

THE BEAUTY OF CHRISTMAS

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I'd like us all to read together from the scripture today, Luke 2 and we'll use the pew Bible and read in unison chapter 2:1-7 "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. It was the first census that to place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to his own hometown to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem the town of David because he belonged to the house and the line of David. He went there to register with Mary who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there the time came for the baby to be born. And she gave birth to her first born a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."

We were driving along in the family car some days ago. I was talking to the family about what would be an appropriate Christmas theme. I asked if there were any suggestions. My son responded that he thought a good sermon would speak to the beauty of Christmas. I thought that's really appropriate. Christmas is beautiful.

As I began to meditate on why Christmas is beautiful, being a teacher I always have to have a list of reasons why it's beautiful. So I would like to share with you some reasons why I think Christmas is beautiful.

The first beauty of Christmas is that it happened. The story is real. There is a real Joseph and Mary not just the plaster paris models you see in the five and dime store. There are real shepherds. Real wise men. Real angels. And a real baby. And the real Christmas had been a long time in the heart and mind of God. All the way back to the fall of man, God had prophesied to the serpent that Eve's offspring would crush the head of the serpent. God had been planning to send Jesus into the world for a long time.

Balaam in the Old Testament would say, "I see him but not now. I hold him but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob. A scepter will arise out of Israel." Isaiah said, "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and you will call him Emmanuel."

The reality of the event began to loom clearer when Micah said, "But you Bethlehem, though you are small among the tribes of Judah out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, who's origins are from old, from ancient times."

The reality of Christmas says God keeps his word, God keeps his promises.

A very favorite story of mine is the play "Black Stranger" which is set in the nineteenth century potato famine of Ireland. The government of Ireland set about just putting people to work to give them something to do, to give them a sense of dignity about their work so that from the income the government was providing they could put things on the table. The two leading characters in the play are seen talking to one another. They come to this astonishing revelation. Michael says to his father as they're out there working on the roads. He says to him in this illuminating moment, "We're building roads that lead to nowhere." He comes to the recognition that the government was just putting them to work to make them be busy rather than putting them to work purposefully. We're building roads that lead to nowhere.

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But God has been building a road, a highway through the scriptures, a highway through the centuries, a highway through his people Israel that has resulted in the reality of the Christ being born. The reality of Christmas. That's the beauty – he has come.

The Jewish world wasn't the only world that was expecting someone like this. The Greeks, the non-Jews hoped someday too that God might make himself clear. The early Greek philosophers in fact tried to find out what was the basic meaning of life and the basic essence of matter of the universe. An Ephesian philosopher in the 6th century was one day thinking about what is the most important thing of life. He went outside his home in Ephesus and there was a river flowing by his place. He put his hand in it then took it out and then put his hand in it again. He said, "The river has changed from the time I first put my hand in to the time I put it in again. The river has changed." He became the philosopher of flux. Or motion. He said everything is constant change. Everything is in motion. He said if everything is in motion, if the seasons change, if we age, if the colors fade, somewhere in some place there must be something that does not change. He called this the *logos*. The word, the reason that there is an unmoving stationary fixed reality somewhere in the world.

John takes this of the reality of the Christmas story and says this, which the Greek philosophers looked to, is the constant in a world of flux and change has not become clothed in flesh. And the beauty of Christmas is that it is rule. God has come to us.

The second beauty of Christmas is the way that it happened. Mary, young and pure, a beautiful young person. And not only young and pure but a young woman who is knowledgeable in the scripture. How do I know that she was knowledgeable in the scripture? You know it because when you find the words of the magnificent on her lips where she praises God for the announcement of Gabriel she breaks forth in a song of praise to God that is modeled along the same words that Hanna in the Old Testament had spoken when she found out that she was to give birth to Samuel. Mary is a person who had hid the word in her heart and when the moment came for her to speak it, it was there, available to her.

She also risked the loss of her reputation for the sake of bearing Christ. The beauty of it happening to Mary. The beauty of Christmas happening to Joseph, the sensitive man. So sensitive to the Lord that the Lord used nothing but dreams to reveal his way to him. Four times in dreams, Joseph finds God's direction.

Most of us have trouble hearing God when he speaks to us when we're wide-awake. Joseph is sensitive enough to listen to God while he is asleep.

