

## CHRISTMAS INTENTION

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With Rev. Richard Maraj

### MESSAGE

The day after Christmas in a church in California, the pastor was walking around and noticed the Nativity scene, and that baby Jesus was missing. So he went outside and there he saw little Johnny with his red wagon. And in his red wagon was the figurine of baby Jesus. The pastor walked over to him and said, *"Johnny, were did you get your little friend?"*

He said, *"Oh, I got it from church, Pastor."*

And he said, *"And why did you take him?"*

He said, *"Well, last week I was praying a week before Christmas, and I prayed to baby Jesus, and I promised him if he would bring me a red wagon, I'd give him a ride in it. So I'm giving him his ride!"*

[Congregation laughs]

So how many people would agree that Christmas comes so fast that it can feel rushed, and you're not always as ready and prepared as you'd like to be? How many of you would agree with that? And how many people get everything done in time for Christmas, but you feel a little exhausted? Maybe even disappointed? And then you're glad it's over with. Anybody? How many people like to experience a Christmas that's a little more calm, spiritually centered, a little more joyful and meaningful? How many people would like that?

You know, today we are going to look at a spiritual practice and a powerful life skill that transforms and can really help us have a more meaningful, more peaceful and a deeper experience of Christmas. And today we're going to talk about using the power of intention to that.

Deepak Chopra says that, *"Intention is the starting point of every dream."* Everything that happens in the universe, he says, begins with intention. When you think about it, intention is a directed impulse of consciousness. It is a higher thought of possibility. It really is the power behind the act of creation. I mean, everything that is created in this universe begins with intention. God intended this world. When God said, *"Let there be light,"* it was an expression of intention that brought forth life.

You were intended by God! You are God's intention! And God has an intention for your life. When you think about intention, it is the power to create. The thing about intention is that it has the ability to take whatever level of thought and experience you're having in your life and open a path to raise those thoughts and intentions to transform change and expand your life.

Every one of us has the power of intention to attract, to manifest, to bring forth a better life. How many people would agree that there is incredible power in intention? You believe in the power of intention? How many people woke up this morning and set a very clear intention about the kind of day you were going to have? Just a little fewer. [Congregation laughs]

Because most of us -- when we wake up -- we're in auto-pilot. You know, we're just getting what needs to be done; getting ready for work; getting the kids ready; getting ready to do all of our responsibilities. And sometimes we get so caught up in surviving and just getting by and the busy-ness of life, that we don't take time to pause and to consider and to set a clear intention for the kind of day -- and the kind of life -- that we want to have. And because we don't always use this power of intention, we kind of miss out on levels of joy and happiness and success that are available to all of us.

The power of intention shapes our lives. It shapes our days; our weeks; our years. and it can shape our Christmas, too! So if you want to have a more peaceful, a more joyful and a more meaningful Christmas, it behooves us to pause before the rush begins, and set a clear Christmas intention.

And so there are three things we've got to do to set our Christmas intention.

The first one is to **CLARIFY YOUR DESIRE**. In the Book of Job it says, "*Decide upon a thing and it will be established for you.*" Some different versions say, "*Declare a thing and it will be established for you.*" But every one of the ways that you can think about it -- declaring; deciding; choosing; affirming; claiming -- they all come down to one thing: get clear.

So what kind of Christmas do you want to have this year? What would make this Christmas great for you? What would make it fun? What would make it more meaningful? What is it that would bring you greater peace or joy or fulfillment? What kind of attitude or mindset would you bring into this Christmas that would help you get the most out of it and be the most joyful?

Sometimes we don't take time to get clear and what happens is: we kind of wander and drift into whatever experience anybody pulls us into, or whatever the expectations are. I would say, without a doubt, one of the greatest keys to success in any area of your life is how clear you are about what you want: what you want to create; what you want to have; and what you want to do.

When it says, "*ask,*" "*seek,*" "*knock,*" "*choose,*" "*decide,*" they're all about saying: take time to get clear. What is it that you really want? Who is it that you want to become? What is it that you want to create and experience?

