

I was recently having a conversation with a Jewish friend of mine, and she was telling me about how much she really dislikes this time of year.

She said that it feels like Jews and other non-Christians have Christmas and Christianity shoved in their faces for about 2 months straight.

She acknowledged that the stores throw some Hanukkah stuff onto the shelves and play some Hanukkah songs over the store speakers just so they can appease themselves and feel like they are being 'diverse,' but the truth is that, for her, this Christian holiday monopolizes everything for way too long.

She gets tired of the constant reminder that none of what she is seeing is part of her faith tradition, and she told me that it's exhausting to constantly have to ignore or tune out what she is seeing.

Now, I sympathized with her.

The truth is that, even though fewer people are going to church on Sunday mornings, Christianity is still by far the dominant religion in our culture.

Although we profess separation of church and state, we live in a Christo-centric country.

While all this is true, after hearing her rant and sympathizing a bit, I found myself getting defensive.

I said, I do celebrate Christmas and the birth of Christ, but do you think that we see in the stores and commercials and advertisements, do you think it has anything to do with the holiday I celebrate?

No.

The retail world has hijacked our holiday in an effort to make money.

I said that the vast majority of things we hear about Christmas- Santa, elves, sleighs, stockings, cheesy Christmas songs, trees, lights, ornaments, none of this has to do with the birth of Jesus.

None.

None of it is found in our scriptures.

These are all secular stories and traditions that have become associated with the holiday over the centuries, but none of it is rooted in the story in our Bible.

I mean, yes, Santa comes from St. Nicolas, and you could argue that that has a religious basis, but even he wasn't alive until hundreds of years after Jesus' death.

But most of our holiday traditions, like Christmas trees, are rooted in pagan rituals of celebrating the winter solstice.

The Bible doesn't say that Mary and Joseph brought a tree inside the stable and decorated it in preparation for Jesus' birth.

Now, the fact that the commercialization of Christmas is so far from the true meaning of the holiday, used to really bother me.

Just as my Jewish friend spends all of December being reminded that she's not Christian and doesn't celebrate Christmas, I was constantly reminded that everything I was seeing about Christmas didn't reflect the holiday I celebrated.

In fact, I remember going to the card store one year, and I asked for Christmas cards, and I couldn't find one card that had *anything* about the nativity or the birth of Jesus on it, everything was owls, elves and snowflakes.

I got incredibly frustrated and thought to myself, *some* of us still do celebrate the religious holiday, thankyouverymuch.

And, it used to anger me that supposed non-Christians celebrate Christmas.

I used to get offended that they're secular or atheist or agnostic 11 months of the year, but suddenly once the Christian holiday rolls around that they like, they jump on the bandwagon.

But sometimes with age comes wisdom, and I have a calmed down a bit.

I realize that many people who are no longer Christian were raised in Christian households, and it's more about the tradition than celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Also, the commercialization of Christmas no longer makes me angry, because I have realized that the true spirit of the holiday is still there, even if it's been covered in 50 layers of bows and wrapping paper.

The truth is, that this season is about giving to others, taking care of those in need, and appreciating all of our blessings.

It's the time of year when families get together to celebrate love and life (even if there's a little, or a lot, of dysfunction thrown into the mix).

It's the time of year when donations to non-profits soar because people are thinking about others, especially those who are not as fortunate as they are.

These are all good things to do, even if you don't identify as a Christian the rest of the year.

I have also come to see the commercialization of Christmas as an opportunity.

How lucky are we that we are surrounded by messages, for week after week, which point us to or remind us of, our sacred holiday.

Sure, we have to do a little translation in our minds, like when the commercial tells you what gift to give to the person who has everything, we say to ourselves, no, we should actually give to the person who has nothing, but okay, if the point is generosity, it's still there.

And there has been more of a push to give ethical gifts, purchased from local stores, or to give handmade gifts, which are more about the sentimental and the financial value.

My mom is an avid reader, she reads many novels a year.

So, last year, for Christmas, she gave us all a collection of quotes from the books she had read over the year.

We each received different quotes, ones she thought we'd appreciate.

It certainly provided a lot of fodder for conversation, as I remember enjoying some of the quotes and being dismayed by others.

The point is that when the commercials tell you to give to others, ignore what they tell you to give, and remember that the most meaningful gifts are those that aren't bought at Target.

They're ones that are made, or they're not tangible, like the gift of time.

Give someone an experience with you rather than one more thing, because nobody needs any more things.

Or give to a non-profit organization in that person's name, especially to a nonprofit that addresses an issue they care about, then it's personal and altruistic.

There's nothing wrong with giving and consuming, as long as it's done ethically.

It's a way for us to live our faith in a tangible way.

We don't have to disconnect our secular traditions from our sacred story, but just remember why you are buying, consuming and celebrating.

The prophet Isaiah was prophesying to the people who had just returned to Israel, after their exile in Babylon.

These words weren't to be heard in the context of someone in quiet, personal, devotional time, but for a people who were gathered to rebuild a ruined city and Temple.

They had come home to a place they barely recognized, I think some of us feel like we are living in a country we barely recognize, but I digress.

Isaiah tells them that they can't have a private religion that ignores public ethics like economic exploitation.

As one commentator put it, that's 'bad faith.' (*Isaiah and Jesus: Critical Dissent as a Form of Faith*, www.journeywithjesus.net).

The prophets words are so pointed, even thousands of years later.

He tells these weary Israelites that even though they have returned home, the work has just begun.

Now they have to live their faith in a real, radical way.

They were privately fasting, but the prophet rhetorically asks them,

*“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice...
to let the oppressed go free?...”*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the
homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to
cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?...*

*If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the
afflicted,*

*then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like
the noonday...*

*You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of
streets to live in.” (parts of Isaiah 58: 6-12).*

See, he’s telling them that their private faith cannot be
separated from their public acts.

Your fasting and your ‘faithfulness’ is nothing if you don’t feed the
hungry, house the homeless and clothe the naked.

Guess what? Same goes for us.

Our private faith in God and preparation for Jesus’ birth cannot be
separate from our public acts, or more specifically, how we spend
our money and our time, especially at this time of the year.

There is a great chasm between the Christmas we know and
celebrate here in this sanctuary, and the Christmas we hear about
in the media.

Be not discouraged that there is such a divide, because each of us has the opportunity to bridge the gap.

For us to give generously to loved ones and strangers,

and to give ethically and intentionally,

is a beautiful way of preparing for Jesus' birth, the one who promoted peace and generosity.

And, this selfless and intentional giving is one step towards repairing the breach,

repairing the breach between the commercialized Christmas season that has little, if anything, to do with the birth of Jesus,

and the Advent season of preparation that we know and love.

Amen.