Year”³
4. Many more Christmas lights than N. America

“If Taiwanese Christmas was exclusively a festival of lights, I think many people would be just as delighted.”⁴

B. The Christian culture

“Christians in Taiwan observe Christmas differently by viewing it as an opportunity to share the gospel. Theologically speaking, the celebration of the birth of Jesus should surely not be labeled as a ‘Western’ event. However, when considering the historical development of liturgy and how this festival was introduced to Taiwan by missionaries from the West over a period of time, the ‘Western’ image of Christmas seems indelible.

“Personally, I do not mind using or improvising some Western elements for Christmas celebrations, whether in musical presentations, vigils, or caroling. However, I always suggest that churches ought to remove or

December 19, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/december-web-only/christmas-asia-japan-vietnam-malaysia-mongolia.html>.

² “Christmas in Taiwan,” whyChristmas?com, accessed December 9, 2023, <https://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/taiwan>.

³ Philip S. Chang, “Christmas in Taiwan Is Another Holiday,” *Medium* (blog), January 4, 2023, <https://medium.com/@philipschang/christmas-in-taiwan-is-another-holiday-8f4fa8ea6a8a>.

⁴ Chang.

downplay elements that have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus, such as Santa Claus, Christmas trees, or gift exchanges.

“Some churches will purchase **Taiwanese-style Christmas cakes** as gifts to share the good news in their neighborhoods. Churches can focus more on spreading the meaning of Jesus’ birth and second coming to remind people why Christians should celebrate Christmas. They can also carry out activities like feeding the hungry, aiding seniors and the disabled, and visiting the ill and imprisoned to incarnate Christmas into our current context.

II. The story of Christmas in Luke

Read Luke 2.1-20

A. The real meaning of Christmas:

1. Incarnation
2. Redemption

B. The simplicity of the first Christmas

1. There was no “cultural Christmas” in the Roman Empire
2. There really was no “cultural Christmas” for over 300 yrs after Christ’s birth

The focus of Mary & Joseph (and the early church) was the message of Christmas

III. A perspective on Christmas

A. The history of Christmas in the west (very simplified)

1. In pre-colonial Europe (esp. England) Christmas connected to drunkenness and bad behaviour
2. In colonial America, Puritans refused to celebrate Christmas
3. Christmas culture in America began with Episcopalians and Unitarians creating a church culture of Christmas

Christmas songs, a focus on becoming “a good man” (think Ebenezer Scrooge)

4. Victorian culture created the Christmas traditions that we most cherish and long for

5. Post-WW2 commercialism coopted our tradition and makes it the madhouse we now experience

This is a great oversimplification!

B. The celebration of Christmas in simplicity (and the Spirit)

1. There is a theology of Christmas: Creation, Fall, Redemption (we do a good job with this)
2. There is a fellowship of Christmas: both in home and at church (we do this well also)
3. There could be more outreach at Christmas
 - a. We've done a few outreach things in the past (and may be too late to organize something now)
 - b. Given the darkness in the world about Christ and Christmas, we could hold a Christmas missions offering

Conclusion:

Now I don't want to fall into a simple lament about commercialism and materialism!

However, I think we should consider how little people around us know about Christmas.

Over the next couple of weeks, let's purpose to speak to someone about Christ and Christmas, and let's think about a missions offering for Christmas eve.