

Thanks guys. Appreciate it. Merry Christmas everybody. It's good to see you. I told somebody earlier today I have to say Merry Christmas because it keeps me from saying good morning.

I don't know how many of you have said good morning just because out of habit of being in this room. But it's okay. We are filled with grace for one another and just, yeah, just start saying Merry Christmas. It'll cover it right up. So Merry Christmas.

We are so grateful to be a part of your celebration this year. Whether you call Sherwood Oaks your church home or you are visiting with us today, or you are dragged here by somebody who you love. And so that's the only reason why you're here. We, wherever you are from, whatever brought you here today. My name's Sean and I just wanna let you know I'm so glad that you are here to join us today.

You know, as growing up and kind of looking back on childhood, there's really only a handful of presents that I remember receiving on Christmas morning. Okay, think about in your own life. What are some presents that you received as a kid that still stand out to you? Maybe it was that bike, maybe it was a doll that you had asked for and really wanted. For me, the two that really stand out above all of the other ones was when I was nine years old, I got my very first Super Nintendo or Nintendo Entertainment System.

And when I grabbed like the original, I opened that up and I could not wait for us to just like open up the rest of the gifts because I so badly wanted to hook it up and play and so I grabbed it. When we were done, I ran into my parents Bedro because they had a TV in there. We had family that was coming over to spend the rest of the day. But I like hooked up my Nintendo and I spent the rest of the day in there playing Super Mario Brothers. When I finally emerged from the fog, I like had like blisters in between.

Like the part in the skin between my thumb and my fingers. If you're of a certain age, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Maybe it's like still calloused from that. Like we didn't have those ergonomic controllers. Our blisters made you bleed and it was totally worth it.

I remember when I was early teenager getting my first 26 second anti skip portable CD player. Like we weren't rich folk. But let me tell you, that made me feel like I was living on top of the world. We were driving down to my grandparents house later on that day. I was jamming out to my new Cranberry CD and Oasis CDs.

And I didn't care if my dad hit a pothole because he could hit him for 26 straight seconds and my CD player was not going to skip.

Those gifts are great. And the truth is, for most of us, for me, I mean, we probably only remember a handful of presents that we received

on Christmas morning. But I'll tell you, I will never forget the people that I spent those holidays with. I will never forget the people that were in the room. I'll never forget those times when my mom, when my mom would be so tickled by something that we were doing or my cousins were doing that she started laughing.

And then it eventually turned into like a snort laugh. Like, I'll never forget that. I'll never forget how excited I would get as a kid when. When my Grandma Horton would spend the night because it was our turn to have her Christmas Eve night after all the family left. Presents are great, but presents is what really matters.

Those are the memories that last long after the gifts are gone, long after they've been donated to Goodwill or passed on to someone else. We remember the people who are in the room. Presence matters because it communicates something that presence can't. Presence communicates value. Presence says you matter.

You are seen. You are not alone. And the irony of this season is that for a lot of us, we are surrounded by so many people this time of year. And yet for a lot of folks, man, there is something inside of us that feels a little bit empty, that feels a little bit alone. We are never more surrounded by people, it seems like, than this time of year.

Like you cannot get away from crowds. I tried to get all of my Christmas shopping done early, but I had to go to Sam's club a couple of days ago just to get a couple of last minute things. And I left there after like two hours of just trying to find a couple of things. And I sent my wife a message and said the worst way to spread Christmas cheer is going to Sam's Club when Christmas is near. Like, you don't do that.

But we are surrounded by so many people and yet when we walk through this time, it is so easy to feel like, man, we're just kind of alone. Like this time of year has a way of shining a spotlight in some of the pain that we feel. And maybe you're here today and you're like, man, it's just not feeling like the most wonderful time of year. You are feeling some distance in your relationships, your marriage feels like it's falling apart. There's a growing distance between you and your spouse.

You, you look around at your life and you wonder, like, who are my friends? Like, if I, if my life were falling apart at 2am who are the people that I would call?

For some of us, this will be the first Christmas without the person that we love in the room. And the absence of their presence has left a bit of a longing and a hole in our heart. And when we go through times like this where we want to be merry and bright, but what we're

experiencing is something different. It can leave us confused and it can leave some of us wondering, God, where are you?

Where are you? Do you see what I'm going through? And if you see it, then do you even care what I'm going through?

Which is why tonight I think that we just need a reminder that we are not alone. We are not alone. For centuries, people have lit a candle to remind themselves about the presence of God.

We live in a dark world sometimes that can be filled with pain, heartache, loneliness and sadness.

And the light of a candle doesn't make all of the darkness go away. Like, if we were to turn the lights off in this room, this single flame would not, would not drive out all of the darkness. But what a flame reminds us is that darkness actually has no power. It's just the absence of light. And this flame reminds us that God is close.

And that even in the midst of difficult times in our life, even in those times that feel very dark and we feel very alone, the promise that this flame represents is that God is right with us.

And the story of Christmas tells us just how far God was willing to go to remind us of this truth. The Gospel of John doesn't capture the birth of Jesus in a traditional way. We don't read a fuller nativity story in His Gospel like we do in Matthew and in Luke. But what we read in John are, I think, some of my favorite words when it comes to the birth of Jesus. In John 1, verse 14, he simply says the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Jesus, the Word, the power, the wisdom of God came to us. The Almighty, the all powerful, the ever present. God did not keep his distance from us. He came near because he loves us. Eugene Peterson puts it this way in the Message.

