

There's a scene that pretty much every Christmas movie includes at some point (usually toward the end of Act II). The protagonist is down on his or her luck, and has just stumbled upon a window. They look inside and see a perfectly happy family, tall, perfect Christmas tree in the corner, a big, crackling fireplace, a big pile of gifts and plenty of laughter.

And the protagonist stands outside, looking in. Separated from all the warmth, laughter and love. Of course this usually happens at the low point in the story, when the hero is about to learn some valuable lesson that will enable them to save Christmas and rejoin their loved ones at their own fireplace scene.

Because the message is that Christmas is happening inside, where the fire is so delightful. Not outside where the weather is frightful. This understanding of Christmas, as the warm places full of love and cheer, runs deep, so that even our nativity scenes look so peaceful and serene.

We forget that the first Christmas was anything but warm and peaceful. We forget that everyone around the manger is an outsider. That the nativity scene is filled with people who didn't belong anywhere else. People who'd been left standing outside in the cold.

We forget - or maybe never actually thought about - the fact that when God came to the World, he didn't come to the cozy fireplaces. He came to the outsiders, to the left-out. In the first Christmas celebration, Jesus was outside.

In our sterilized, commercialized Christmas culture, that's a hard thing to imagine. That Jesus would come into the darkness, rather than into the warmth and light. Yet that's just how John describes the first Christmas:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it...

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn-- not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son." John 1:1-5; 10-14 (NLT)

Jesus, the light of the world, came into the darkness. Jesus, who created the world came into that world even though it didn't know him. He came to darkness, and was reject by his own people. Look at what a staggering statement John makes:

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him... The Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

If there's such a thing as the most perfect warm and welcoming place ever, surely that's in Heaven

with God. Talk about the mother of all Christmas trees, the best presents ever and I guarantee you that fireplace has s'more sticks.

And Christmas is about Jesus *leaving* all that to come outside in the dark with us. Jesus didn't hold back, even a little bit.

That's a different picture of Christmas than we're usually presented with. As far as I know, Norman Rockwell never painted that. I'd venture to say that it's a different picture of Christmas than we are taught to expect. There's a reason Christmas movies don't end at that scene when everything falls apart. Because Christmas isn't about darkness. Christmas is about light.

And I know a few of us in here are headed to some pretty perfect Christmas gatherings - your fireplaces are going to be just short of heaven.

But most of us are going to experience those through-the-window moments over the next couple of weeks. You're heading toward some pretty nasty messes, some pretty dark holidays. Maybe it's business or family stress or financial struggles. Maybe it's all of those. For a lot of us, we know Christmas is supposed to be about light, but it's a lot of darkness.

Whatever those situations are, if you're anything like me, you're going in with your defenses on high. You're protecting yourself, keeping some walls up. Maybe you'll hide behind your cell phone, or have a ready-made excuse so you can duck out as quickly as possible. Maybe you've got a habit you're hiding away in.

When we're confronted with mess, when we find ourselves outside in the darkness, we figure out ways to keep ourselves out of it. We hide in habits or places we're comfortable rather than engaging the messiness of our circumstances. We're not fully present in the mess.

And yet our Lord, the person we follow, the person whose Way we know is Life dived head-first into the mess. Jesus didn't hesitate to abandon the comfort and safety of Heaven to come among us. To be born to an outcast family, visited only by the dregs of his culture.

If we are to be like Jesus, if our Christmas is to look anything like Christ's first coming, then we too must engage those messy places. Rather than avoid those painful places, rather than put up barriers or hide, we must step into them, embrace them, choose to be fully present in the midst of whatever your Christmas looks like.

How often do we use Jesus as an excuse to escape messes? We think that Jesus wants us to be happy and safe. We think the main reason Jesus came was to make our lives better. That if we follow Jesus, then all our problems will go away, or at least that we can go away from our problems. We think that if there's a light place and a dark place, that Jesus would want us to go to the safe, warm, light place.

Revelation teaches us a different way to remember Jesus first coming as we look forward to his Second. Let's look together at Revelation 10. In the first two weeks of this series, we looked at chapters 4 and 5. Revelation was written to Christians who were living in a mess. They confessed Jesus as Lord in a culture that followed Caesar as Lord. At minimum we could say their culture was very dark. To follow Jesus instead of Rome was very costly. So John wrote to them to encourage

them to be faithful in the midst of their hardships. To remind them what the light of Jesus looks like.

Revelation 4 began a Wizard-of-Oz moment when John was taken behind the veil of reality to see how the world really is. And in the Heavenly Throne Room, he saw God (not Rome) on the Throne of the Universe, with all creation worshipping God. Then in Chapter 5, he saw God's will represented as a sealed scroll. John gave us a powerful picture of human sin by telling us that no one in all creation was worthy to open the scroll. In other words, human sin has separated creation from God. God's will is not being done on Earth as it is in Heaven because of our own sinful choices.

But just as John begins to despair, he sees a revelation of Jesus as the Lamb who was sacrificed. Jesus overcame death by dying. Jesus wins the battle for the souls of humankind by losing his life. God rescues humanity, God enacts God's will, through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The next few chapters are a picture of what happens when human empires oppose the kingdom of God (spoiler: it doesn't go well for humanity. As Paul says in Romans, the wages for sin is Death). To say that chapters 6-9 get messy is an understatement. And through all of that, we should be asking the question, So what? What does this have to do with us? If this is supposed to be an encouragement for Christians living in messy places, how does this help?

