

“Mary Didn’t Know”

Isaiah 53:1-12

Sermon Series: The Clues to Christmas

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Everyone is busy before Christmas but I think the ones who work the hardest are Moms. They do so much in the weeks leading up to Christmas: so many gifts to buy and wrap, decorations to hang, cookies to bake that, inevitably, something goes wrong.

Lia from Colorado writes, “With my daughter asleep, looking like an angel, I went to put out some presents. What did I find? The dog lying underneath the tree. When I tried to pull the dog out, the tree fell over on top of both of us. My daughter woke up, came in, and yelled, ‘The Christmas Tree is killing Mommy!’ From now on, on Christmas Eve, that dog sleeps downstairs!”

Deborah from New Jersey recalls, “One year my brother helped our mother clean up the Christmas wrapping paper and toss it into the roaring fireplace. Then they sat down to enjoy some hot chocolate and warm cookies...but...alas, my mother could not find her dentures. She wrapped them in some blue paper and left them on the chair. My brother paled as he looked into the fire. Mom had to dunk her cookies for a week!”

Sometimes Mom comes out on top. Sarah from Minnesota recalls, “Two weeks before Christmas my daughter-in-law asked me what I bought her husband, my son, the man who has everything. I told her a 3 Stooges tie. One week later my daughter informs me my daughter-in-law just bought my son the coolest thing for Christmas - a 3 Stooges tie! *She knew* I bought him that. This means WAR! I bought him something else. On Christmas day I made certain he opened my gift first. He loved what I got him and then I said to him, ‘I’m glad you like it. I almost bought you a 3 Stooges tie but then I thought, “That’s a dumb gift.” The next gift he opened was hers. Revenge at last!’”

Take a minute and think about all your Mom did this time of year. My Mom always worked extra hard to make our Christmas special. I must confess, sometimes I made it harder for her. I think I was in second grade when I told my Mom, “I promised my teacher I could be Santa Claus and give out presents in class. Can you make me a Santa Claus suit?” “For when?” she asked in a panic. “Tomorrow,” I replied. So my Mom spent that night of the busy Christmas season turning an astronaut costume into a Santa suit. I guess I felt bad about that because I think that was the year I convinced my Dad to buy her this big Nutcracker for Christmas. She treasured it. Every year it held a prominent place in our Christmas celebration.

Christmas brings a lot of pleasure. But take off the tinsel, unplug the lights, clear away the wrapping paper and you’ll find Christmas also brings pain.

- Christmas piles extra tasks on top of your usually crazy life – no wonder everyone is wound tighter than a rubber band ready to snap.

- Christmas comes at year end – when many companies lay off employees.
- Christmas involves buying gifts – an annual reminder that you can't please everyone, a painful reminder if you're already deep in debt.
- Christmas brings families together – which can be explosive when certain relatives show up or sorrowful because some loved ones will never be with you again.

There is pain in Christmas. Perhaps that's why people eat too much, drink too much, and spend too much at Christmas. It makes the pain go away...but only for a little while.

A few weeks ago you told me about your pain. You filled out and placed in our manger a slip of paper which reads, "I need God to be with me in..." I told you not to write your name on them and you didn't – although some of you wrote your spouse's name down. Each one is a window into a soul. You need God to be with you in your:

Family:

- My thoughts and actions as I go through the journey as a mother and wife. I need God to help me learn to love better
- My struggle with trying to help my parents
- Help my children to love one another

Marriage:

- My relationship with my husband and in my marriage

Physical problems:

- Every day as we go through paralysis due to a disease from childhood. Help my anger – I know all things work for good
- Dealing with my husband's health issues

Emotional Struggles:

- Moving forward with my mental health struggles
- My darkest sad moments

Grief and loss:

- My struggles with the loss of my son
- The many losses I've had this year

You need God to be with in your school work, your job, your finances, even your celebration of Christmas: "I need God to be with me in my broken home during the holidays." Many simply write, "I need God to be with me in everything."

With all the decorations, the ornaments and the lights, we tend to forget there was a great deal of pain at the first Christmas. After all, the Mom who worked the hardest for Christmas will always be Mary. When Mary said, "Yes" to God and became the mother of His Son, she didn't know all she was signing up for. Mary faced a hard to explain pregnancy. She was nearly abandoned by Joseph. Both left town by order of the occupying forces and traveled seventy-five miles on foot, over rugged terrain in the final

trimester. Homeless, helpless, harassed, they made their way into Joseph's ancestral home, just a number among a sea of humanity. If you are a mother who had natural childbirth, you know the pain and anguish involved. Now imagine giving birth not in a sanitary hospital with an attentive staff, but on a bed of straw with farm animals looking on. The swaddling clothes that wound round the Child were rags – a poor man's blanket. And before the tyke reached the age of two, the family fled their homeland just ahead of Herod's murderous soldiers. We can paint a pretty picture of Christmas. We can set up an elegant Nativity scene under the tree. But there's no avoiding the pain of that first Christmas.

