

Welcome

What's the best Christmas present you've ever *given*? My wife makes fun of me because I'm really bad at one particular aspect of giving gifts - the *waiting* part. As soon as a gift shows up, I want to give it to her. I just can't help myself. Giving gifts is one of my major love languages, and I find it really hard to wait.

Unless there's a scheme afoot. I've been known to plan elaborate treasure hunts here and there. And for a number of years now, my wife and I have celebrated the 12 days of Christmas - so starting on Christmas day, we give each other gifts for 12 straight days. Since today is the 10th Day of Christmas, we've got some gifts to exchange a little later - and for the next two days!

12 days of Christmas is incredibly fun - it's a great way to keep the spirit of celebrating Jesus' birth going throughout the whole Christmas season. But it takes some discipline and planning. Discipline not to just give all the gifts on that first day - otherwise there's nothing left for the other 11 days!

And planning because I want to be sure to find 12 distinct gifts, ready to wrap and deliver each day.

As we've already covered, planning and waiting isn't my strong suit when it comes to gifts. But it's worth it, because there's little better than the perfect gift at the perfect moment.

We're going to explore the Christmas story as God's perfect plan at the perfect moment. We're going to wonder at what it means that we get to join in God's perfect plan.

And we're going to respond in song. So I'd like to begin with a reading of our psalm for the day:

A reading of the Psalm:

Sing a new song to the LORD, for he has done wonderful deeds.

His right hand has won a mighty victory; his holy arm has shown his saving power!

The LORD has announced his victory and has revealed his righteousness to every nation!

He has remembered his promise to love and be faithful to Israel. The ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

Shout to the LORD, all the earth; break out in praise and sing for joy!

Sing your praise to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and melodious song, with trumpets and the sound of the ram's horn.

Make a joyful symphony before the LORD, the King!

Let the sea and everything in it shout his praise!

Let the earth and all living things join in.

Let the rivers clap their hands in glee!

Let the hills sing out their songs of joy before the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with justice, and the nations with fairness. -- Psalm 98

Message

Welcome to the Christmas season! Just nine days ago, we welcomed Jesus into the world, and into our lives. Before that, we spent the four weeks of Advent preparing for his arrival - both by shopping, wrapping and decorating *and* by preparing our spirits through prayer, scripture and repentance. We called our series this year Christmas at the Crossroads because we're in a time of massive change. 2020 was marked by the pandemic, which seems closer and closer to an ending. We have a transition in our government coming in a few weeks, which has proven to be more fraught than usual. And that's to say nothing of all the personal changes - both good and bad - we have experienced and that are ahead of us in this next year.

During Advent, we asked how we could be faithful during this season of change. We saw again and again that we can affirm God is with us, active and present even when we can't discern God's movement. For the next two weeks of Christmas, we're celebrating God's presence. Remember: we know Jesus will return because of how he arrived the first time: a baby in an ignored corner of the world stage.

What we're celebrating in the Christmas feast is that God did not leave us to carry on business as usual. God disrupted our world - though not in the way anyone expected. God came not tearing open the heavens, but as a baby.

It's a potent reminder that disruptions always carry with them the potential for grace. God does not leave us alone in our discomfort, our disorientation.

The two Sundays we have during the twelve days of Christmas are all about celebrating. All the planning and preparation we put into the Advent season, getting ready for this time has come to fruition. Christmas is here! God is with us!

The texts we've been reading together this week, and for today, are all about that reality: that what we celebrate on Christmas is not a singular event that happened one time, long ago. God becoming human has been the climax of God's plan from the beginning, and in many ways, Christmas was only the beginning of the story, not the end. Christmas isn't a day so much as an ongoing reality in which we get to participate.

So let's begin with where you are today. Where we all are today. It's January 3rd. 2021 is here. The COVID vaccine is on the horizon, though we know it'll still be quite a few months before we're able to congregate safely again. We're definitely on the downhill after the holidays - taking down decorations, putting the Christmas playlists away till the end of the year. Turning our attention back to work and school. Wondering how much longer our resolutions are going to last.

Despite the fact that it's only the tenth day of Christmas, it's easy to forget the joy of Christmas already, as the ordinary world presses in on us.

Today, then, is a chance to take one more deep breath. We're going to soar at 30,000 ft today, to get a big picture look at God's plan for the world, and how God invites us to participate.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Jeremiah 31. This is a passage from after God's people have been taken into Exile. They've been scattered all over the known world - many ancient teachers compared it to a farmer scattering seed. They have a lot of fear surrounding this scattering - will they be able to maintain their identity as God's people?

Any of you who've ever moved away from home, or had kids leave home, know this fear: you remember the traditions you had that made you a family - a lot of those traditions around the holidays. Maybe it was opening one present on Christmas Eve, or midnight mass or a big Christmas morning breakfast. But then there's a change, a disruption, and those traditions don't happen the next year (or there's someone missing). And... it just doesn't feel like your family anymore.