And so this Christmas, what are some feelings you'd like to feel? Would you like to feel a childlike sense of joy and excitement? Would you like to feel a bit more reflective and more spiritually grounded? Would you like to feel a greater sense of gratitude or generosity? What do you want to feel? What is your intention for what you'd like to feel this Christmas?

Another one is: What is the intention of what you'd like to do? Like, do you want to do all the traditions you've done? You want to do no traditions or less traditions or make up a new tradition?

A couple of years ago, I decided one intention of what I wanted to do was: I wanted to bake cookies. And I found somebody -- because I really didn't do that -- and I asked a friend if I could be invited over to help bake cookies. [Congregation laughs] And I did! And you know what I realized about it? Because I never did that ... Baking reminded me of my mom; it reminded me of just a nurturing, loving time. And I loved hearing the carols, and cutting out the cookies ... It was a great experience.

This year I set an intention to do something. My family used to always eat black-eyed peas at Christmas and New Year's. And I've never made black-eyed peas. This year, I'm baking black-eyed peas! [Congregation laughs] Send a recipe if you've got one! [Congregation laughs]

And so, do you want less activity for this Christmas? Would that be more meaningful for you? Or more activity? Spending it with more people or fewer people? More active or maybe more contemplative? More time in prayer and meditation?

What are the things that you would like to do this Christmas that would bring more meaning? What is your intention for the things you'd like to engage in? And finally, what do you want to experience? Do you want to experience a deeper sense of love? Maybe a closer connection to your family and your friends? Maybe a sense of belonging? Maybe greater spiritual awareness?

I remember when I was in my early 20s, I decided I wanted to ... My intention for Christmas was to express my love to all my family members. You know I'm one of 10 kids! So I wrote nine cards, to each of them, expressing how much I loved and cared for them. It was easy to my mom's. And the tough one was my dad's. Not that I didn't love him, but sharing, expressing -- stuff like that wasn't a part of our regular connection.

So I wrote him this card, sharing how much ... how honored I was to be his son; what a great provider he was. And my dad was dying. And I said how proud I was that he made himself available -- even though he was hurting -- to all his grandchildren. My nieces and nephews. And how proud I was of him.

I was so scared! I went and put the envelope by his bedside, and then left the room. Like, why would you be scared? But I was! So anyway, my dad comes out a little bit later, and I could see the card in his hand. My heart's racing. He walks right to me and he puts his arms around me, and he just starts to

weep. [Congregation murmurs] And we both cried. And it was a beautiful, powerful moment that I'll never forget.

My dad died one month later, and it probably made that even more special. But it was because I had that intention -- to have an experience of expressing my love on a deeper level to the people I love.

So what is your soul seeking this Christmas? What is your heart yearning for? What is it that will give more meaning to your life this Christmas season?

Intentions are powerful! And the first step is: you've got to get clear. And that's like the seed. The second one is to immerse yourself in the mind of God. Just feel God's peace as you open yourself to this intention. That's like the fertile soil. And then you just feel a sense of peace and joy and gratitude. That's like water; watering it. And then you release it to God in faith and trust. Detach from it. That is like sunshine. And then you just allow it to come forth. That is the harvest, or the blooming. Because it isn't just writing it down on a piece of paper; it's getting it in here [points to heart] and planting it deep inside. And giving it the conditions to fully manifest itself.

So the first thing for your Christmas intention this year is to get clear about what it is you desire; what it is you want.

The second thing is: you've got to **HEAL YOUR GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST**. You know, we always -- at Christmas -- sing, "*It's the most wonderful time of the year.*" Sung better, but still you get the point! [Congregation laughs] And we always say, "*Merry Christmas! What a joyful time it is!*"

Well, it isn't joyful for everybody. Everybody doesn't have happy, glorious memories of Christmas. Sometimes Christmas has some painful and horrible memories. Sometimes it triggers family trauma or dysfunction. Sometimes it triggers depression or isolation or loneliness or the loss of a loved one. Maybe our first Christmas without our loved one. Sometimes it's a painful thing!

Sometimes we can close off our hearts to Christmas. Sometimes we can be a little cynical and a little negative or withdrawn. Or even anxious about it. The Ghosts of Christmas Past really represent those areas in our lives -- and connections and memories -- where we feel wounded; where we feel pain; where we feel alone and isolated. Those areas in us that need healing. Those areas that we need to bring into the light. Areas that need to be released and transformed. It's parts in us that need to find peace and acceptance with whatever memory or image of Christmas that we might have.

