

Christmas Eve 2021

Pastor Ryan Harmon

Ultimately, Christmas is a time of celebration, isn't it? How's that for a profound statement? Pretty obvious. That's what we've been doing the whole afternoon—we've been celebrating. But, of course, one thing I know about people and I'm sure is true of everyone in this room is all of us I am betting have our preferred way to celebrate, especially our preferred way to celebrate Christmas. I know there are some people in here right now that their approach to Christmas is, “We have to squeeze every last drop out of Christmas.” Right? If the Christmas music starts at the grocery store in October, we are very pleased. We have gingerbread lattes every day. You can't get too much Christmas. That's the way some people prefer to celebrate. I'm betting that every kid in the room this afternoon celebrates that way—my kids certainly do. We have not slept much this week. We've shed quite a few tears that it's still two days away until Christmas. That was yesterday.

Now others of us...we'd like to celebrate maybe a little more somberly a little more quietly. That's me. Silent Night types. Right? Hushed celebration. We all approach this time of year a little differently. But the one thing that unites us all this afternoon—everyone in this room—is we are all united by the One that we gather to celebrate. Our sole focus at Christmas is on Jesus. And this afternoon, our prayer is that not just during this service, but also throughout this weekend, whether you have known Jesus for years or whether you're getting to know Him for the first time, our prayer is that you would be astounded all over again by how incredible the message of Christmas is. Not just that but by how incredible Jesus is—the very greatness of Jesus Christ.

We're going to reflect on that for just a few moments. But before we do that, I wanted to pause just to talk about something that I think happens to us as we get older. I think it's pretty natural in the course of life that as you walk through Christmas after Christmas and especially as you walk through it in our culture, you start to get pretty distracted. Don't you? It's easy to kind of run through from Christmas party to Christmas party, shopping, all the things we have to do. And before long you know that the day has come and gone and it's almost as if you approached it with apathy or with indifference—sometimes even relief—that it's all over. Sometimes I think it's also tempting when you've celebrated it year after year, it's easy to start to lose sight of how significant the message of Christmas is. But today, today if we're listening, there is a message that God has for us that is so astounding, so incredible, that indifference is just not an option.

Another thing that I think happens over time, maybe this is you, is that as we walk through life we run into obstacle after obstacle. Maybe our life starts to go a different way than we had planned and we start to accumulate burdens and sorrows, making decisions that we maybe regret. And that leads us to approach Christmas and Jesus Himself in a fearful or in a timid way. Fearing that maybe He'll be like those others maybe He'll greet us with anger and rejection. And so we approach timidly, maybe trying to hide that stuff as we walk through these days. But today, if we listen, there is a message from God of His generous, extravagant, extraordinary love for you and for me. The author of Hebrews, the beginning of that book, spends four verses just reflecting on who Jesus Christ was, and is. Listen with me as we reflect on these verses for the next few minutes, I'm just going to read them to you. This is Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us, in His Son... (NASB, Hebrews 1:1-2)

The author of Hebrews is telling us that we have a God that loves to communicate. Sometimes we think of Him as silent, but He has not been silent. He has been communicating over and over in many times, and in many ways. But with the Incarnation, with this moment where God became man, we encounter a moment that is a pinnacle moment in all of history. This is a moment that God sent a definitive message, a decisive message and ultimate and final message to us—to you and me—about who He is. We are His. We are His. And He told us that he is communicating something new and something final about us. So, what is that message? Well, the message depends on who the Son is that He sent. And so, over the next three verses, this author unpacks, all of the things that are true of Jesus, listen to this at the end of verse 2:

...whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. (Vs. 2-4)

Well there is a lot in there, we could spend weeks unpacking all of those statements about who Jesus is. But let me try to summarize over the next few minutes who He is. Who is Jesus? The author of Hebrews tells us that He is our Creator. The world was made through Him. We are His and we are His inheritance. He is the heir of all things. The Creator of the world. Now to those of us that look around the world and we see a weary and broken world, we see sin and destruction and sadness everywhere we look, this should be a moment, a truth that causes us to be filled with hope. This is a truth that is so astounding that the indifferent can no longer be indifferent. The Creator came on the scene. The Creator intervened in the darkness and the brokenness of the world. As the world tends to draw away, as the world tends to reject us, God did just the opposite. He drew near; He entered in. He sent His son right into the midst of the brokenness. Why? Because we are His. He is our Creator. We are his inheritance.

