

Why Christmas is Still Good News

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 December 2020

Preacher: Kevin Murphy

[0 : 0 0] Good evening and welcome to our online Christmas Eve service. It's so great to have you with us. We're thrilled that you've joined us this evening. If you're new to Watermark or joining us for the first time, my name is Kevin.

And on behalf of all the staff and the leaders here, welcome. It's wonderful to have you with us. And of course to the Watermark family, a warm welcome to you. Merry Christmas. And we're so glad that you're with us as well.

So, when we think of Christmas, I wonder what imagery comes to your mind. You may think of the big dazzling lights in our city. The massive Christmas trees with the thousands of lights and baubles that are in the shopping centers.

Or maybe some of the streets lights and the decorations in Li Tung Avenue and Wan Chai. Maybe the harbor lights across from TST looking over onto the island. Maybe when you think of Christmas, for you what sticks out is a family meal, lots of food, warm music playing in the background, dazzling presents and Christmas trees.

Or maybe if you're more traditional, you might think of a traditional nativity scene. See, the shepherds with their sheep, the angels in their halos, and the wise men with their three gifts.

[1 : 1 5] And of course, Joseph and Mary with their newborn baby. No doubt many of us are familiar with the Christmas story. We've watched the pageants.

We've had the decorations. We've sung the songs. We've listened to stacks and stacks of Christian messages and sermons over Christmas time. But what does it all mean?

What's the point of Christmas? How does the birth of Jesus 2,000 years ago affect and impact our lives today in 21st century Hong Kong?

Well, this evening we're going to zoom out and look at the Christmas story from a whole Bible perspective. And I want us to think about three things as we think of the Christmas story.

We're going to think about the search of Christmas, the messiness of Christmas, and the promise of Christmas. The search, the messiness, and the promise.

[2 : 1 1] So let's dive in. The search of Christmas. Recently, I was reading the Christmas story once again in the Gospels. And one of the things that stood out to me is how many characters there are that are all searching for Jesus.

The wise men come from the east. They see the constellation of stars. And they perceive that the divines are sending them a message. That a newborn king has been born.

And so they make their way towards Jerusalem. And they say this, We have come to find him who has been born the king of the Jews. For we have seen his star when it arose in the east.

And we have come to look for him. And of course, Herod, when he hears this message, he sends the wise men to Bethlehem. And he says this, Go and search diligently for the child.

And when you have found him, bring word to me that I too may come and worship him. Of course, Herod doesn't really want to worship Jesus. He is threatened by the idea that there's another king in town.

[3 : 10] And he wants Jesus to be killed. But still, this idea of go and search diligently for him. And then, of course, the angels deliver this message to the shepherds. And upon hearing this news of this new king being born, They say to one another, Come, let's go to Bethlehem.

Let's search for this child and see this thing that has happened. Everyone seems to be looking for this birth of this baby, Jesus. One of the most marvelous and wonderful things about the Christmas story is the fact that the eternal king of the universe, the one by whom all things were made and brought into existence, came to dwell amongst us.

And yet, he did so not by being born into a palace with royalty or even being born in Jerusalem near the temple, but was born in the back borders of Bethlehem, born in a stable, laid to rest in a manger.

And yet, the obscurity of Jesus' birth, being born in Bethlehem and laid to rest in a manger, meant that those who wanted to find him needed to seek him out, needed to search for him.

No one stumbled upon Jesus by accident. It was the deliberate seeking of Jesus that led those first worshippers to find him. When we read the Bible, one of the things the scriptures tell us is that, in fact, the whole point of the Christmas story is all about searching and seeking.

[4 : 41] But it's not about the kind of searching or seeking that we may think about at first appearances. At first glance, you may think that one of the points that the Bible is making is that it's only those who seek diligently for God ultimately find him.

But that's actually not the point of the Bible at all. The main point of the Bible is that the point of Christmas is that God has come to seek for us. In every instance, God is the one who takes the initiative.

It's God who sends his angels to go and tell the shepherds about this newborn king, and they go and respond to God's message. It's God who takes the initiative to speak to the wise men, to send the sign that will lead them to Jerusalem and then Tibetan.

The entire Christmas narrative is about God's initiative to seek out those who are lost, those who need him. Many years later, when Jesus is growing and has embarked on his ministry, he's at one stage walking the dusty roads into the ancient city of Jericho.

And he's walking along, he's clamored by people all around him, vying for his attention. And there's a man in the crowd, a short man, called Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a tax collector, which means he is of a moral, dubious nature.

[5 : 57] He's also a social outcast because he's aligned himself with the Romans. And the text tells us that Zacchaeus is seeking to see Jesus, but he can't see him.

