

Ep 105 | Christmas Reflections 2022, Dr. Don Payne

Speaker 1 [00:00:04] Welcome to engage360, Denver Seminary's Podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the Gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Don Payne [00:00:16] Hi friends, welcome to engage360 at Denver Seminary. This is Don Payne, your host, and Merry Christmas. The 1890s were known in the Western world as the Golden Age because of the widespread sentiment that humanity had transcended its base uncivilized nature. But if anything, the technological progress, and other forms of progress experienced in the late 19th century provided the means for humanity to accelerate its destructive nature.

In 1914, the bloodiest war in human history began. It came to be called the Great War, but with a sort of tragic optimism, some referred to it as the war to end all wars. History eventually labeled that war World War One, because, as we all know, it was followed just over 20 years later by a conflict of similar scale and arguably even worse, atrocities. The Great War did not come remotely close to ending such human conflicts and carnage.

And yet on Christmas Eve, 1914, something remarkable occurred in the trenches of Belgium, where German, French, British and Belgian troops were fighting. Military historian Stanley Weintraub recounts this gripping story in his book, *Silent Night the Story of the World War One Christmas Truce*. It started with German troops lighting candles on small Christmas trees and singing carols. Their opponents heard them and began singing back. Before long, the fighting had stopped. Troops from both sides left their trenches and joined each other for Christmas Day. They played soccer. They exchanged small tokens. They showed each other pictures of their families.

On both sides, their superior officers were quite upset with this informal and spontaneous truce, out of fear that it would dilute their soldier's willingness to resume battle with the intensity needed to win a war. And sure enough, after the Christmas truce ended, some of the soldiers were intentionally shooting over the heads of their enemies with whom they had enjoyed Christmas camaraderie. Weintraub recounts, however, that, quote, like a dream when it was over, men wondered at and then went on with the grim business at hand. End quote.

Some of you have probably heard this story elsewhere. If it's new to you, you really should pick up a copy of Stanley Weintraub book. It's a fascinating portrayal of how the human heart yearns for peace and how people will at times take the most startling and unexpected steps in that direction. It also provides a glimpse of hope, however slight and fleeting that glimpse is. But as much as anything, it shoves in our faces an example of how no amount of good intentions or seasonal sentiment can rescue us from our condition with any permanence or any depth.

We need to put that story and other stories like it in a larger context. We are still recovering at a somewhat irregular pace from a global pandemic. In the U.S., we're still reeling from intense divisions over political and social issues, and the church has not been immune to those controversies and sadly, has often aided and abetted them. But here we are again at Christmas. The rhetoric we hear, particularly during times of widespread unrest and conflict, it intensifies at Christmas. It's the popular sentiment that if we all just learn to love each other and listen to each other and internalize the true spirit of Christmas, we'll get it all together and we'll all be happy.

Well, as a global population, we're more educated and resourced and supposedly enlightened and technologically sophisticated than ever before. But here we still are. We are over 100 years on the other side of that bloodiest of all wars and perhaps the bloodiest century in human history. And we still cannot find peace. The worse things get in our world and the closer those maladies get to home, two messages tend to dominate. On one hand, we hear refrains of a romanticized utopianism. That is, if we all simply get more love in our hearts, you know, then it's all okay. That's what we hear a lot of at Christmas. And on the other hand, is a radicalized utopianism that's determined to force all things to be right, whether through resolutions or referenda or even revolt. Now the romanticized utopianism narrative leads to a naive sort of withdrawal and sentimentalizing of our world's brokenness.

On the other hand, the radicalized utopian narrative is a history replete with examples of how radical revolution tends to create alternative versions of the same oppression and dehumanization that it aimed to repair. And either version of this human centered utopianism can leave us pretty much right where we are. But what Christmas really celebrates can evoke even deeper and more powerful emotions and is actually even more revolutionary. God showed up in human history, in person, and set about the redemption of the world through the limitations, the frailty, the suffering, and the scandal of human existence. It was the strangest message ever in a world that even then knew only one way to get things done, and that was raw, straightforward power.

The Incarnation shatters all those preconceptions and misconceptions about how the world can be made right. It strips away all of our illusions about how our ability, through our ability, we can create utopia, either through the feel-good romanticism of a worldwide group hug or through the intense and calculated overthrow of oppression. The Gospel that summarizes God's redemptive ways through the incarnation actually pulls us into the fray to fight oppression and injustice and to heal brokenness in both large scale and tiny scale ways. But it frees us from the burden to fix what we cannot fix without being as evil as what we aim to fix. It frees us to let God take hold of our efforts and use them, even multiply our efforts in ways that we might never detect. It frees us as well as obligates us to be God's agents without having to be God.

Now I'll confess to being about as disgusting a Christmas sentimentalist as you'll find anywhere. Every year at this season, I hear Andy Williams saying it's the most wonderful time of the year. And I think, yes, give me another cup of hot chocolate and put another present under the tree and hang another stocking and let it snow. Let it snow. Let it snow. I can't get enough. I know the strange power of Christmas music because years ago, when my kids were young, we were having a family game night one summer and it was not going well. There was cheating and denial of the cheating and the evening was turning sour at a record pace. I got up and put on a Christmas CD and the mood changed almost instantly. The entire evening was salvaged, so there is a strange sort of power in the Christmas spirit.

But if we want to get into the Christmas spirit and stay focused on what it's really all about, we have to look at how God chose to redeem the worst there is in the world and the worst there is in each of us. By taking up residence in the weakness and poverty and death of our world. Nothing about that makes sense to the world, but that is the only path to the redemption of the world and to the culmination of that redemption in the Kingdom of God. Ultimately, of course, through the death and resurrection of our board, but beginning in that incarnation.

Now, friends, that's utopia. We can't manufacture that. We can't force that. We can't sentimentalize or theorize our way to that. We actually can do something far more potent and

liberating. We can follow that model as we strive for more humane legislation. We can follow that model as we feed the hungry, as we cry out against injustice, and as we find better ways to do human society. The incarnation gives us the pathway between sentimentalism and revolution so that we can be fully engaged with the needs of the world through the redemptive power of the Gospel, while trusting God to be God and trusting God to orchestrate the Kingdom. God will always surprise us with how that comes about if we live in that type of courageous, trusting and engaged manner. That's a great Christmas gift.

Friends, on behalf of all of us here at Denver Seminary, thanks for listening. Thanks for spending time with us. Thanks for praying for us. Thanks for supporting us. For recommending us. And thanks for what you do in the world incarnationally. And Merry Christmas.