

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR *Real Life*

17. Keeping Christmas Simple and Special This Year

You are listening to episode 17 of the Encouragement for Real Life podcast. Welcome! I know, we are still in November, but the season of Advent (the four weeks leading up to Christmas that many Christian denominations celebrate to prepare our hearts and lives for the birth of Jesus) started on Sunday. So, even though it may seem a bit early, for this week and the next three, we are switching gears just a bit as we lead up to Christmas. (Christmas songs are already playing on the radio, and I may or may not have already begun listening!! So, maybe it isn't so early after all.) But these episodes will focus on keeping Christmas simple this year. They will be full of joy, hope, inspiration, and encouragement for our real lives this Christmas season. I pray these Christmas themed episodes will bless you, encourage you, and help you keep the main thing the main thing this season. I'm excited to begin, so let's get started.

Merry Christmas, friend! This has been a strange year, hasn't it? Maybe last year was stranger, I don't know, but 2021 sure seemed to have its fair share of strangeness. Yet, it has sped by quicker than I expected. You too? And here we are at the beginning of what some call the "most wonderful time of the year" and others call the "most stressful time of the year."

How do you feel about Christmas, anyway?

Maybe I need to ask that question differently. How about we break it up into two parts, because I believe there are two parts to Christmas: Christmas, Jesus' birth and Christmas the holiday. Because so much of our world has separated the two. Just look around and we see evidence of that. So much so, some people don't even say the words "Merry Christmas" anymore. Because that might be offensive to some. No judgement here, I'm just stating reality.

So, the first question is this: How do you feel about Christmas, Jesus' birth? Some of us love and appreciate and are immensely grateful for the hope we have through Jesus' birth in the stable all those years ago, and we celebrate it in various ways. And yet, maybe some of us don't. And the second question: How do you feel about Christmas, the holiday? Some of us may not care for the stress and strain that accompanies the Christmas holiday, and we try to avoid it all we can. And yet, some of us love the hustle and bustle of it all. We might answer those questions differently depending on our perspective, right? We likely have varied views.

Between you and me, Christmas is my favorite. It's my absolute favorite time of year. And even though our holiday traditions have changed over the years, and I don't go crazy like I used to with trying to make our holiday perfect, I do all I can to blend Jesus' birth and the holiday, together. I absolutely love listening to Christmas music and also pondering what that first Christmas must have been like. I enjoy wrapping presents, baking treats for our family, and decorating our home. Yet, I also intentionally participate in daily Bible readings for Advent. But hands down, my two favorite things in this season are

our Christmas Eve worship service at church with my family and celebrating together afterwards and the following day. It's all so special to me.

No matter how you feel about each part, I extend an invitation to you this year. I invite you to look at Christmas through fresh eyes. Both the birth of Jesus and the holiday. I invite you to join me in keeping Christmas simple this year.

But is that even possible?

Well, when this virus overtook the world last year, I see how God used 2020 as a reset in my life. Maybe in all our lives. A t.v. show I watched recently talked about this very idea... of having a reset. Where you start over in life, or you make a fresh start at a given point in time. Looking back, I think 2020 was a year of reset. So much was cancelled last year. Our lives, our schedules, our traditions were altered because of those many cancellations. We maybe realized some things and people we took for granted. We became aware of what was truly important to us, and what really mattered. And when I think about the holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas last year, thankfully they were not canceled. Sure, they were different for many of us as some of us did not celebrate them like we normally do. But thankfully they couldn't be canceled.

It was different for our family, too. We didn't gather together as an extended family like we usually do. Just the six of us celebrated together. But last Christmas was pretty special for us. Our first grandson was born a couple weeks before Christmas, and this little bundle of joy brought great hope to our family in a season of much darkness. God blessed us with little Nolan, just when we needed a big shot of hope. So, Christmas, for us, was extra special last year. Yet, it was simple.

And on a side note, I had no idea how becoming a grandma would change my life and my perspective! This little boy is makes my heart feel like it's going to burst most days. I still can't get enough of him!

I digress when I think about little Nolan. Back to some encouragement...

So, yes, 2020 was a reset year.

And even though it was an incredibly difficult time in our lives, life was a little simpler for a time. Now I know, it wasn't simple for people like my husband, being an essential worker. Or for my nurse friend, being a frontline worker. Life wasn't simple for them, and still may not be. Maybe it wasn't simple for you, either. Maybe it's still not. Let's remember to pray for those of us in these roles daily.

But you know there's something special about simple, isn't there?

Now, I know, the word simple doesn't sounds so exciting. Who or what wants to be known as simple? Simple is plain and boring, right? Simple isn't what the world considers thrilling or impressive. I mean, the world wants elaborate, sexy, showy, and flashy. It wants the opposite of simple.

Simple is defined as: plain, not elaborate, not ornate or luxurious, unadorned, common or ordinary, humble or lowly, an ignorant, foolish or gullible person. Yet, it also means: easy to understand, not complicated, modest, sincere, unconditional, honest, not artificial, pure, unfussy. All taken from dictionary.com and thesaurus.com.

I don't know about you, but an easy to understand, uncomplicated, modest, sincere, unconditional, honest, unartificial, pure, and unfussy Christmas sounds nearly heavenly to me. It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Especially the uncomplicated, unartificial, and unfussy parts!