The beauty of the way that it happened in that Caesar is simply seen as a puppet in the hands of God, issuing a decree that the world should be enrolled. Little did he know that what he was doing was in fulfillment of prophecy. And the beauty of the scripture is to say that in the humility of Bethlehem the iron hand of God is at work ruling even in the palaces of the world.

Then there is the beauty of the manger and the animals in the way that Christmas happened. A picture of the Messianic age when the lion would lay down with the lamb. Here is the baby born in the ox's crib. The poverty of Jesus, the vulnerability of God. Yet the accessibility of God. Isn't it good that he was not born in the inn where the doors would have been locked? But he is born in the stable where everyone can get to him.

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The beauty of the way that it happened with the wise men and the shepherds that God works on both dimensions of human life. Persons who diligently seek him like the wise men will find him. And persons who weren't looking at all will be found by God. The beauty of the angels who appear to the shepherds. A reminder to us that Jesus would shepherd his flock.

Looking back on the whole Christmas narrative, there's not a thing that I would change. You can't improve upon the Christmas story.

I think we may make some application of that to our own lives. Why doesn't God give you and me a more thermostatically controlled world? Why doesn't he arrange things more conveniently to suit our comfort? He's not changing our world any more than he's changing that first Christmas world because somehow the story wouldn't be beautiful if he interfered with the processes that were at work.

I do now know what at the Christmas season you are carrying in terms of loss or in terms of personal agony and spiritual weight. But I know one thing: the scriptures tell us that the glory will exceed the groaning. The ecstasy is greater than the agony.

Mary, if you could ask her today, Was it worth it to give up your reputation to have this child? To bear this child in the cave? Was it worth it? Oh, a million times over!

And so it is in our life. The way God does things, he is weaving a tapestry of his design. "Not till the loom is silent and the shuttle cease to fly will God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why. The dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hands as the threads of gold and silver in the patterns he has planned."

Christmas is beautiful in the way that it happened.

The third beauty of Christmas is that God has planned it all. We have to look behind the Christmas story at the heart of God who initiated Christmas. Many of us find ourselves living with inadequate views of God and Christmas somehow comes along to correct them all.

A little book J. B. Phillips wrote a number of years ago had a real hold of my life where he talked about the varying views that we have of God that are incorrect.

Some of us think that God is a resident policeman. The one who has the whistle in his mouth and the billy club in his hand and is just waiting for us to do something wrong and pow!

The God of the parental hangover. That is to say we may have had a parent that has not modeled the character of God and when we think of God as father we may think of a father on earth that was not in the character of God the Father. So we live with a God who is angry. Or we live with a God who is very judgmental. We live with a God who is very undisciplined because we are thinking that somehow that God is an extension of our own parent.

Or the God as a grand old man. Sort of an old man image of God in the sky, which many people have, sitting benevolently letting everybody do everything and not getting all worried about it. And everything's ok because he's a grand old man.

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Or the God of absolute perfection. Live a hundred percent and if you're not a hundred percent, *bang*. God's going to get you.

Or the concept of God as the managing director. When you're in a corporation the higher you go the fewer people can get to you. Just try to get to the president today. Because the higher you go the fewer contacts you have with the persons at the bottom of the list. Many people think of God as the manager director. High and removed.

But Christmas blows all that inadequate imagery of God and tells us that God communicates with us and is vulnerable and comes among us. Theologians have talked about the attributes of God that is the characteristics of God. They've divided them into two phraseologies – immutable and commutable. Sounds like a disease, doesn't it?

Incommunicable is the aspect of God, which he doesn't transfer to us. That is we are not all powerful, we are not all knowing, we are not everywhere present. Those are the immutable attributes of God.

But then he has commutable attributes. He is the God of love. He is the God of joy, the God of peace, the God of endurance, the God of gentleness, the God of self-control, the God of goodness. And all of these manifest themselves in the Christmas story. The God who delights to bring joy. The God who must be motivated out of his own heart to bring love. The God of peace, the God who endures the enmity of man. The God of gentleness. The God of self-control. The God of goodness.

We at Christmas bring adoration to this living God. Let us adore the ever living God and render praises unto him.

The fourth beauty of Christmas is the people that come forth from it. The people that I'm looking at and maybe the person you're looking at. Beautiful in the Lord's eyes are his people.

Have you ever thought what would happen on a space mission if the shuttle wouldn't be able to get down out of its orbit and we would lose some astronauts orbiting the earth? I can tell you one thing: the whole attention of the world would be focused on the flight of the astronauts who were isolated out in space. No effort would be spared to mount a rescue operation to bring that person back.

