

## Text: Mt 1.18-25

This afternoon we are going to follow the format of last Sunday afternoon, except we will talk about three Asian countries and how they celebrate Christmas.

I asked Daniel about his flag collection and so this afternoon we have on display some of his flags.

We will describe what goes on at Christmas time in three more Asian nations this afternoon: Vietnam, Japan, & Korea

You will see an overlap and similarities in these descriptions. Then I am going to read the Christmas passage from Matthew 1.

Our world lies in darkness. The way so many nations of the world have taken to celebrating Christmas, we can see they have some of the trappings of Christmas, but they have none of the light.

I want to lay on our hearts a burden for the lost as we think of these things.

**Proposition:** The world lies in darkness, let us be concerned to bring it light.

## I. Christmas in three nations

### A. Vietnam

1. Comments from *Saralen Tran, lecturer in Christian education at Hanoi Bible College*<sup>1</sup>

“Christmas is not recognized by the Vietnamese government as an official holiday, but rather a religious event.

Workplaces and schools operate as usual. The last week of December is the busiest time for enterprises to close the year and to make final deals while school children take their final exams.

“However, like in other countries, Christmas is celebrated as a feast. Shopping malls, restaurants, and other public places are nicely decorated. Also, people often gather on big streets or city corners on Christmas Eve. Recently, growing

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<sup>1</sup> Isobel Ong, “Is Christmas a ‘Western’ Holiday in Asia?,” Magazine, Christianity Today, December 19, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/december-web-only/christmas-asia-japan-vietnam-malaysia-mongolia.html>.

international cooperation among businesses have raised demand for Christmas to be recognized as a holiday, but the communist government is still considering it as it has religious significance.”

2. Christians in Vietnam attend services that run for two days and two nights
3. Non-Christians invited to hear the Gospel through the Christmas stories
4. Christmas Eve is usually a big gathering, with choirs and bands preparing as much as three months in advance

## B. Japan

1. Comments from *Mieko Iwata, associate professor of Christian ethics at Tokyo Christian University*<sup>2</sup>

“Christmas in Japan is fully established as a Japanese festival, although it is recognized as an event of Western origin. By the Taisho era (1912–1926), Santa Claus was already known, and historical documents show that children looked forward to receiving Christmas presents.

“In Japan, Christmas is considered a day spent with lovers and friends because of media portrayals that have [painted](#) it as an occasion for a romantic night out. Couples typically have dinner together and give each other gifts. Families gather on the night of December 24 instead. A Christmas Eve dinner without chicken and cake is unthinkable in Japan, probably because of the success of Kentucky Fried Chicken and cake company promotions.”

2. Christian churches promote Christmas to celebrate the birth of Christ
3. Most secular Japanese are not curious about it – seeing it as a ‘Western’ cultural event
4. Services are typically held on the closest Sunday to Christmas, as it is not a holiday in Japan

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<sup>2</sup> Ong.

- Christian churches tend to use Western Christmas hymns like “Silent Night,” “Angels We Have Heard on High,” and “Joy to the World.”

## C. Korea

- Comments from *Chiheon Shin, pastor at City Center Church*<sup>3</sup>

“The perception that Christmas is a “Western” or foreign holiday in Korea remains because there are other traditional holidays, like Seollal (Korean Lunar New Year) and Chuseok (Mid-Autumn Festival), in our calendar.

“Christmas in Korea is celebrated in kindergartens, schools, private academies, and in families, but it is often recognized as a day when Santa Claus gives gifts to kids. Also, it is considered a day for young people to confess their feelings to someone or go on a date, like on Valentine’s Day.”

- From [whychristmas.com](http://whychristmas.com)<sup>4</sup>

“There are more Christians in South Korea (the Republic of Korea) than in many other Asian countries such as China and Japan, so Christmas is celebrated more widely. Christians make up about 25-30% of the population; with about 15% of people being Buddhist and 56% of people not having a faith or religion.”

“Unlike Japan, Christmas is an official public holiday in South Korea - so people have the day off work and school! But they go back on the 26th. There's a longer official winter break in the New Year.”

“Department stores put on big displays of decorations. There's also an amazing display of lights in the capital city, Seoul. The lights are all over the city center including the bridges over the Han River.

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<sup>3</sup> Ong.

<sup>4</sup> [whychristmas.com](http://whychristmas.com) / JPC-DESIGN, “Christmas in South Korea on Whychristmas?Com,” accessed December 16, 2023, <https://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/south-korea>.

“Some people (especially Christians and westerners who live in South Korea) will have decorations at home including a Christmas tree.”

And apparently Santa is also called “Santa Grandfather” in Korea

3. Christians in Korea often spend time with their church family or with “marginalized” people, bringing gifts and aid
4. Christians also will often join together to put on Christmas plays, musicals, and singing in the city streets
5. *Chiheon Shin* is concerned that Christians in Korea make Christmas more than a “Western event”

“We need to impoverish ourselves voluntarily to reach out to our neighbors who are marginalized, lonely, and discriminated against in society, including immigrants who have recently entered Korea. That is how we can contextualize Christmas and remove the misconception that it is a ‘Western’ event.”<sup>5</sup>

## II. Christmas in Matthew (1.18-25)

Read Mt 1.18-25

- A. The birth of Christ was a “counter-cultural” event
  1. Obviously, Mary’s virginity contradicted cultural norms and seemingly also biblical morality
  2. Joseph had to overcome his instinct to put Mary away
- B. The birth of Christ involved God coming near to man (Emmanuel)
  1. We are perhaps too comfortable in our culture as Christians
  2. We need to find ways of reaching out, telling others of the true hope of Christmas
- C. The point of Christmas is salvation: Yehoshua, Jehovah is salvation

<sup>5</sup> Ong, “Is Christmas a ‘Western’ Holiday in Asia?”

## Conclusion:

**Proposition:** The world lies in darkness, let us be concerned to bring it light.

The challenge for us is to be always looking out, thinking of how to tell others about the Lord Jesus.

For us, this year, let's try to invite folks out to our Christmas fellowship, but lets also think about how we might increase our outreach next year.