I believe keeping Christmas simple can be done.

And I think we proved that last year. Because by the sounds of things, we weren't the only family who experienced a simple Christmas last year. And even if it wasn't exactly like we wanted it, I'm venturing to say it was still special. Right?

Because, really, what is Christmas about, anyway? It's really not about us, is it? It's about what I mentioned a couple minutes ago. It's all about Jesus. God who took on flesh to be born as a baby, in a lowly manger in Bethlehem to save His people from their sins. Talk about keeping Christmas simple. There has never been a more simple Christmas than the first one. Uncomplicated, unartificial, and unfussy.

So, how have we gotten so far away from keeping Christmas simple?

How have we made it into so much more? So much more stress, strain, hustle and bustle? About making lists and checking them twice, about hunting for the perfect gift and going into debt to purchase it, about decorating and baking and wrapping and rocking around the Christmas tree?

Now please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying there is anything wrong with these activities, because I participate in some of them too. Maybe not the rocking around the Christmas tree part. But the reality is, these things really aren't Christmas. They maybe be fun to do and part of our traditions, and they may bring us great joy and happiness. But they aren't actually Christmas. Baby is Jesus is Christmas.

If you're a The Office fan, remember what Stanley Hudson said in episode 10 of season 8 of The Office? He went on a rant about working at Dunder Mifflin for 18 years and suffering through many Christmas themed parties, listing some by name such as Honolulu Christmas and a Pulp Fiction Christmas. At the end of his long discourse, with rising anger in his voice, he exclaimed he just wanted a "plain, baby Jesus, lying in a manger Christmas."

Stanley understood Christmas.

A "plain, baby Jesus, lying in a manger Christmas." That's Christmas. Because in keeping Christmas simple, we keep Christmas special. We return to the heart of the holiday and the reason for the season. We keep the main thing the main thing. Because when we remove all of the extra stuff we feel we have to do, and all the expectations we or others put on ourselves, Christmas is less complicated and much more enjoyable. And when we examine why we do what we do, doing less can actually be more. Keeping Christmas simple helps us keep Christmas special.

So, how do we go about keeping Christmas simple this year? How do we do it? Well, I'm a big proponent for applying lessons I've learned in past situations. Because if we never apply to our lives the lessons we learn, we will likely keep experiencing them, right? So, is there something we learned last year (or in past years) that we can apply to this year?

Here are a few I learned and am still applying to my life:

It's not what's under the tree that matters, it's who is around it.

How can we put a priority on the people in our lives instead of the gifts under the tree? Two years ago we did less gift giving as a family and instead, decided to spend dedicated time together. We all snuck away for a few days to an Airbnb in Lake Geneva, WI. That time together was much more special than any gift under the tree. We plan to follow suit this year, but plan our "getaway" differently now that we have a little one in our family. Making memories is more important to me than buying gifts we really don't need.

Living with joy is a choice.

How can we choose joy even when we don't "feel" joyful? Joy is a byproduct of a grateful heart. The more grateful we are, the more joy we have. We talked about having a grateful heart in last week's episode, episode 16. A grateful heart notices the little things in life, which are sometimes really the big things. It stems from thanking God for His many blessings. Living each day joyful is a beautiful way to live. Plus, it's contagious and will rub off on others! That's the best thing to spread!

Christmas doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful.

Our homes don't need to look perfect, our meals don't need to be perfect, our presents don't need to be perfect to have a wonderful Christmas. Sometimes letting go of our expectations frees us up to enjoy the season more. Christmas will be wonderful no matter what because of Who we are celebrating. Remember Stanley Hudson's example. So, we can let go of the expectation of a "perfect" Christmas.

This leads us to my last lesson:

Stress does not need to be a part of the season.

What stresses us out in this season? I invite you to answer that question by naming it, then, if at all possible, don't do that thing. If cooking stresses you out, then find another option besides cooking a meal yourself. If decorating stresses you out, then don't do it or ask someone else to help you with it. If baking stresses you, then don't bake. Stress does not need to rule this season. Do all you can to avoid it. Rest, exercise, take care of you to help you stay stress free or at least stress-less. We'll be discussing this subject more in next week's episode, so stay tuned!

The reason for this season hasn't changed over the years. But sometimes it just gets buried under the glitter and tinsel. Under the hustling and bustling. Let's not bury it under the busy-ness. Let's not lose it among the making the lists and checking them twice.

I want to celebrate Jesus' birth in beautiful ways. Maybe even in different ways, if necessary. Friend, how do you plan to celebrate Jesus' birth this year? How will you embrace keeping Christmas simple this year? I'd love to read your ideas, your plans, your thoughts. Come on over to our Encouragement for Real Life Community on Facebook. We're discussing this all week. You'll find the link in the show notes.

If you received encouragement from this episode, I invite you to review it and rate it so others can find this encouragement too.

You can find more encouragement and hope at juliefebure.com. Link for my site is in the show notes.

Keeping Christmas simple may make this Christmas the most memorable one of all. I am praying we celebrate this season, keeping in mind Who we are celebrating. I look forward to journeying through this season with you. God bless you. And Merry Christmas!

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