God knows that we were lost to heaven and we would die on earth so he mounted a rescue operation to save us and all the attention of heaven is fixed on lost humanity, you and me. Jesus in being born has it as his mission to seek and to save those who are lost.

This is not just something God wants us to know theologically. But he wants us to know it personally. I suppose of all the inadequate views I've had of God probably the one that's been the strongest with me are the resident policeman and the hundred percent perfectionist. Whenever I don't reach a hundred percent perfection I kind of feel like I wonder if I'm going to make it. That comes out of my strong non-eternal security background. My strong *insecurity* background.

I had an experience this week where as a member of a presbytery that sets in on the hearing of ministers who have somehow failed in their spiritual life, a real sense of the mercy and kindness

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of God in bringing restoration. As I was thinking about this message and thinking about the experience I had this week I woke up one morning about 5:00 this week and God had been saying to me, I don't know if it was in a dream or what, but it was just like to me, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Somehow I always interpreted that verse to mean if you're out doing missionary work of the church somewhere and you really get cut off from funds or the like, God would make it up. But all of a sudden I began to see it in my inner life in a new light. God has committed himself. Christmas is the fact that God has committed himself to us and God is not pulling Jesus back out of the world. "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

A great comfort it is to know in our lives that we have truly been reconciled to God because of Jesus Christ. Christmas is beautiful. It has to be the most beautiful time of the year.

I'm going to close with my favorite Christmas story. You'll forgive me but I think this story pulls all the threads of this message together. It is a delightful story. It was told in *Guidepost* magazine in 1975. It's the story of Wally. Some of you know about Wally. I lost the story. I could not find it. I have searched high and low for weeks for Wally. It almost became a person to me. The other night I was in my office and saying to myself "Wally, I know you're here somewhere. Wally, come to me. I want to make this a great Christmas and I need you Wally." I laid my hands on it within five minutes after looking for hours. But here's the story of Wally, the beauty of Christmas.

Wally was nine that year and in the 2nd grade though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still Wally was well liked by the other children in his class all of whom were smaller than he. Though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally would ask to play ball with them, or play any game for that matter in which winning was important. Most often they would find a way to keep him out but Wally would hang around anyway, not sulking. Just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one. The natural protector paradoxically of the under dog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who would say; "Can't they stay? They're no bother."

Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year. But the play's director Miss Lombard assigned him to a more "important" role. After all, she reasoned, the innkeeper did not have too many lines and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful. So it happened that the usual large partisan audience gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of crooks and crowns and halos and a whole stage full of squeaky voices. No one on stage on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of that night than Wallace. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lombard had to make sure he didn't wander on stage before his cue.

Then the time came when Joseph appeared slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted backdrop. Wally the innkeeper was there waiting. "What do you want?" demanded Wally swinging the door open with a brusque gesture. "We seek lodging." "Seek it elsewhere," Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. "The inn is filled." "Sir, we have asked everywhere in vein. We have traveled far and are very weary." "There is no room in this inn for you." Wally looked properly stern. "Please good innkeeper. This is my wife Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired." Now for

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the first time the innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that there was a long pause. Long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment. *No! Be gone*, the prompter whispered from the stage. “No!” Wally repeated automatically. “Be gone.” Joseph placed his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband’s shoulder and the two of them started to move away.

Wally the innkeeper did not return inside his inn however. Wally stood there in the doorway watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open. His brow creased with concern. His eyes filling unmistakably with tears. Suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all others. “Don’t go, Joseph!” Wally called out. “Bring Mary back.” Wally’s face grew in a bright smile. “You can have my room!”

The beauty of Christmas. Christ can have our room.

Father, we thank you for this beautiful season. We thank you for remembering again that you have come. Lord Jesus, you have come to save your people from their sins. To bring us into an eternal home with you. We thank you. Lord, there may be persons here today who glory in the meaning of Christmas but who have not yet personally experienced what it is you can do. Have not yet made you Lord. We pray that with little Wally they would find in their own hearts today a door swinging open and saying, “There is room in my heart for you.” Make Christmas beautiful to us all this year, Lord. Whatever load we’re carrying, whatever state of joy or sadness we may be in, make the beauty of Christmas the beauty of Christ live in us. We ask in the name of our Lord. Amen.