



DON'T STRIVE FOR ONE DAY OF PERFECTION — *remember there's a season to celebrate*

Are you looking at your calendar and realizing there's no way you can celebrate a family Christmas on Christmas Day this year? Or maybe that's the case every year. While everyone else you know is caroling, jingling, opening presents under the tree and merrily carving up a turkey or ham on Dec. 25, things at your house will look very different because your family looks different.

Lots of families are in this position. Maybe the parents have separated and one household won't have the kids on Christmas Day. Perhaps your extended family is complicated and you'll have to juggle the demands and expectations of many different people in many different places. Maybe you wish you had children but you don't, and everything you know about how to celebrate Christmas is kid-centered and you're not sure where that leaves you. Maybe in your household, one parent is deployed, working weird hours, or is on call to attend another baby's birth.

It is, in short, more common than you may think to spend Christmas Day doing something other than acting out a picturesque Norman Rockwell scene.

Let's say you've figured out the one essential thing for Catholics — going to Mass for Christmas. Now what?

How will you make Christmas feel like Christmas when you're out of step with the rest of the world?

The first thing is to acknowledge that most of the world gets Christmas wrong in the most basic way, even down to the timing, because they think it's one day. It's not.

Even if everyone on your block chucks out their Christmas tree and pulls down their string lights on Dec. 26, Christmas really, truly isn't only on Dec. 25.

The absolute shortest a Western Catholic can reasonably consider Christmas to be is 12 days, from Dec. 25 to Jan. 6, also known as Epiphany — when the magi came to pay homage to the newborn baby Jesus.

In the Catholic liturgical calendar, though, the Christmas season actually continues until the Baptism of the Lord, which can fall anywhere from Jan. 7 to Jan. 13. In some countries, it's traditional to keep Christmas decorations up until the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, or Candlemas, which is a full 40 days after Christmas.

So, in theory, any day from Dec. 25 to Feb. 2 would be a suitable time to have a Christmas celebration. If that's what your family does, you're not even breaking with tradition.

If your mother and her new husband and your dad and his new wife can't stand to be in the same state with each other, but they both want to see the grandchildren, you can point to the broad swath of Christmas days marked on the liturgical calendar and show them just how much Christmas there really is to go around. They can have the big day on whichever of those 40 days makes the most logistical sense and it's still Christmas, for real.

Many, many families do this. But even knowing it's common, it may sound a bit like a consolation prize to insist that we can celebrate Christmas almost any time we want to. It's hard not to feel like you're missing out or doing it wrong if you have your big celebration after everybody else you know.

But there are two things to keep in mind:

One is that even the most ancient tradition was new at some point, so nothing prevents you from establishing something new and wonderful starting this year. This is true if you're raising kids and want to give them happy memories. It's also true for adults who, for whatever reason, find themselves unable to recreate the traditions they associate with a happy holiday. You can just start your own tradition on the day that works for your family.

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I'll say again that the one unshakeable tradition should be going to Christmas Mass, but aside from that, what else you do every year is completely up to you. You may even discover that some long-established tradition that felt necessary can actually be scrapped or replaced by something you enjoy more.

If you make a point of doing something special every year to mark a particular day, it not only doesn't matter what day it's on, it hardly matters what that special thing is. Sometimes, the goofy, trivial or simple traditions make the warmest memories. Our hearts register repetition and predictability as comfort, security and significance, and you can choose to consciously foster this deep emotional warmth in your family life simply by doing the same pleasant thing every year. Just be sure to choose something you can reasonably recreate every year and something enjoyable for everyone involved and tap into the power of ritual.

The second thing to remember is that Christmas — real Christmas, not Instagram Christmas or shopping mall Christmas or Christmas as portrayed by car ad executives in 1953, but actual Christmas, the day that baby God was born in the mud and the hay with animals after a long night of hard travel — has always been weird.

It's never been about having the day go the way you want it and everything turning out picture-perfect. Just the opposite, in fact. Read the Gospel accounts slowly and try to internalize how hard and strange and beyond their control Christmas Day must have been for Mary and Joseph. So try to receive any discomfort or disappointment as a gift of recollection: A hard, quiet or strange Christmas isn't bad. It may even be a more authentic one, a chance to return to something deeper than twinkling lights and gingerbread cookies.

Christmas can be a hard holiday for lots of people. It's OK to acknowledge that you're one of them and not to put spiritual pressure on yourself to drum up artificial cheer. It is far better to be honest and place yourself in solidarity with everyone who is struggling — the poor, the lonely, the displaced, the outcast, the fearful and the grieving.

That is exactly what Jesus did when he was born on Christmas Day. Tell me that's not a good way to celebrate Christmas. And it's something you can do no matter what the calendar says. ■



Simcha Fisher is an award-winning writer and speaker. In addition to her regular columns for Parable, she writes for major Catholic publications, blogs for The Catholic Weekly and at simchafisher.com, and is the author of "The Sinner's Guide to Natural Family Planning." She and her husband have 10 children and live in Marlborough.