And so he makes a plan, and Jesus is surrounded by all these people around him. But Jesus finds Zacchaeus. Jesus seeks him out. And so over and above the heads of the crowds, Jesus says, Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus, I want to come and have a meal in your house today.

Jesus is demonstrating what his whole life is about. But he's seeking out the misfits, the lost, the broken, the excluded. And so Jesus goes to Zacchaeus' house, and he has a meal with him.

And at the end of the meal, it appears that Zacchaeus is still not so sure, why would Jesus want to come to my house? Why would Jesus want to be with me? And Jesus turns to Zacchaeus and says, Zacchaeus, this is the very reason why I've come.

I've come to seek out, to save those that are lost. At Christmas time, we often hear the story of the wise men that traveled thousands of kilometers across hills and plains and deserts to come and find Jesus, and the journey of the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and to find him.

[7 : 12] And the wise men traveled to bring their gifts and their treasures, but often we miss that the point of Christmas episode is actually the story of God seeking us. Jesus didn't travel across thousands of miles of fields and plains and deserts.

Jesus left the throne room of heaven, the glory of heaven. Jesus left the intimacy of the Trinity. Jesus laid aside his majesty and his glory in order to take on the nature of servanthood and humanity, in order to seek out people like you and I.

Friends, I'm not sure about you, but I don't know where I would be in my life if it wasn't for Jesus seeking me out. I shudder to think what kind of man I'd be, what kind of father and what kind of husband I'd be if it weren't for the miracle of Christ transforming grace in my life.

I was just thinking earlier this week of all the episodes and the times in my life where God has changed me as I've reflected on the gospel and as Christ has moved towards me and his miraculous grace towards me.

I'm frightened to think what kind of person I'd be if Christ had not sought me out. I'm a Christian today not because I reached out to Jesus, but because he reached out to me.

[8 : 22] And this is the story of Christmas. That each in our own way, each of us have our Zacchaeus story. Sin has rendered us not only social outcasts, but cut off from relationship from the God who loves us and who made us to experience his grace.

And yet the good news of Christmas is that God hasn't left us. Jesus came to seek us out and to find us. There's an incredible verse in the book of 2 Samuel in the Old Testament, chapter 14.

And in this verse, a lady says this, Friends, God devises ways.

He orchestrates plans. He sent his son to come and seek and save people like you and I. The search of Christmas. Secondly, the messiness of Christmas.

When we read the accounts of the Christmas story in the Gospels, we read of the surprise and the shock that Mary experienced when this angel comes to her and says, Mary, you are with child.

[9 : 41] The Messiah is going to be born from your womb. And remember Mary's infamous word. She says, how can this be? For I am a virgin. For Mary and Joseph, who were engaged to be married, the news of Mary's pregnancy was obviously an inconvenience.

But it was far more than an inconvenience. In many ways, it was a complete disaster. Because in the Middle East culture, both ancient and modern, for an unmarried girl to announce to anybody that she was pregnant was the ultimate act of bringing shame and dishonor, not only on you, but on your family and on your people.

Imagine Mary trying to explain to her parents, Mom and Dad, I've got news. I'm pregnant. But it's not what you think. It's the Holy Spirit. I promise you. I wonder how well they believed her when she shared that story.

Scholars tell us that the ancient city of Nazareth, at the time of Jesus, the population was only about 450 people. Not a very big town at all. In a small village like this, everybody raises each other's children.

Everybody knows everybody else. Everybody knows your business. Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married. Not so much because they've fallen madly in love and just couldn't think of life apart from each other, but because of the arrangement, the negotiation of the families that have come together.

[11 : 10] In ancient times, marriage wasn't just two individuals coming together. It was two families. And yet, Mary is pregnant. As we said, this is not just an inconvenience.

This is about the most shameful and scandalous thing that could have happened to that small town. That village. In other towns, such a girl probably would have been stoned to death. And then, of course, think about the mess of the birth.

In a stable. Remember the Christmas carol, Silent night, silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright. Round yon virgin, mother and child.

Holy infant, so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace. Friends, the reality is that that night was probably anything but calm and mild, calm and bright.

We tend to think of the Christmas evening as this balmy, perfect summer evening. The sky, the weather perfect. Mary just gently rocking her baby.

[12 : 13] The animals gently cooing around. And we tend to think that Jesus just somehow popped out without any pain, without any noise. And was immediately sleeping peacefully in his mother's arms.

Jesus probably came out of Mary's womb, wrapped in swaddling cloths already. And we've got this idea of the perfect, peaceful, still perfect evening. But for anyone that's had children, you know that that's not really how it works, right?

These days we are so aware of hygiene, of washing our hands, of sanitized environments. Can you imagine giving birth without medication, without doctors and midwives assisting you, without any of the hygiene, without sterilization?