He says the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. Presence matters. We know this. God knows it more than we do. And so instead of staying distant, God showed up with us, to be with us, to experience what we Experience.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it is like to get tired. And not just the kind of tired that a good night's rest can cure, but the kind of tire and weariness in your soul that you wonder, is this ever going to go away? Because of Jesus, God knows what it is like to wake up with a kink in your neck because you slept in a family member's bed that's just not quite as comfortable as yours. Because of Jesus. God knows what it's like to get hungry, to miss someone that you haven't seen in a while.

Because of Jesus, God knows the joy of dinner with family and with friends and gatherings around holidays. Because of Jesus, God knows the joy that we feel whenever plans were canceled in the midst of a busy week. Jesus felt everything that we have felt. He has experienced everything that we have experienced. He knows what it is like to feel joy and grief and sorrow and loneliness and anger.

He knows the pain of being misunderstood and mistreated. Listen. He knows what it's like to care about a relationship more than the other person does, to have friends who abandoned and betrayed you. Jesus knows what it is like because the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Presence matters.

And so God showed up and his presence continues to remind us, to remind you that you are loved, you are cared for, you are not forgotten, you are not abandoned, you are not alone. God is with you. That is the promise of scripture, that it's not just God was with us, it is God is with us still today that he continues to show up in our lives. Today he meets us in the middle of our mess, in the middle of our loneliness, in the middle of our pain and our disappointments. God meets us in these places not with judgment, not with apathy, but with empathy.

Because he knows what it's like and his light continues to shine in the darkness of our lives.

At the end of each pew, there's a basket I want to just encourage, invite. If you're sitting on one of the inns or near it, if you can just go down, grab it and pass it through the aisle or down your row and there's a little card in the basket. Take one of these cards and take a pen.

As we think about this idea of light shining in the midst of darkness, think about what your life is like right now, what you walked in carrying burden that you've been feeling, worry.

The question on the back of this card is, where do I need the light of God's presence most right now? So do a quick inventory of your life, where do you need the light of God's presence to shine in your life? Today?

I want to invite you just to write a single word or maybe a short phrase in there to capture that. It's loneliness, grief, exhaustion, fear.

Maybe you walked in today struggling with doubts. You're not even sure what you believe about any of this or what you believe anymore.

If that's you, I want you to know that we've all been there. I've been there. It's okay.

Maybe for you. What you need to write down is, man, I need the light of God's presence over these next 24 to 48 hours. Lord, help me.

We want to give you a few moments of quiet reflection to thank and pray and then write something down. And we're not going to collect these cards tonight. These are yours to keep. But I do want to encourage you to do a couple of things with them. Number one, put it someplace where you can just be reminded that Jesus became human.

He became one of us. He became light to shine into these places of darkness in our life. But I also want to encourage you to think, who is a person that you can share this with, because we don't need to carry these burdens by ourselves. All of us have something here that we can put, and we think that we're the only ones who struggle with them. Man, pray for somebody, whether it be the person who's sitting next to you right now.

Maybe someone, a friend, a family member, someone that you would be vulnerable enough to share this with and just invite them into that with you. Let's just take a few moments. Whenever you're ready, write something down and remind yourself that, man, the light of God continues to shine with his presence in this place. So, God, may you meet us here in this moment.

Let us know that we are not alone, that your presence is still with us even today. In Jesus name, Amen.

A couple weeks ago, our church family lost a very dear member, someone that just exuded the light of Christ. Luis Briggs was a servant at heart in everything that she did. If you spent a little bit of time around Luis, it didn't matter what was going on in your life. And you just walked away from that conversation with her feeling a little bit more hope and a whole lot more joy because of Jesus in her.

We miss her. We know that she's with Jesus now. We celebrate a life that was well lived. I was thinking about Luis as I was processing and writing the sermon for Christmas Eve and thinking about God's presence and the light that shines in darkness. I think one of the most beautiful things I've seen in my 25 years of many ministry is, is the way that Luis's small group came alongside of her in her final days.

She had been battling with cancer for a while, and the last days were tough. If you've walked through that with anybody, you know how difficult it can be. And her small group came alongside of her, and they cared for her, and they did her laundry and cleaned her house and made sure that she had everything that she needed, made sure that the hospice nurses were taking the best care of her, which they always do.

But one of the things that I will never forget is one of Luis's

closest friends and member of her small group, Christy. She said, I want to make sure that someone is with Luis all the time so that when she opens her eyes, she's able to look into the eyes of someone else and know that she's not alone.

Presence matters. Presence matters. Jesus came to remind us that we are not alone. And God's promise is that he will never leave you nor forsake you.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us so that we will never have to open our eyes to the darkness of this world and wonder if we are alone.

And so tonight we come to one of my favorite parts of our year.

This candle has been lit all night representing God's presence with us. But. But as it spreads around the room, it's a reminder that. That God comes to each one of us and he's not distant. The light of his love, it spreads to us and it shines in our life as well.

God is near. Not just metaphysically, he is near to you and whatever it is that you're going through right now. So as we close tonight and as we sing, may we be reminded of this beautiful truth that light shines in the darkness. The darkness will never be able to overcome it. God is near.