We're tempted to think the message is: Don't worry! God wins in the End! So just stay out of the mess, hang in there and you'll be okay!

That's not a half-bad message. But it's not what John tells us. Let's look at chapter 10 together. Remember: as we read, we're not going to get caught up in the little details. We're going to focus on the main thing, which in this case is that scroll that we saw in Chapter 5, that the Lamb who was sacrificed has unsealed because he is worthy because he was sacrificed:

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, surrounded by a cloud, with a rainbow over his head. His face shone like the sun, and his feet were like pillars of fire. And in his hand was a small scroll that had been opened. He stood with his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land... Then the voice from heaven spoke to me again: "Go and take the open scroll from the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land."

So I went to the angel and told him to give me the small scroll. "Yes, take it and eat it," he said. "It will be sweet as honey in your mouth, but it will turn sour in your stomach!" So I took the small scroll from the hand of the angel, and I ate it! It was sweet in my mouth, but when I swallowed it, it turned sour in my stomach.

Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings."  
Revelation 10:1-2; 8-11 (NLT)

John is told to take the scroll, which represents the will of God, and eat it. John's original audience knew their Old Testament really well. They would've recognized that John is imitating one of the great prophets, Ezekiel, who had to do the same thing. The point of eating the scroll is that you're internalizing the message. You're literally making the will of God part of who you are. You're chewing on it, digesting it, taking it in and absorbing it into the fabric of your being.

And here's the important bit: the whole reason we eat the scroll is because now the message is ours to deliver. John is told to take his message to the peoples, nations, languages and kings. In other words, God is sending John back into the mess. Just like Jesus, John has to leave the Heavenly Throne Room and go to the peoples of the world. He has to leave safety and beauty and head back into the mess.

That's why the message is sweet on his lips, but sour in his stomach. Being in the presence of God, consuming God's word, worshipping in spaces like this, connecting with God, it's amazing. It's beautiful and sweet.

But we're not supposed to stay in these spaces. Christianity isn't meant to be a sterile, escapist religion. We don't worship a God who refused to get his hands dirty. Our God abandoned Heaven to become a part of our mess. To redeem our mess.

John shows us that we are to follow Jesus, to internalize and embody his example and to become his witnesses in the world. Just like Jesus did, we are to abandon our safe places and plunge into the darkness, into the mess to bring light there.

Paul tells the Christians in Corinth the same thing in his second letter to them. In Chapter 5, note how he outlines the same sort of pattern John shows us:

**Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ.**

That's finding the safety and security and beauty of a relationship with God. Being wrapped into the light of Jesus. But Paul doesn't stop there:

**And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" -- 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 (NLT)**

We are now God's ambassadors! We have eaten the scroll. We've internalized the will of God. We've come into the light. And now God is calling us to follow Jesus back out into the darkness, to go back into the messes so that we can be lights in that darkness. So that we can plead with those still in the darkness to Come back to God!

I know that's a scary charge. Everyone likes light more than darkness. No one enjoys feeling uncomfortable and messy if we can avoid it. That's why we set time-limits with our families or hide behind our phones when we have to be there. Or even avoid them altogether.

We'd all prefer to be inside by the fire rather than outside in the cold.

But here's the thing: the first Christmas story was outside in the cold. When Jesus came into the world, it was to outsiders, in the darkness.

And God is still working out there in the darkness. We don't serve a God who avoids the darkness. And aren't you glad? Aren't you glad God was willing to forsake the light of Heaven to bring the light of Heaven to our darkness?

Here's the bottom line: whether your Christmas looks exactly like a Norman Rockwell painting or you're the person outside looking in, Christmas is for you. We are all called to be like Jesus to look for the darkness around us and be light there.

So let's go! Let's be like God. Let's roll up our sleeves and plunge headlong into the darkness. Because here's the secret: when we go, we don't go alone. In fact the God who sits on the throne of the universe, the Lamb who rules by dying has already gone ahead of us. And the Holy Spirit within us empowers us to go outside with God, to join Jesus in the darkness as ambassadors of hope.

When we go into the darkness, we go to meet the God who's already gone ahead of us.

This year, let's go into the darkness. Let's take up our roles as God's ambassadors. Let's choose to be like Jesus, the Lamb who was sacrificed, and go into the messy places this Christmas. Let's choose to be fully present there, to give our whole selves to them just as Jesus has given his whole Self to us!

### **Communion SetUp**

Each week during Advent, we approach the communion table as a revelation of Jesus. This week, you have the opportunity to eat and drink of Jesus' meal. But this meal is special. This bread is the body of Jesus, broken for our sin. This grape juice is Jesus' blood, poured out to restore us to God.

This meal isn't just for us. Jesus was broken for the whole world. So today, when you eat and drink, you are making Jesus' message a deep part of who you are. Just like John was commanded to eat the scroll, so too, you are invited to eat and drink of Jesus' body and blood.

You don't have to be a member of Beavercreek Nazarene to share in this meal. Today, if you will follow Jesus into the messes around you this Christmas, then come and eat this meal.

Let's pray together.

### **Benediction**

Advent Readers

After Party

You have eaten the scroll. May your Christmas be messy, that you may be lights in the darkness. Go now into those messes and find the God who has gone before you and is already working there.