I really believe that sometimes Christmas can be a time to heal. Setting it as an intention to heal. Intention to forgive and intention to let go. Intention to be transformed and relieved and released of those painful memories and hurts, and not allow them to keep holding us back and stopping us from having a more meaningful, joyful Christmas.

When you look at three of the most traditional, transformative Christmas characters, they all had to do some inner healing. Ebenezer Scrooge was sent to boarding school; his dad wasn't the nicest to him. He actually got there accidentally or on purpose for Christmas. He spent Christmas alone at his boarding school. His mom died; his sister, Fanny, died. He was very close to her. He was engaged; he got dumped, because he was focusing on too much money.

And then the Grinch -- the Jim Carrey version -- shares that he was rejected. He was made fun of. And so he isolated himself and hated Christmas. George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life*: he felt like he was a royal screw-up and messed up. And he wished he'd never been born.

Listen to this quote by Marcus Bach in his book, *Because of Christmas*. He writes, "*Somewhere in life every thinking person comes upon his or her Bethlehem, the place of spiritual awareness, the place of spiritual re-birth.*"

See, each of those characters were transformed in an amazing way. They came to their Bethlehem: to that place that needed healing; that place that needed transformation. And they had an inner awakening. Parts of their hearts were opened up again; they felt lighter; they felt greater joy; their relationship with themselves and their fellow man was changed and renewed in amazing and wonderful ways.

And it's always an inside job! Christmas has all these outer things but, really, if we want to have a good one, it's got to be an inside job. And maybe this Christmas intention of healing is about doing some more journaling; or going to a therapist; or taking a grief class; or being in a support group; or doing more prayer. But it is something that is vital.

So I ask you: What Ghosts of Christmas Past hold you back from experiencing your Bethlehem? Or the fullness of the Christmas season? What are you holding on to still that it's time to let go so you can move forward and be free? What fear? What resentment? What judgement of pain from the past is affecting your ability to enjoy Christmas now?

You know, we're the only ones that block our experience of Bethlehem, and we're the only ones who can heal our Ghosts of Christmas Past so we can have a great Christmas Present.

And the last thing about our Christmas intention is to **BRING THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS ALIVE**. One of my favorite scenes is *A Christmas Carol* when Scrooge wakes up on Christmas morning and he's so excited; so transformed; so grateful to get a second chance. So generous! I think that is such a beautiful thing! And what we need to do is to make Christmas come alive in us!

How many people have ever heard of or read the book, *All I Needed to Learn I Learned in Kindergarten*? Anybody ever? Old book, but it's a good book. Here I'm going to read a little story that Robert Fulghum wrote about a Christmas experience in California. He said:

*A Sunday afternoon it was, some days before Christmas. With rain, with wind, with cold. Wintergloom. Things-to-do list was long and growing like an unresistant mold. Temper: short. Bio-index: negative. Horoscope reading suggested caution. And the Sunday paper suggested dollars, death and destruction as the day's litany. O tidings of comfort and joy, fa la la la la!*

[Congregation laughs]

*This holy hour of Lordsdaybliss was jarred by a pounding at the door. Now what? Deep sigh. Opening it, resigned to accept whatever bad news lies in wait, I am nonplussed. A rather small person in a cheap Santa Claus mask, carrying a large brown paper bag outthrust: "TRICK OR TREAT!" Santa Mask shouts.*

[Congregation laughs]

*What? "TRICK OR TREAT!" Santa Mask hoots again. Tongue-tied, I stare at this apparition. He shakes the bag at me, and dumbly I fish out my wallet and find a dollar to drop into the bag. The mask lifts, and it is an Asian kid with a 10-dollar grin taking up most of his face. "Wanta hear some caroling?: he says in singsong English.*

*Hey, I know him. He belongs to the family that settled in the neighborhood by the Quakers last year. Vietnamese, I believe. Refugees. He stopped by at Halloween with his brothers and sisters, and I filled their bags. Gong Duc is his name; I think he's about 8. At Halloween he looked like a Wise Man, with a bathrobe on and a dish towel wrapped around his head.*