There is Mary giving birth on the floor of an animal stable. It's about as messy as it can get. I think maybe a modern day equivalent would be a teenage girl about to give birth, going to labor, being turned away by person after person, institution after institution.

And so eventually finding a dark alley in between a row of shop houses, giving birth there in the dark, next to the trash cans, not with cows and donkeys and sheep, but maybe with rats and mice running around.

[13 : 37] A modern day equivalent of the horror and the mess and the shame of this birth. And then of course there's Herod, the psychotic ruler who issues this order to have all male children under the year of two killed, murdered, just in an effort to try and get rid of Jesus.

When we think of Christmas, we tend to think of it with warm, glowing sentiment. We have silent night playing in the background. We have a glass of mulled wine in our hands. We're opening beautifully wrapped presents.

And as we take another spoonful of Christmas pudding, But the original Christmas story is nothing like that. It's messy. It's not sanitized at all. It's filled with prejudice and shame and jealousy.

It's filled with murder and anger. It's filled with disorder and pain and mess and even blood. Friends, do you know what this means? It means that Jesus is not ashamed of the mess and the shame and the disorder and the brokenness of our lives.

If we're really honest, every one of us have areas of our lives that we either tend to hide or tend not to think about. We tend to cover over. And it's exactly in that place that Jesus wants to come in.

[14 : 56] Friends, what about those of us who have got broken relationships with family or feel hurt by those around us? Friends, some of you grapple with the everyday experience of anxiety, depression.

And we walk around our city with a smiling face or we try and cover it with our best foot forward. But under the surface, the anxiety, the depression is always there. Friends, for some of you, you carry shame.

Past decisions. Past choices you've made. Mistakes in our lifetime. Friends, for some of us, it's a sense of failure that we carry in our lives.

Dane Ortlund says it like this. God's forgiving, redeeming, restoring touch reaches down into the darkest crevices of our souls.

Those places where we are most ashamed, most defeated. More than this, those crevices of sin are themselves the places where Christ loves us the most.

[16 : 05] His heart willingly goes there. His heart is most strongly drawn there. He knows us to the uttermost. He saves us to the uttermost. Because His heart is drawn to us to the uttermost.

Friends, do you sometimes think that there are parts of your life that are too disordered? Too messy? Too complicated? For either God or God's people to accept you or to love you the way that you are?

Dane Ortlund goes on and he says, You don't need to be unburdened. You don't need to collect or clean yourself up in order to come to Jesus. In fact, the mess of our lives is the very thing that qualifies us to come to Jesus.

Friends, you see that Christmas is all about Jesus Christ. The God of the universe. The one who knits you together in your mother's womb. The God who knows you better than you know yourself.

And He's moving towards you. Not just into our neighborhood in general. But into the messiest parts of our lives. And He's not ashamed of it. He's not embarrassed by it. He's not put off by it. He's not looking for a sanitized version of our lives.

[17 : 11] Jesus is peeling back the very messiest part of our lives. And He's saying, I want to know you there. I want to come there. Friends, I don't know you.

And I don't know what you've done in your life. But Jesus does. And He's not put off by it. He's not embarrassed by it. Jesus wants to move into those areas of our lives.

And to bring His healing light into the very darkest areas of our hearts. Your anguish is His home. Come to Him. The mess of Christmas.

Now, most Christmas narratives end somewhere around there. With Joseph and Mary cuddling their baby Jesus. The animals cooing in the background. The three wise men with their gifts.

And the shepherds with their sheep. That's where most Christmas narratives end. Some people say, No, the Christmas story really ends on the cross. Only of Jesus can it be said that He was born in order to die.

[18 : 11] And Christ's death and resurrection really is the culmination of the Christmas story. And that is true in many ways. But that's still not where the Christmas story ultimately ends.

Because the promise of Christmas is that Christ is coming again. And that leads us to our third point. The promise of Christmas. In Revelation chapter 19, we see that Jesus is coming again.

But this time He's going to come not so much as a baby born in a manger. But as a victorious conquering King. Jesus is going to come again and He's going to crush His enemy.

He's going to dismantle all that is broken and disordered and messy and evil and wrong with our world. And after Revelation 19, in chapter 21, the Apostle John, who's writing this, describes what eternity is going to be like for those that have encountered God.

And as he's describing this, he hears this voice. And look at what he says. He says, And then John hears these incredible words.

[19 : 36] And behold, I am making all things new. Jesus promises that He's coming again. Two years ago, there was a story that captured the headlines of the world and captured all our attentions.

It was the story of that soccer team in Thailand. Those teenage boys that, after practice, rode to the caves in Chiang Rai and decided to go for a bit of a stroll through the caves.

