

COME HOME FOREVER!

Titus 2:11-14

What does Christmas mean for us?

A sermon preached by
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A local Christian radio station had a Christmas ad one year that was one of those “person on the street” interviews, with various responses to the question, “What does Christmas mean?” There were no unexpected answers in the ad. One person said, “Getting presents.” Another said, “Being with family.” Another said, “Spending time with friends.” One actually said, “Helping other people.” None of these are bad answers; they are just not correct answers to the question, “What does Christmas mean?” Finally, a man said, “The love of God revealed in Jesus Christ,” then the announcer wished everyone a Merry Christmas from the radio station and the music came up and out.

As I was listening to this ad, two things struck me. One, even on a Christian radio station, people were confused about the true meaning of Christmas. And two, the radio station made no attempt to clarify or correct the off-base answers.

It’s pretty hard in our culture today to get clarity about the meaning of Christmas. Is it a winter festival? Is it a celebration of family and friendship? Is it an economically driven rush toward the bottom line of the fiscal year? What does Christmas mean? What significance does the birth of Christ have for our world and our lives today? Let’s look at Christmas from that perspective this morning.

You have to admit, there was some pretty strange stuff going on two millennia ago when Jesus came to earth. There were visitations by angelic beings; there was an unexplained pregnancy; there was a celestial phenomenon, a new star that scientists are still arguing about. There was the tragic story of a man and a woman turned away from hospitality, having to give birth to a child amid the filth of animals. There were shepherds who claimed to have seen angels in the skies. There was a bizarre visit from three astrologers who followed the star until they found the baby. This is the stuff of fantasy and myth and legend—unless, of course, it’s true. Then it is the mighty work of God in the world.

What God is doing at Christmas is taking matters into God’s own hands. God’s purpose from the beginning was to save planet earth, to reconcile all creation into God’s love. God tried making covenants with people; God tried giving them a set of laws; God tried sending prophets to lead the people

back to the paths of righteousness. Nothing worked. People were still the hard-headed, stiff-necked people they had always been—intent on doing their own thing whatever the consequences.

Finally, God took the most radical action of all. God became human. God took on flesh in the womb of Mary and came into the world as the baby Jesus. We say, “God sent the Son,” and that is true, but the Baby in the manger is not separate from God. The holy Child is the same God who created the universe. God finally could not depend on anyone else to get the job done. God had to take matters into God’s own hands. God had to become what God was trying to save.

You may remember way back to 1987 and a news story that held the nation in suspense for two days. Jessica McClure was a toddler from Midland, Texas, who fell down an abandoned well shaft. For fifty-nine hours, scores of rescue workers worked around the clock to free the helpless child. The whole nation watched and waited in compassionate anticipation, praying and hoping for a good outcome. Jessica’s parents stayed there with her, their heartbreak becoming ours as the time marched on. At first Jessica was singing Winnie-the-Pooh songs from down in the shaft. Then she went quiet. The oil field workers and paramedics worked feverishly against death and time, overcoming one obstacle after another to save the child. Finally, after 2 ½ days of superhuman effort, a paramedic emerged from the hole with Jessica in his arms, bruised but safe and sound. The eyes of a nation filled with tears, and our collective voice let out a cry of gratitude to God.

I think that drama is a good parable of Christmas. For centuries, God’s people had been waiting for a Savior, a Messiah who would save God’s people from their sins and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. For centuries, humankind had been down a deep, dark hole—stuck in the shaft of sin—and not one of the rescue attempts had been successful: not the law of Moses, not the words of the prophets, not the sacrifices in the Temple. Nothing worked until God entered history as a baby born in Bethlehem. God came down into the hole personally and set us free. Christ our Savior came down into a world of darkness and brought us light.

So God has opened up a new way of salvation for us. Paul wrote a letter to his co-worker Titus, and in that epistle he was talking about the lifestyle

of a Christian, how we ought to behave. But then Paul gives the reason behind the behavior. This is the “why” of the Christian life: “*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.*”¹ The Gospel of John sums it up in two sentences: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*”² That’s the Gospel for Christmas or any other day. It is salvation, not dependent on sacrifice or law, but dependent on relationship. In this miraculous, supernatural birth in Bethlehem, God has bridged the gap between earth and heaven, and we can walk across.

This is the work of Christ for us. Jesus bridges the gap created by sin so we can cross over into the safety of God’s Kingdom. This is the reason he was born. But what does this mean? What significance does this Christmas Gospel have for our lives today? What difference does the birth of Jesus make?

Christmas means **our earthly home is not our permanent home**. This life does not last forever. There is an eternal world of the spirit where God dwells. There is a heaven. And because God has come to us, then by God’s grace we can go back to our Creator. We have “*a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens*”³ We do not see this realm, but we believe in it. It’s the foundation of our hope.

There’s a great Christmas story about an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope. Stella was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died after a long battle with cancer just a few months earlier. Now, just a few days before Christmas, she was almost snowed in by a brutal blizzard. She felt terribly alone—so much so she had decided she was not even going to decorate for Christmas.