And maybe that's on purpose. The heart of Christmas is pain. The message of Christmas is that God came to take on our pain, your pain. In our Clues to Christmas series we saw how ages ago the prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of Immanuel – which means “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14). He predicted the people who walk in darkness will see a great Light, the Messiah will be a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:2,6). Isaiah promised a new King, a strong branch, will arise from the dead stump of King David's fallen family tree (Isaiah 11:1-11). If you only know those three prophecies, you will conclude this Messiah will be the most powerful, triumphant Emperor this small globe has ever seen. That's what you'd think ... until you hear the fourth and final prophecy clue. Then the story takes a dark turn.

Yes, God will send His Servant. But He will not be majestic, attractive or popular. In fact, Isaiah observes, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3). People will turn their faces away from Him and consider Him worthless. Though He will never utter a deceitful word nor commit a single violent act, still the tide will turn against Him. “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth” (v. 7). When the people stare at this bloodied suffering servant, they will conclude God is punishing Him, the Lord is striking Him down for His sins. And one person who saw it all was Mary, His Mother. Mary didn't know her little lamb, the one she cradled in the cold night air of a cave in Bethlehem would die a condemned criminal, crucified and cursed by God, buried in a borrowed cave in Jerusalem. Mary didn't know.

But then Isaiah's words take an unexpected twist. “It was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer” (v. 10). Not for His sins ... but for ours. “He took our sickness and carried our sorrows... He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities.” His punishment brought us peace. By His wounds we are healed. “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the sin of us all” (v. 6).

People ask me, “What does God do about suffering and pain?” God takes sin and suffering so seriously He leaves the safety of heaven to wade into the evil of this world. God becomes a helpless babe who is in danger from the moment of birth. God is with us, God shines as a Light to the people who walk in darkness, God is nailed to a Cross, God takes the pain of all of human history upon Himself. Despised and rejected, oppressed

and afflicted, pierced, crushed and slaughtered. The only God we know is the One who dies on the Cross and who rises from the grave. Wherever there is suffering in the world, He is there. Wherever there is oppression, He is there. Wherever there is pain, He is there. For the heart of Christmas is pain – Jesus came to bear your pain and to save you. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said an hour before His arrest, “But take heart! I have overcome the world. I am with you always” (John 16:33, Matthew 28:20).

Bring your pain to Him - the pain caused by your debt, your depression, your divorce, your disease, your fear of death. Give your pain to Him and in its place let Him give you His peace, faith, hope and love. Maybe you’re trying to find your way back to God. Tonight, I invite you to take a step. Commit or recommit your life to Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Follow Him in the New Year. Join us as we discover God is Closer Than You Think. Learn how to open your heart and soul to the God who longs for a relationship with you. Join youth group or a Growth Group – a community of fellow followers of Jesus. If you have doubts and questions, join us for the next Alpha course starting February 2 where skeptics and seekers are welcome. Christmas and the rest of your life will be different if you do.

Christmas is very different for me this year. For the first time in my life I will not be able to wish my Mom a Merry Christmas. As many of you know, last July I flew to Kansas City to join my brother and sister at her bedside. Over the years I’ve visited a lot of families with a loved one in hospice. But this time it was my family. She took her final breath on July 19 and went to be with my Dad two days before their 68th anniversary.

This December brings back memories of all my Mom did to make Christmas magical. My Mom’s name is Grace. That make me a son of Grace. The word “Grace” means “gift.” My Mom didn’t just give me Christmas gifts, she gave me the gift of life and also the gift of eternal life. She told me God’s greatest gift is His Son Jesus who saves us by His Grace. Through Him we receive the free Gift of Grace: a full life now, an eternal life forever.

My Mother was a writer who frequently submitted articles to local newspapers. Her writings were encouraging messages of faith, hope and love generously seasoned with Scripture. I found one of her letters printed in the local newspaper. She writes,

It wasn’t until I entered college - when my guidance counselor asked me if I ever expressed my thankfulness to God - that I began my walk with Him. And, I am grateful. As Christians we know and respond to the ultimate King of all kings, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who doesn’t require advance appointments or payments for Him to accept us. He loves us one and all. It is my belief in Him that comforts me. As Hebrews 4:16 states, “Come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy in time of need.” I pray you are responding to God’s open invitation to come in awe and gratitude.

Tonight: Receive His Gift, His Grace. Let Him bear your pain and fill you with hope that one day you will stand before His throne of grace.

This Advent, I was feeling blue that my Mom is no longer here. Then, unexpectedly, a package arrived in the mail from my sister in Kansas City.

Inside I discovered the Nutcracker my Dad bought for my Mom so long ago.

It was a sign to me that they are together celebrating Jesus' birthday with Him and, in a way, still with me. This Christmas I know she received the gift she always wanted. Grace is standing before the Throne of Grace. Heaven is glowing on her face. She's home for Christmas.