

“A Rockin’ Christmas Eve”
Matthew 1:18-25; John 1:1-14
Series: Love Came Down: 5. Savior
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The Woodside Church

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My wife Lisa is an expert at giving the perfect gift. One of the best Christmas gifts she ever gave me almost gave me a hernia. It was so heavy she made me carry the wrapped gift downstairs and put it under the tree. I could not imagine what this monster might be. When I opened her gift on Christmas morning, I stared in awe at a treasure. She bought me a 200-Watt Peavey Bandit guitar amplifier with reverb and foot pedal. And get this: it’s Scorpion equipped. I don’t know what that means, but it sounds cool. At the time I was not playing in a Praise band and I had no amp so my electric guitar was silent. When I came to Woodside I used this amp to get our Celebration Services started. I’ve even been known to jump off this amp doing a Pete Townshend windmill! Never in my wildest Christmas dreams would I ask for such a gift.

What made it such a perfect gift? It was unexpected. It was extremely valuable to me. It took effort on her part. It was probably as difficult for Lisa to shop in a guitar store as it is for me to buy her clothes for Christmas. I’ve tried and we both agree it’s better to let Kristin handle the clothing purchases. Best of all, she put her all her love into the gift. That year I had the loudest, head-bangingest, ear-splittingest’ Rockingest Christmas. I even turned it up to 11. I’m sure she regretted getting it for me.

Maybe you’ve had a tough time trying to find the perfect Christmas gift. Maybe you’re feeling some regrets, resentments, remorse. Maybe something has rocked your world this Christmas. Maybe this Christmas you just don’t feel WITH it. You don’t want to go along with what the family is doing. My wife and I tried to take a picture with our grandchildren but one of them was just not with it. She was in the picture but not going along with it. First she just stood and stared. Then she practiced her teenage “whatever” eye roll (she’s five years old). Then she flatly refused and stuck out her chin.

You may not be *with* it this Christmas. Even though we sing, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year” I see a great deal of weary, stressed expressions on the faces that fill the shops, the streets and these seats.

- Every year people try to make everyone in the family happy but it never works.
- Many are worried about the state of the world and what they hear on the news.
- You might not feel like celebrating as you struggle with unemployment, debt, health problems, divorce, single parenting, rebellious children, aging parents.
- It’s especially difficult for those who lost a loved one, who have an empty chair.

You may not feel with it this Christmas. But one thing you can count on: God is WITH you. An angel told Joseph,

Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). Matt. 1:21-23

The meaning of Christmas is locked in one little word: WITH. In Hebrew, Immanuel means “God with us.” At Christmas God becomes human - one of us. God the Son “became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14) In other words, God pulls on skin and moves into our neighborhood. The birth of Jesus, God’s Son is the best, most perfect Christmas gift of all. Far more than my Peavey Amp, this Gift is completely unexpected, supremely valuable, required incredible sacrifice and is filled with unconditional love. Why? For one thing when God is near, you can get to know Him.

When she turned 21, Tammy Harris from Roanoke, Virginia, began looking for her biological mother. She searched for a year but did not find her. Tammy didn't know her mother, Joyce Schultz, was trying to locate her for twenty years. One day Tammy lamented to a coworker about the frustrating search to find her mother. Another coworker overheard the conversation and asked Tammy to tell her story. Then the unexpected happened. The other coworker was Joyce Shultz, Tammy’s long-lost mother. She was right there with her, working alongside her for 6 months. Tammy and Joyce embraced. “We held on for the longest time,” Tammy said. “It was the best day of my life.”¹

Today might be the best day of your life. Tonight might be the night you discover that God has been *with* you, by your side, all the time. Tammy found out what her mother is like. In Jesus, we get to know what God is like. And the first thing we discover is: **God Gives Us Love.** In one of his letters, the Apostle John says “God is love.” (I John 4:8) In his Gospel he wrote that Christmas is all about love.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. John 3:16-17

