

“Our Christmas Story”

[Luke 2:22-35](#)

My name is George Young (for those who don't know me) and my Christmas story comes from growing up in a small town in Australia called Kalangadoo.

In Australia, being in the southern hemisphere, Christmas time was a very exciting time for a child, as it marked the start of our summer vacation. So we spent the last few weeks of the school year getting ready, preparing for Christmas, looking forward. To not just the celebration, but the whole period of summer and being able to go to the beach and relax outside, and enjoy the warm weather.

Even though our Christmases were not (potentially) as hot as it got later in the year, it was still the start of a very exciting season for us. Growing up in a small town, it seemed like the entire town would spend the time preparing. We had the local Boy Scout troop go and cut down pine trees, maybe two or three hundred every year, that we would line the streets with. Local businesses would decorate them to give themselves the chance to kind of show off to the community how much they enjoyed Christmas. Every town in the area would have their own Carol night. Being, again, in the summer, it didn't get dark too early. So everyone would start off inside, in a hall or in a church, sing carols for a while and then later on, when the sun went down, we would go outside and light candles, and spend the rest of the evening singing songs.

It seemed like this time built up gradually. There was always something else going on next week, there was an end-of-year party somewhere, there were all these events that would build up one after the other until, finally, Christmas was here. We would have Christmas parades – Christmas pageant-type events – and each town would have their own. Two towns over, a place called Penola, would have theirs on Christmas Eve. And this town was on the main highway, so to speak (it was a single lane road in each direction), but they would close down the highway throughout the town to have their pageant. They'd have European-inspired traditions – we'd decorate things with snowflakes and sing European carols, and Santa Claus (or as we called him, Father Christmas) would come down at the end of the parade. But things were a little bit different. It was a little hot for Santa's fur coat and fur boots, so typically he'd wear a pair of board shorts and flip-flops, and often Santa's elves would be carrying water pistols to help cool people down. Everyone would turn this whole evening into a town party, so there would be barbeques outside, people would gather in the park after the parade and you'd see all of your friends from school one last time before everyone separating out for their summer vacation.

For the church though, we would actually come to church and celebrate Christmas on Christmas Day itself. Perhaps that's partly because the whole country has a national holiday on Christmas Day, so everybody was available to come. But we could actually go and light our Advent wreath, light the fifth candle on Christmas morning. Being a small town, though, things were a little different again. We had five churches in a town of about two hundred people, and the pastors had to be shared with various other towns. So we couldn't always get a pastor for every church for Christmas. Instead we would join together, the different denominations would pick one church to celebrate at and everybody would gather there. We'd get probably a third to a half of the town showing up at the one church for a Christmas morning

celebration. And that was kind of exciting because there were people there that you don't really see at church on Sundays – they'd go to a different church – but at Christmas you know that you get to see them and sing carols with them, then hear a message, and everything would be over just in time to go back to your family's house for lunch.

Christmas lunch was the big meal of the day – everybody would try to prepare a big meal. Maybe in a European tradition, maybe with some roasted chicken or turkey or goose, sometimes with a bit more of a summer feel to it, with more seafood. We would often spend the day outside, set up a table outside under the shade and enjoy our meal out there. As children, the favourite part of Christmas afternoon was the family game of cricket, where we would set up just enough equipment to play a game. All the children would start playing and occasionally we could convince an uncle or an aunt to join in. And that would go most of the afternoon. Maybe we'd go swimming if the day was particularly hot as well. And then we'd gather in the evening with more family, more an extended family celebration for a quiet evening.

One other difference, I guess, was that the German side of my family had a tradition of opening their gifts on Christmas Eve, which we would do. We would gather with my mother's sister, and often my grandmother would be there as well. We'd have our Christmas Eve celebration with that family before the celebrations on Christmas Day itself with my father's family, who had more of a traditional English celebration of the day.

And then, following Christmas was this time leading up to New Year's and the opening up of the summer. So for us, the idea of a baby being born at Christmas, a gift of new life, it all kind of made sense. This was the exciting time of year, it was the time we looked forward to and everybody seemed happy. It's perhaps rose-coloured, looking back at it now. I didn't necessarily see all of the challenges that people went through. One interesting thing about Christmas in Australia is that a lot of the songs that are written in Australia particularly for Christmas time are a little more melancholy. We sing the Christmas carols and all the happy songs, but there a few favourites that are related to people you're missing at Christmas, people that couldn't be there to celebrate with you. And these days I feel that more strongly, since my father passed away several years ago and we can't celebrate with him. And now living here, we celebrate with my wife's family and this year I was very lucky to have my sister come over to join with us. But the excitement of Christmas, the looking forward to summer, to a wonderful New Year ahead, is something that I try to maintain, even with family so far away. But hopefully now with my daughter Eleanor, and our next daughter on the way, we can keep that excitement, that hope, going in all our Christmases to come.

Thank you.