Late that afternoon the doorbell rang, and there was a boy with a box at the door. He wasn’t from Fed Ex or UPS or the Post Office. He looked to be a teenager. But she invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, “What’s in the box?”

The delivery boy laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little puppy, a golden Labrador Retriever. He picked up the squirming pup and

explained, “This is for you, Ma'am. He's six weeks old, completely housebroken.”

“Who sent this?” Stella asked.

The young man set the animal down and handed her an envelope and said, “It's all explained here in this envelope, Ma'am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift to you.” The young man then handed her a book, *How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever*.

In desperation she again asked, “Who sent me this puppy?”

As the young man turned to leave, he said, “Your husband, Ma'am. Merry Christmas.”

She opened up the envelope, and there was a letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement to be strong. He vowed that he would be waiting for the day when she would join him. He had sent her this puppy to keep her company until then.

She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and she picked up that golden furry ball and held it to her neck. Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor's house. From the kitchen she heard the radio playing “Joy to the World, the Lord has Come.” Suddenly Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and a wonder greater than the grief and loneliness.

“Little fella,” she said to the dog, “It's just you and me. But you know what? There's a box down in the basement I'll bet you'd like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. Let's go get it.”⁴

This world is not our permanent home. The birth of Jesus is the sign. This is the foundation of our hope.

Therefore, **our problems here are only temporary.** This is the foundation of our courage. This is how we can get out of bed in the morning. Whatever griefs we bear, whatever obstacles we face, whatever hardships come our way—death, disease, depression, anxiety, poverty, persecution, broken relationships—we can endure, because this world is not

our only home. In Romans, Paul says we can “*boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.*”⁵ When all is said and done, the tragedies and troubles, the scars and wounds of our lives, will be healed in the heavenly home that is waiting for us.

A few years ago Mitch Albom wrote a best-seller called *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. It tells the story of Eddie, a man who was raised in the Great Depression of the 1930’s. Eddie was treated harshly by his father growing up, and he was held as a prisoner-of-war in World War II. He lost the love of his life, his wife Marguerite, to cancer. Eddie spent most of his adult life as a maintenance man at a cheesy seaside amusement park in New Jersey. He was killed in a tragic accident at the amusement park where he worked. He just had kind of a sad and difficult life.

The book is about Eddie’s experience in heaven, as five people from his earthly life who have preceded him in death help him resolve the tangled mess of his life and to see how important and significant his life really was.

In the last few paragraphs of the book, Eddie is led by a child to his final destination. He and the child are swept away by a river, which carries him along like a leaf through all the colors of the rainbow, all the pain and weariness of his life washing away in the peaceful waters. Finally, he emerges in brilliant light above an almost unimaginable scene:

“There was a pier filled with thousands of people, men and women, fathers and mothers and children—so many children—children from the past and the present, children who had not yet been born, side by side, hand in hand, in caps, in short pants, filling the boardwalk and the rides and the wooden platforms, sitting on each other’s laps. They were there, or would be there, because of the simple, mundane things Eddie had done in his life, the accidents he had prevented, the rides he had kept safe, the unnoticed turns he had affected every day. And while their lips did not move, Eddie heard their voices, more voices than he could have imagined, and a peace came upon him that he had never known before. He was free of [the child’s] grip now, and he floated up above the sand and above the boardwalk, above the tent tops and spires of the midway, toward the peak of the big, white

Ferris Wheel, where a cart, gently swaying, held a woman in a yellow dress—his wife, Marguerite, waiting with her arms extended. He reached for her and he saw her smile and the voices melded into a single word from God: *Home*. ”⁶

For those who hope in the One who was born in Bethlehem, the final word of God, beyond this earth, beyond our problems and pains, will be “home.” How do we get there? We believe. We have faith. As Mary and Joseph believed the word of the messenger from God, as the shepherds and Wise Men believed and fell down to worship him. Simply trust your heart to the One who made your heart.

Then live a life worthy of that relationship. Paul wrote to Titus: “*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.*”⁷ Our faith shows in our character. Our relationship with God is visible in the ways of discipleship. Like Eddie at the amusement park, it’s our job to keep things in good repair. Our diligence and persistence to a self-controlled, upright, and godly life will make a difference in the people and the world around us. And at the end of the day, the combination of inward faith and outward behavior will take us home every time.

This is what Christmas means. It doesn’t mean counting your presents. It does mean counting on God’s love. That’s why God gave us Jesus. Because God’s love has been poured into us, we are capable of loving others. This love gives us life everlasting now and an eternal home beyond this little world. This Christmas, find the love of God in Jesus Christ, and you can come home forever.

¹ Titus 2:11.

² John 3:16-17.

³ II Corinthians 5:1.

⁴ Robert Russell, *Preaching Today*, Tape #195.

⁵ Romans 5:3-5.

⁶ Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet In Heaven* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2003), p. 193f.

⁷ Titus 2:11-13.