

“Christmas Around the World: Italy”

Luke 2:16

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All Scripture quoted from ESV unless otherwise noted

Christmas in Italy might look somewhat familiar to many people around the world. Italian homes and markets often feature Christmas trees, celebrations of St. Nicholas’ Day, festive Christmas markets, parades and caroling, and more. There are, however, a number of traditions unique to Italy. One such tradition is Panettone, an Italian Christmas cake distinctive for its tall, domed shape and more closely resembles a sweet bread than an actual cake. Another tradition largely specific to Italy is that every Christmas Eve, Italian TV shows the 1983 comedy film *Trading Places*. Italians observe Epiphany on January 6 by putting stockings by the fireplace, with the tradition that an old lady named Befana would put presents in them before morning.

As for decorations, to many Italians, very few decorations can match the popularity and importance of the nativity scene, which may have originated in Italy, where St. Francis of Assisi used them to tell the Christmas story. But nativity scenes in Italy often have extra, “every day” characters and objects, such as houses, foods, animals, and additional figures like famous people or politicians. In fact, Naples, Italy, is the home of the largest Nativity scene in the world, which features over 600 objects and characters!

By contrast, the original Nativity scene was much simpler. For a few brief moments there in the stable/cave, Joseph and Mary had Jesus all to themselves; no celebrities or politicians, not glittering lights and brightly wrapped gifts. The wise men weren’t there that night, and the shepherds only came late. But when they did, what they found was simple and quiet – and all about Jesus.

But over the years, we have added to the story of Christmas, and what’s worse, we’ve added to Christ, and wrapped religious arguments and reasonings around those additions in order to make them feel authentic; additions like acting, living, feeling, or being a certain way, so that God won’t reject you. But you **can** be a sincere Christian and still struggle with pride, addiction, lust, or unforgiveness.

Looking closely at what God’s Word really says reveals the simplicity of what Christmas is all about; a simplicity shown in Luke 2:16. Christmas is the celebration of Jesus’ birth. May you find what the shepherds found – simply Jesus. Nothing had been added to the story. At least, not yet.

If you’re a Christian you don’t have to be perfect – you can and will still make mistakes. A relationship with Jesus is transformational, but you might not feel like someone who’s been transformed because you still struggle with the same old sins. But Jesus says, “You

are forgiven,” “You are loved,” “I do not reject you.” We celebrate Christmas in all its glorious simplicity, simply because of Jesus. He is enough!

Take a moment and clear the table – strip away all the traditions, festivities, and observances that distract you from simply Jesus, and Christmas – true Christmas – still shines through. Reset the scene and make Jesus the center and source of every celebration, remembrance, and joy.

Takeaways from this message.

Nativity scenes may have been originated in Italy.

We have added to the story of Christmas, and we’ve added to Christ.

- Wrapped religious arguments and reasonings around those additions in order to make them feel authentic.
- Additions like acting, living, feeling, or being a certain way, so that God won’t reject you.

God’s Word reveals the simplicity of what Christmas.

- Christmas is the celebration of Jesus’ birth.
- The shepherds found – simply Jesus. Nothing had been added to the story.

A relationship with Jesus is transformational, but you might not feel like someone who’s been transformed because you still struggle with the same old sins.

- But Jesus says
 - “You are forgiven.”
 - “You are loved.”
 - “I do not reject you.”

We celebrate Christmas in all its glorious simplicity, simply because of Jesus. He is enough!

- Reset the scene and make Jesus the center and source of every celebration, remembrance, and joy.
- Tell the wonders of His love.

DIG IN!

Here are some farm-fresh questions that will help you to personalize and apply this morning's message.

1. *What was most surprising, unexpected, or helpful from today's passage/message? Why?*
2. **Think of a time that you had an encounter with God. What words would you use to describe the experience? How do you know that you were truly encountering Him? How did that experience change or affect you?**
3. **What is the greatest Christmas movie ever, and why is it "It's a Wonderful Life?"**
4. **How might you explain the simplicity of the real Christmas story to someone who has never heard it? Would you describe it differently to someone who had heard it but rejected it? Why?**
5. **Read Luke 2 again. What is most surprising or unexpected in this passage?**
6. **Think about what the shepherds did after hearing about Jesus. How is this different from the way many people today react after hearing about Jesus? Why do you suppose that is? Short of an angelic messenger (an the host of heaven) suddenly appearing to them, what is the next best way for you to help them understand who Christ truly is?**
7. **Compare and contrast the reactions of those who heard (Luke 2:18) with the reaction of Mary (2:19) Why this difference?**
8. *What have you learned through your personal time of Bible reading this week?*