*"Wanta hear some caroling?"*

*I nod, envisioning an octet of urchin refugees hiding in the bushes ready to join their leader in an uplifting song. "Sure; where's the choir?"*

*"I'm it!" says he. And he launched forth with an up-tempo chorus of "Jingle Bells" at full-lung power. This was followed by an equally enthusiastic rendering of what I swear sounded like "Hark, the Hairy Angels Sing!"*

[Congregation laughs]

*And finally, a soft-voiced, reverential singing of "Silent Night."*

*Head back, eyes closed, from the bottom of his heart he poured out the last strains of "Sleep in heavenly peace" into the gathering night.*

*Wet-eyed, dumbstruck by his performance, I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my wallet and dropped that in the paper bag. In return, he handed me a half-broken candy cane. And did it so solemnly and sweetly.*

*Flashing a 10-dollar grin again, he turned and ran from the porch, shouting, "GODD BLESS" and "TRICK OR TREAT" and he was gone.*

[Congregation laughs]

*Who was this masked kid? Hong Duc, the one-man choir delivering Christmas door-to-door.*

*I confess that I'm usually a little confused about Christmas. It never has made a lot of sense to me. It's unreal. Ever since I got the word about Santa Claus, I've always been a closet cynic. Singing about tiding in a one-horse open sleigh is ludicrous. I've never seen one, let alone ridden in one. Never roasted chestnuts on an open fire. wouldn't know how to, and I hear they're not that great anyway. Wandering Wise Men raise my suspicions, and shepherds who hang around with sheep all day; I think they're a little strange. I've never seen an angel, and neither is my experience with virgins very good, either.*

[Congregation laughs]

*The appearance of a newborn king doesn't interest me; I'd just as soon settle for some other President. Babies and reindeer stink. I've been around them both, and I know. The little town of Bethlehem is a pit, according to those who have been there.*

*Singing about things I've never seen or done or heard or wanted, and dreaming of a whit Christmas that I've never known. Christmas just doesn't seem very real to me. And yet ... And yet ... I'm too old to believe in it, and too young to give up on it. Too cynical to get into it, and too needy to stay out of it.*

*Trick or treat! After the door shut I was in hysterics, laughter to tears and feeling that funny feeling inside when, once again, Christmas has come to you. Right down the chimney of my midwinter hovel comes St. Hong Duc. He is confused about the details, like me, but he is very clear on the spirit of the season. It's an excuse to let go and celebrate; to throw yourself into the holiday with all that you have, wherever you are.*

*"I'm it," says he. "Where's Christmas?" I ask myself. "I'm it," comes the echo. I'm it. Head back, eyes closed, and singing whatever song that I'm meant and have the courage to sing.*

*God, it is said, once sent his son upon a starry night that we might all have hope and joy. I'm not sure I quite believe that, or I believe all the other stuff that's been poured on it for 2,000 years. But I'm sure I believe in Hong Duc, the one-man Christmas choir, shouting, "Trick or treat!" door-to-door. I don't know who or how he was sent to me, but I know that I was tricked into the whimsical mischief of fate to join the choir singing hope and peace. Through a child, I had been given and treated to Christmas."*

And so the answer to "Where's Christmas?" I'm it. You're it! Christmas has to come alive in each and every one of us. And for it to come alive, we have to be willing to open our hearts. Willing to open our minds to the unexpected somethings or someones like the Hong Duc. And it might come as a smile; a card; a helping hand. It might come in a lot of different ways.

The question is: Are you willing to let it come alive in you this Christmas?

Life is always moving fast. And we can miss things so, so quickly. So it truly behooves us to take time to pause and to use the power of intention to clarify our desires -- know what we want our Christmas to look like and feel like. To heal the Ghosts of Christmas Past -- to do the healing of those things that need releasing. And third, is to bring the Christmas spirit alive in each of us.

Intention is the creative power and ability, and it is the starting point of every dream. So let's use it this year to have a peaceful, joyous Christmas! Let's take time to set our Christmas Intention.

God bless you! [Congregation applauds]

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