Who is Jesus? Well, the author says that He is God Himself. The radiance of the glory of God, the light that moves forth from the brightness that is God, He is the exact imprint of God's very being. He is God in the flesh, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. Who is Jesus? Who is this child that we celebrate? Well, he is our Sustainer. The author says that He upholds everything by the Word of His power, everything is sustained by Him. Now that means that even you and me in this very moment, our molecules are held together by Jesus's sustaining word. He is our Sustainer; He's our upholder; without Him things devolve into chaos, things fall apart. Who is Jesus? Well Jesus is our Savior. He came and he made purification for sin and Scripture tells us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And God sent Him that we might place our faith in Him. And as we do that, as we place our confidence in Him, God forgives. God restores us, restores us into relationship with Himself, Jesus, our Savior. Who is Jesus? Who is this One we celebrate? Well, He is all of this. And where is He right now? He is currently on the throne at the right hand of the Majesty. He's at the right hand of God sitting on the throne, reigning supreme, overseeing all of history, sovereign over everything.

In sending His Son, God communicated a definitive, a decisive message to the world to you and to me, and here is the message: God loves you. God loves you and in love He sent His Son into the midst of a broken world to begin to make it right. To begin to cast out the darkness. And in the same way, He is willing and ready to enter into the darkness, the chaos, the disorder, the dysfunction of all of our lives. There's no problem too big. He doesn't shrink back. And He wants to come in and bring order out of the chaos of our lives and come and forgive us for sin and then reign supreme as the King. God sent His Son because He loves you.

What do we gather to celebrate? A birth? Births happen every day, right? But this birth was different. This birth was different because there has never been anyone like Jesus. Jesus, this One born so long ago. The One the prophets foretold—the promised One born in a manger—now sits on the throne as Savior and King over everything. And so now we celebrate. We celebrate as we turn our faith to Him. And we bring Him all the brokenness knowing that our God who loves us more than we could ever know will never turn away. There's no amount of trouble. There's no amount of pain or sorrow or sin in our life that would ever make God run or turn to us in anger. He constantly turns to us in love. That is the message of Him sending His Son. That's what He'll do for you and for me. It's precisely what He did in Amy's story. Let's listen as we hear how God came into her life.

Video:

Growing up, my dad was angry, very angry. And when he got very angry, he would take it out on my mom, which would usually cause her to shut down. It was scary. When I was four, they decided to take me to a preschool. That way I was kind of away from the situation. That was supposed to be a place where I thought I was safe. Until I wasn't—that's the day everything changed. That caused me to shut down. But because of the situation at home, they really weren't paying attention. They didn't notice the drastic shift in my personality. So there was another day. My parents had some friends over and I grabbed what I thought was a glass of pop. And it turned out to be a whiskey coke. I didn't like the taste, but I loved how it made me feel. I love how it numbed me. I loved how I didn't have to feel anymore.

So, my family, we only went to church, usually Christmas and Easter. But during the school year, I would be dropped off at a Sunday school. And the stories we were told, God always seemed angry. He flooded the earth, He sent down fire from the heavens. And that made a lot of sense to me. It was like God was like my father. So my first drink was at the age of eight. By the time I was 13, I was drinking pretty heavily. And that wasn't enough. I was doing self harm. My early 20s I was actually diagnosed with Crohn's disease that causes a lot of pain. It's made it very, very easy to get opioids. And I became hooked instantly.

My dad had gotten 'hurts', and he had gotten a whole bottle full of them. It was Christmas Day, 2008. I had gone to my parents' house to celebrate with my family. But I knew I couldn't take anymore. I was ready for it to be done—I was ready to be done. And so I went into that cabinet and then I took as many of the painkillers as I could. I woke up in the hospital and some friends of mine from Lincoln were there. They started talking to me about God, about Jesus, about how no matter what He loved me; that He wasn't judging me; and that it was safe to turn my life over to Him and that He would walk through the addictions and the pain with me. I would love to tell you that that was an overnight process. But it actually took me several years and several steps of walking through my recovery with safe Christian friends. And I knew I had to not just surrender my addictions anymore, I needed to truly surrender.

I'm so thankful for those women at Celebrate Recovery. The ones that didn't judge me. They really truly showed me Jesus and His love. And I've gone from being angry at God to knowing that He sent me Jesus. That Jesus paid that price. That Jesus loves me so much. There's not any sin of mine that He hasn't already forgiven. I finally believed that I wasn't too far gone. Now I'm filled with joy. I'm able to have friendships, real relationships—I can walk alongside others. And I don't have that chain of pain and of needing a fix. It's glorious freedom. This Christmas I have hope. It's the hope of Jesus.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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