

Date: December 24, 2023

Title: Christmas Eve

Scripture: Luke 2

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Merry Christmas. It's great to be together. Let's pray. Father, I thank you for each person who's gathered here tonight. And I thank you for the great music we just heard in this beautiful place. But we ask tonight that you would speak to each of us who are gathered here, that my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and emphasis. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, if we were to go around this room and just simply ask the question, what are some of your favorite things about Christmas? I would guess we'd get a variety of answers. There would be some unique things, but probably many of the general ideas behind what made us appreciate Christmas would be similar. We would talk about time off work, maybe family coming in to visit, family leaving after they visit, or maybe food.

We talk about music and the music hits us, probably in part because of maybe some nostalgia. We remember songs from years ago and it makes us feel things that we felt before. Or maybe it is the beauty of the songs. Or maybe it's the meaning of the songs. I was thinking about this earlier this month and was planning to play my list on Spotify of past Christmas songs. And I looked and thought, I've heard all these songs by all these artists. I want something new. So, I decided to try to look for some new music, and I looked for some new music by typing into the search bar there on Spotify. List of 2023 New Christmas Music. And I started listening to some of the songs, and they were just bad.

And so, that led me to Google the worst Christmas music ever. Several articles came up, and one of them that I found was from Rolling Stone. It had 20 of the worst Christmas songs ever. Now, I'm not going to give you all of them, but here are just a few that stuck out to me. Coming in on the Top Ten was a song by In-Sync. Justin, J.C., Joey, Chris, and Lance sing about how they never knew the meaning of Christmas. And a 17-year-old Justin Timberlake singing that he didn't know the meaning of Christmas until he looked into the eyes of a young woman. Among the other highlights of this song is the line "I thought Christmas only came from a store. And looking back, I can't believe how foolish I was."

Another top-ten entry is the song by Lou Monte called "Dominick the Donkey." Now, I have to admit, I'd never heard this song. And the article I read said once you hear it, you can't unhear it. I know exactly what they mean now. They said this, too. They said it's a spiritual cousin to the chicken dance, except with none of the charm. And at the top of their list was the song "Little Drummer Boy." Not just the song, but it had to be the song that was done by Jessica and Ashlee Simpson. This came in at number one, and they said it's equivalent to musical waterboarding.

Now, those are just some of our cultural things. So, if you just look at the culture and some of the music for the meaning of Christmas, you might miss it. But there is one cultural kind of stalworth that stays with us from year to year that points to the meaning of Christmas in a really profound way. I'm thinking of the old Charlie Brown Christmas special.

Some of you remember this as parents. Some of you remember it as kids who had to watch it. Well, like planning your month around when to watch it because it would come on, and it was on once and you watched it, or you missed it. Some of you have only known it as a streaming option. But whatever it is, your experience with this is, there's Charlie Brown, who was exasperated with all of his attempts to find the meaning of Christmas. And he finally says can anyone tell me the meaning of Christmas? And as you probably know, Linus steps up and says sure, I can. The lights come on the stage, and as he steps onto the stage, he begins to read Luke chapter two.

I missed something until just recently. And that is when he comes to the part of Luke two where he's reading about Jesus coming. He drops his blanket. And if you know the Peanuts franchise at all if you call it that back then, what you know is that his blanket was always his security. He never wanted to be without his blankets. So, for Linus to drop the blanket was a way of saying, now I have found something that brings me better security than anything I've had before.

Here are the words that he reads, at least in part from Luke chapter two. I'll begin in verse ten. It says, "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.'"

In just those few verses, I think we see a little bit of what Christmas is, what Christmas is really all about. I'm going to suggest this evening that it's about three things from this text. We could say it's about more, but from these verses, there are three. The first is that Christmas is an event. Notice in verse 12 it says that he was born in the City of David, a literal city. Sometimes the songs sing about the little town of Bethlehem, and the idea is that you could place Jesus literally in history, in time, and he was somebody that historians do not argue or dispute whether or not he existed. They may debate his significance, but they don't debate his existence.