Before Christmas, people pictured the Lord as a distant God, a distracted God, a disconnected God. The religions of the world imagine Him as a warrior God, a wrathful God, or a weak God. But on Christmas, God became visible. He has skin, hair, a face, a voice and a shadow. God becomes personal, approachable and vulnerable. Why? It’s the only way to truly love someone. You can’t fully love someone at a distance. God loves you so much He wants a personal relationship with you. And the best way to do that is to show up in person. But that was a huge risk on God’s part. Pastor Tim Keller writes,

There is no way to have a real relationship without becoming vulnerable to hurt. Christmas tells us that God became breakable and fragile. God became someone we could hurt. Why? To get us back. No other religion—whether secularism, Greco-Roman paganism, Eastern religion, Judaism, or Islam—believes God became breakable or suffered or had a body.

¹ B. Paul Greene, San Pedro, California. Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 4.

What do we discover about God? He is a God who wants to know you, love you, live with you and give life to you forever. That's why He is willing to risk everything to have a relationship with you. That's love. That's what we long for.

In a 2012 interview with *The New Yorker*, rock legend Bruce Springsteen said that his broken relationship with his father lives on in his songs.

My parents' struggles, it's the *subject* of my life. It's the thing that eats at me and always will. Those wounds stay with you. Rock and roll is all about "Daaaddy!" It's one embarrassing scream of "Daaaddy!"²

Earthly parents, partners, and peers will let you down. God, Your Daddy, unconditionally loves you. Christmas means God wants to give you love now and for eternity. What's your answer? "Okay," you say, "God is love. But before I risk giving my heart to Him, there is still a linger question: 'Can I trust Him?'"

That is the second thing we learn about the God who is with us. **God Gives Us Faith.** Faith is another word for trust. Faith is not just something we believe in our heads. Faith is trusting someone to lead your life. Many trust rock stars to lead them. But even Pete Townshend from The Who admits he doesn't have a clue.

The massive question was: Who are we? What is our function? What is our worth? Rock 'n' roll was a celebration of irresponsibility. What we were hoping to do was to serve the spiritual needs of the audience. It didn't work out that way. We abandoned our parents' church, and we haven't replaced it with anything solid and substantial.³

It's hard to know who you can trust these days. In this life there are people who let us down. It seems especially painful at Christmas. One poll in England says there are three million family arguments each Christmas.⁴ "No, I'm not inviting them to dinner." "No, I don't love you anymore." "No, dear, mom and dad can't live in the same house. And we won't be together for Christmas." "No, I'm sorry; we had to eliminate your position." "No, I don't have a problem, you do." "No, I don't believe in God anymore." "No, the chemotherapy didn't work." Even the people who love us eventually leave us.

How do we know we can trust God? For one thing God keeps His promises. Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the Lord promised,

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

That is just one of hundreds of prophecies Jesus fulfilled. God keeps His Word. Christmas also tells us God is willing to get down into our mud and muck to save us.

² David Remnick, "We Are Alive: Bruce Springsteen at sixty-two," *The New Yorker* (7-30-12)

³ David Marchese, "The Who's Pete Townshend grapples with rock's legacy, and his own dark past," *The New York Times Magazine*, (11-24-19)

⁴ Nicky Gumble, *Why Christmas?*, Alpha Resources, Alpha North America.

Saul and Pilar Cruz went to a vast garbage dump in Mexico City to start a ministry called ARMONÍA. Their aim is to show God's love to those who live in the dump and to work with them to meet their needs. At first, the people didn't trust Saul. Then one Sunday morning, someone frantically burst into their worship service crying, "The sewage system is flooding the street." The gush of sewage threatened to sweep away dozens of makeshift homes. The city wouldn't respond for three days.