Now, blow that up to the size of a whole culture, a whole people, and make the disruption as traumatic as it could possibly be and you have what God's people are living in.

THAT is the atmosphere in which Jeremiah is speaking. And listen to what he says:

Now this is what the LORD says:

“Sing with joy for Israel. Shout for the greatest of nations!

Shout out with praise and joy: ‘Save your people, O LORD, the remnant of Israel!’

For I will bring them from the north and from the distant corners of the earth.

I will not forget the blind and lame, the expectant mothers and women in labor.

A great company will return! Tears of joy will stream down their faces, and I will lead them home with great care.

They will walk beside quiet streams and on smooth paths where they will not stumble.

For I am Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my oldest child.

“Listen to this message from the LORD, you nations of the world;

Proclaim it in distant coastlands: The LORD, who scattered his people, will gather them and watch over them as a shepherd does his flock.

For the LORD has redeemed Israel from those too strong for them. They will come home and sing songs of joy on the heights of Jerusalem.

They will be radiant because of the LORD’s good gifts— the abundant crops of grain, new wine, and olive oil, and the healthy flocks and herds.

Their life will be like a watered garden, and all their sorrows will be gone.

The young women will dance for joy, and the men—old and young—will join in the celebration.

I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them and exchange their sorrow for rejoicing.

The priests will enjoy abundance, and my people will feast on my good gifts.

I, the LORD, have spoken!” -- Jeremiah 31:7-14

Jeremiah promises God's people that God isn't done with them. There's a lot of promise here that would sound a little like getting back to the good ole days for the people in Exile - God is bringing them back from the far reaches. They'll sing songs in Jerusalem. Healthy crops and flocks, no more sorrows. Dancing and singing.

But if we're listening closely, we'll hear reminders that God is not ignoring their pain, or turning back the clock. Jeremiah promises the blind and the lame will be gathered up - those are injuries that would have resonated really strongly with a people who had just been conquered. A great many of their husbands and sons would have returned home maimed - if they returned at all. And the King of Judah was blinded after the Babylonians captured him.

So wrapped up in God's promise through Jeremiah is an insistence that God will not forget even the most wounded by the horrors of the Exile. God sees all our pain. And God will not pretend as though none of that matters.

No, whatever this return from Exile will look like, it won't be a rewinding of the clock. How could that be good? The same problems that *caused* the Exile would still be there. Rewinding the clock is a recipe for repeating the sins of the past.

Hard not to remember that in the midst of our own yearning for better days. Many of us wish we could turn back the clock, go back to a mythical simpler time in our country's past. We forget (by choice?) that said past was not simple nor was it easy for a large minority of Americans.

[Scripture Slide 2] No, we can't ignore our pasts - and God doesn't ignore our pasts. In fact, the power of the Christmas story is that God's plan was much larger than anyone anticipated. Turn with me to John 1. John doesn't have the Nativity story. Rather, John opens his story of Jesus reminding us that Jesus is God, preexisting from time immemorial. Christmas, for John, is the story of this God becoming human.

But it's not enough for John to remind us that Jesus is preexistent. John also wants us to note that Jesus entered into the story of God's people, that Jesus is the culmination of God's rescue mission. We're going to read the end of the prolog to John's Gospel, and you'll note that John brings in the story of Moses.

If you were here this summer when Tim and I preached about chiasms, you might remember this text. When Moses received the Torah, what we often call the Law, he did so at the top of a mountain. Ancient peoples believed the gods came to the tops of mountains when they wanted to meet with humans (you know, since they were so close to heaven). So people came UP the mountain and the gods came DOWN from heaven and they sort of met in the middle.

Of course, Jesus being God, he does the opposite. He leaves Heaven and comes down. Not to a mountain or to a palace or to any other "high" place we might imagine. He comes to a manger. A feed trough. To peasant parents. Keep that in mind as we read John's story of Christmas:

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...

From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us. -- John 1:10-18

Jesus has revealed God to us. When we look at Jesus, we see the best picture of God. And God isn't a god who leaves God's people in the pain of Exile. God doesn't wait for us on mountaintops or in palaces. God comes to us, wherever we are. In stables or in exile or anywhere else.

Christmas is about God's plan to move toward us. It's why the good news of Christmas is "God with us".

[Scripture Slide 3] Our last text comes from Ephesians 1. This is a letter written to an ethnically blended congregation, trying to help two very different cultures - Jews and Gentiles - become one new family (the family of God).

Again, what I want to focus on this morning is that what happened in Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan:

God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan. -- Ephesians 1:9-11

God's plan was Jesus - God becoming one of us. And we get to join in that plan. That's why I said that Christmas is not a single day - 2,000 years ago or even one day a year. It's not 12 days, it's not the space between Thanksgiving and New Year's. Christmas is a new way of living, as one of God's adopted children.

No matter where you are at the beginning of 2021, you belong to God.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to find our space at his table.