The reason this is important is because a lot of times in our day and age, in any day and age, people have thought, well, Jesus is a nice story, he's a myth. He's a concept of love coming to Earth. But the idea is that Jesus really was God who came to Earth. And what's more, the words *I give you good news of great joy* were used in some translations, it says gospel. In the original language, the word meant one who brought good tidings of an assured victory. So, it was a word, a technical word that was used when an army had won a battle, and they didn't have news services back then. And so, a courier or somebody would come with gospel saying, we've won. We've secured the future. When an heir was born to the throne, there would be a gospel announcement.

So, what is that announcement here? It's that there's a savior who's been born. You see, the good news isn't just merely that Jesus says although that is good news, but it's that Jesus came to be the Savior. Religion says to perform, do, and try harder. But what Jesus does is He comes and says, I have become the Savior. I am the Savior.

There's another piece of culture and theater that tells us how often we think about goodness and our futures. I'm thinking of a Christmas Carol. If you know the story. Scrooge is miserly and mean-spirited, and so he's visited by the Ghost of Christmas past, Christmas future, and Christmas present. At one point the angel says to him, "The weight of the length is a strong chain, and it has been full and as long as this seven Christmas Eves ago. And you have labored on it since." And then the angel says this, "It is a terrible, ponderous chain."

But you know what the angels answer to that is? Try to change your ways. So, what does Scrooge do? He decides to change his ways. The cultural idea is if you're not all that you could be, do better and try harder. Just get a chance to see it. But the Christian answer, what makes good news is that Jesus is the one who died for sin and that salvation is in Him and not in our efforts. And that is good news. And not only that, it's something that you can figuratively speaking, drop your blanket for. Your blanket of saying Jesus is just a good story, or I'm going to try harder, to do better next year because you can turn to Jesus instead of yourself.

Christmas is an event. But it's not just an event. I would also say it's an expectation. I see this in this word, again in chapter two, verse 12, where it says that he's the Messiah. The Messiah was a title for the one who the Jewish people expected to come and to make the world right to bring peace. So, when the angels announce good news, the Messiah has been born, what the people thought was this was the one who was going to change everything.

Now you may say, well, here we are some 2000 years later, and the Messiah hasn't done much. But here's what's true in John 14, Jesus said, I'm coming again. He said I'm going to prepare a place for you, that where I am, you can be also. He basically was saying my first coming is not the ultimate coming. In Philippians two we're told that when he comes again, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. There's coming a day when Jesus will come back. Christmas is an expectation because we see Jesus. But we also know that He comes with expectations. Now, there's a challenge with this, I realize, because we live where we live, when we live, it's hard sometimes to believe that anything will be different.

The other day I was out driving, and one of the places I go by often, there was a new car wash that had opened. They had a sign out front that said free car wash. So, I stopped. Car washes have two different ways that they wash cars generally. When you pull in the one, you push your car and park, and the thing moves around you and sprays your car. Then when it's done, you pull out and drive. The other one is you pull in and you put your car in neutral and you get your tire into this little track, and then a thing comes up and propels your car forward as it's in neutral. This was that kind of car wash. Okay?

I wasn't the only person who saw the free car wash sign and got in line that day. There was a big line. So, there were cars in front of me, cars behind me, and they had us stacked up pretty close. So, when I pulled in, I realized right away that the car in front of me was like right in front of me. And I thought, well, I'm glad they have this all figured out. And so, my car starts to go through the car wash and I can't see out for a while. Then all of a sudden, I'm coming out, and I'm into the dryer thing where it starts drying your car. I notice that the car that was in front of me has been pushed out of its thing, and it's just sitting there. I don't know if the person was doing TikTok or what exactly, but my car was moving closer and closer to this

non-moving car in front of me. I'm being propelled by the thing, and I'm thinking, what do I do? So, I did what probably any of us would do. I honked. The guy didn't move. I don't know if it was a guy. It may have been a woman, just saying. I didn't say that the last two nights. I don't know where that came from.

As long as I was sitting there, I'm looking around thinking, I hope somebody comes and does something. And then I honked again, and the person finally pulled away. Now, here's my point. I think sometimes when we look at our world, we feel a little bit like I felt in that car wash. It's a little out of control. I don't know what's going to happen. And I wish somebody would come and do something. Do you know what Christmas is? It's the announcement that Jesus is going to come and do something.