Saul and a local engineer organized the church members. Working frantically for nearly fifteen hours, they finally stopped the flow of sewage by 3 a.m. It was cold and drizzling. Exhausted, shivering and covered with mud and sewage, Saul and his church members emerged from the pit and walked back to the church to wash off. As they gathered together, Saul started to cry. "I need to thank God, because he just saved us. He saved you. He saved me. Can we pray?" They joined hands and knelt to pray. That night they trusted Saul as their leader and friend. "People need to see you're for real—that you really care for them, that you're even ready to put your life on the edge for them."⁵

On Christmas, God was with us. He dove in over his head into the sewage of our sorrow, sickness and sin. It wasn't just his humble birth as a homeless baby in an animal's manger. Jesus descended all the way into the darkness of our sin when He died on a wooden Cross on skull hill. Paul says,

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

You can trust Him because Jesus is with you in the mud, the muck and the sewage you can't stop. But how do we know He defeated the evil, suffering and pain in our world?

That's the last thing we learn about the God who is with us: **God Gives Us Hope.** Two thousand years ago, there was a lot of suffering caused by a psychotic King Herod, corrupt priests, traitorous tax collectors, violent Roman soldiers. Into this dark scene, a homeless mother gave birth in an unsanitary animal pen. She and her husband had to flee for their lives and become refugees. It seemed like a completely hopeless situation. And yet on that utterly dark night, an Angel of the Lord said to some shepherds,

"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." Luke 2:9-12

The shepherds found the babe in a cave. It was a tiny flicker of hope in a very dark world. For the next 33 years that light grew. Then, one very dark Friday, the Light of the world was snuffed out. In that moment Love died. Faith died. Hope died.

And that would still be the case...except that three days later, in another cave, the Light burst forth brighter than ever. Even when evil had done its worst, Jesus, the Light

⁵ Leadership Journal, "Dumping Ground: An Interview with Saul Cruz" (October, 2007)

rose from the dead to prove God is still with us. No matter what is rocking your world tonight: disputes, divorce, disease, depression or death, hang on to the Light. Receive the Faith, the Hope, the Love of the God who is still with you, the God who will never leave you, the God who makes a place for you so you can be with Him forever.

Tonight, I invite you to receive God's perfect gift by committing or recommitting your life to Jesus Christ. Join us for a Cliff Notes Tour of the whole Bible – the greatest love story ever told. Sign up for a Growth Group. Give yourself the best Christmas gift of all. Let God be with you forever. He will hold you and rock you and never let you go.

Tonight I want to tell you about another Mary who rocked her baby. At 20 years of age, she had surgery to remove her tonsils. To calm her anxiety the doctor gave her some medicine called Thalidomide. Mary was three weeks pregnant. She never took it again. Yet nine months later, on December 14, her baby was born. As you may know, that drug causes devastating side-effects. Her son was born with one arm, legs that were bent, a face that cannot smile. Worst of all, his heart had a valve which did not work. When he was born they took him directly to the NICU where he stayed. They sent Mary home without her baby. For ten days she visited, watching him grow ever weaker. Finally, on Christmas Eve Mary begged the doctor to let her take him home. "He will likely die if you do." If that was going to happen it would be better for him to be with her. Reluctantly, they agreed. All she did that day, Christmas Eve, was cradle him and rock him in the rocking chair. Twenty-four hours, through the darkness of Christmas Eve, she rocked him and rocked him.

The next day, Christmas day, when Mary brought him back to the Hospital the doctors checked him over. And they were astonished. His heart valve was healed. He was not in danger of dying. Decades later, researchers discovered one cure for this heart defect is rocking your baby. This is why they invented rocking incubators.

That was the first of many milestones and miracles. Through her tenacious love Mary helped her son John beat all the barriers the doctors said he would face. Today, John Marshall is a beloved disciple here at Woodside and a member of our Thursday morning growth group. He told me,

I believe it was the hand of God that saved me. He gave my mother the wisdom to do what she did. I beat all the odds against me and I attribute that to God's plan for me. That's why faith in Jesus has always been very strong. I'm still here so there's more for me to do.

God loves you with the same tenacious, death-defying love Mary had for her son John. When your world is rocked, let God rock you.