They left their bicycles outside. By evening time that night, they had not returned. Their parents were worried. A search party formed. And they found these bicycles at the mouth of the cave.

And suddenly everyone realized what had happened. The boys were inside. Monsoon rains had come. And they were unable to get out. And the story of the boys captured in this cave, stuck in this cave, captured the world's attention.

And so the Thai army rallies together and puts a plan in place to try and find them. And pretty soon they realized that they alone are not going to have enough resources, people resources to do it.

[20 : 47] And so they put the call up. The world gathers experts of flown in from around the world to come and search for these boys in this labyrinth of the Thai caves in Chiang Rai.

And so days go by. And eventually, after about a week, two British divers are swimming through the caves. They come up at an air pocket. And their headlights shine on these 13 faces.

These 12 boys and their coach. And what the world has been looking for, for a couple of days, these divers have found them. And their hearts must just rejoice as they see that all 13 boys are alive and well and healthy.

And so they climb out of the water. They interact with them. They talk with them. And they spend half an hour, an hour with the boys, reassuring them, lifting them roles, encouraging them, and bringing them good news that their rescue is on the way.

But then they do something remarkable. They leave the boys there. They leave. After coming to rescue them and searching for them, they haven't found them, they leave.

[21 : 56] But as they leave, they make a promise. They say, we're going to come back and get you. We're not abandoning you. We're coming back to rescue you.

We're coming back to bring you home. And in the meantime, we're going to send a medic who's going to come. And so a medic comes and he brings supplies. He brings some blankets. He brings some fresh water.

He sits with them for a while. But the divers go back and they formulate this plan. And they formulate this plan to come and rescue the boys and bring them home.

And while the boys are there, even having experienced the divers, they probably had no idea of the complexity of the operation.

Just what is going on outside the cave. As these thousands of people are hatching this incredible plan to go in and bring these boys home. I wonder how those boys felt when the divers left.

[22 : 52] Anxious, sure. Worried, maybe a little. But oh, so full of hope and expectation. If they'd wondered before whether anyone had remembered them or knew about them, they could be absolutely certain now.

The divers, they leave, but they leave with instructions. Wait where you are. We are coming to bring you home. And the following day, the divers return. Not just with supplies. Not just with waters and blankets. But with a plan.

They bring those boys home. They rescue them. Friends, Christmas is not just about Jesus coming with a message. Jesus didn't just come to help us improve our lives or to give us a painkiller to deal with some of the messiness and the disorder in our lives.

Jesus didn't just come to help us get through this lifetime. Friends, the story of Jesus is Jesus comes with a declaration, a promise. He says, I've come once, but I'm coming again.

I haven't left you. I haven't abandoned you. In his first coming, Jesus comes and he announces his kingdom. He dies on the cross. He pays the ransom price to bring his people out of death and slavery.

[23 : 58] But at his second coming, he's coming to bring his people to the eternal dwelling. Jesus says that when he comes again, the heavens and the earth will be made new. They'll be joined together.

And the dwelling place of man will be with God. And the dwelling place of God will be with man. And there, there'll be no more separation. There'll be no more waiting. No more agony.

John tells us that no more will we experience the pain and the brokenness and the heartache and the tears of this world. In that place, he will wipe away every tear.

Pain will be no more. Suffering will be no more. Crying will be no more. And the former things of this world will pass away.

Behold, he's making all things new. Friends, every year we put up Christmas trees and we light candles and we turn on the lights and we give presents and we eat wonderful food.

[24 : 57] We sing the carols. What's it all for? What's the point of Christmas? What does Jesus' birth 2,000 years ago have to do with our lives in Hong Kong 21st century today?

Friends, Jesus has come. Christmas tells us that Jesus came to search for you and I. When we were lost in our sin, when we were cut off from God, Jesus came to find us.

Jesus has come into the messiness of our lives. He hasn't come looking for a sanitized version of us. He hasn't come looking for a neatly packaged version. Jesus has come into the very darkest, messiest parts of our lives.

And he says, I want to be known there. I want to know you there. Jesus comes with a promise. A promise that he's coming again. He's coming to make all things new. This is the hope of Christmas.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus Christ, thank you so much for Christmas. Thank you that you came all those years ago. Thank you, God, that you didn't just send us a book. You didn't just send us advice.

[25 : 58] You sent us yourself. You sent us Jesus, your son. You sent us the message of good news that by simply coming to you, we can experience new life.

God, I pray for every one of us watching this this evening. I pray for our Christmas day tomorrow and this week that we will not just eat food and sing carols and open presents. God, I pray the wonder and the beauty of Jesus will be real to our hearts.

We pray this in your wonderful and your glorious name. Amen. Amen. Amen.