In "Joy to the World" that well-known Christmas Carol, there's a verse that says, "No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow Far as the curse is found, Far as the curse is found, Far as, far as, the curse is found." Someday Jesus is going to come. And in a world that's filled with war, we feel like the curse is found everywhere, the Messiah will change things. Someday the Messiah will come and where we see the curse of hunger, oppression, and racism in our world, the Messiah will come and make things right.

It isn't just the global issues. There are things that have happened to many of us. Some of us feel the the loneliness of life, and someday the Messiah will come and take the curse that makes us feel alone. Some of us have felt the sting of betrayal, the curse of betrayal, and one day the Messiah will come and make it right. Some of us have felt the curse of our own choices, failures, and the things that we've done that have hurt people we love. But one day, the Messiah will come and make those things right. And some of us this year are struggling. Maybe there's an empty chair for the first time at our Christmas table. Maybe there's a health crisis with an uncertain future, and we're saying the curse is felt, but one day the Messiah will come and make things right.

Christmas is an expectation, and it means we can drop our blanket, figuratively speaking, from loading everything into this life and demanding that this life gives us everything. We're choosing to self-medicate or amuse ourselves in a way that simply tries to numb the pain because we can say, I wasn't created just for this world. But there was something more.

Christmas is an event, it's an expectation, but I would also say it's an experience. We see this in verses 13 and 14. It says, "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. Do you see this? It's a moment of worship, and I use that word to talk about the experience. Because what worship is, is a moment when we see things as they really are. We see that whatever our life is, there's something greater to which we can attach significance and pursuit. Then you have an experience of the Jesus who was, and the Jesus who's coming, then you can have an experience of this Jesus and see things as they really are.

Earlier this year, Matthew Perry died, and it caused many people to just look at some parts of his life. He was the actor on *Friends* for years and other things, and he had written a memoir a couple of years ago called *Friends, Lovers and the Big Terrible Things*. At one point in it, he

said, "Nobody wanted to be famous more than me. I was convinced it was the answer. I was 25 and it was the second year of *Friends*, and eight months into it I realized the American dream isn't making me happy. It's not filling the holes in my life. I couldn't get enough attention." And then he says this, "Fame doesn't do what you think it will do."

You know, fame may not be your thing. But whatever your thing is, it will not do all that you think it will do. And what worship is, is a moment of saying this thing may be a good thing, it may be a great thing, but it's not everything. What worship does is it moves us to say there is a God who does love me, who does care. And when I connect to the divine, it gives me an experience. It reminds me of what Saint Augustine said at one point and that is our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.

We're going to do a series in January at Orchard Hill at all of our locations that we're calling *Virtue or Vice*. But what the series really is about is some unexpected practices to help us draw into the experience of God. Maybe you're here tonight and you say you know, I've tried the faith thing. I've believed in the past. I've hoped in the past, but I haven't felt like I've experienced God in a long time. Maybe this series will just be a fresh start for you. If you don't have a church home, we'd love for you to come. But maybe it's just reading your Bible again, beginning to pray again, getting in a group, or committing to just being part of a public worship experience on an ongoing basis to say God I do want to connect with something more. Maybe even tonight you felt something you haven't felt in a long time. And in a way, that's God simply knocking on the door of your heart and saying there's something more that you can be a part of.

Now, here's the challenge with Christmas. Do you ever get given a gift card that you took and stuck in a drawer and then found it years later? Do you know what's true about that gift card? It didn't do you any good if you didn't use it. Christmas is an event. Jesus came and died to make a way. It's an expectation. There's hope, and it's an experience. You can encounter this God now. But if you simply say that's nice and go about your life, then it's like putting a gift card in a drawer. But if you say, God, I believe, today I believe, then you can begin to experience God's work in your life in a fresh way.

God, we ask tonight that you would meet each of us. God, for some of us, it might be just coming and acknowledging that you are the Savior and that our self-efforts aren't enough. For some of us, it might be the hope or a recognition that all we're trying to load into this life can't hold the weight of our souls. But I ask that you help us to encounter your Son afresh. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.