

SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS¹

Luke 1:26-38

It's all about love, faith, and hope.

A sermon preached by
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Are you ready for Christmas? I've heard and asked this question several times in the last few days. Are you ready? Advent is all about readiness. What does it mean to be ready for Christmas?

If you asked the person on the street or coming out of Wal-Mart what the meaning of Christmas is, you would get some good answers. Christmas is about family get-togethers; Christmas is about giving and receiving gifts with people you love; Christmas is about that warm feeling in your heart that you get from helping someone in need. All of those are good answers. But none are the right answer.

In the Christmas movie *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, Chevy Chase plays the part of the goofy dad, Clark Griswold. In one scene, Clark and his extended family are gathered around the table for a holiday feast, and you almost think they're going to get it. Red and green Christmas decorations adorn the dining table, and everyone is dressed in festive holiday clothing. Clark stands at one end of the table smiling, ready to carve a golden brown turkey. He is drinking in the joy of family. He raps a knife against a crystal glass to call the family to attention.

Clark announces, "Since this is Aunt Bethany's 80th Christmas, I think she should lead us in the saying of grace."

Aunt Bethany is very hard of hearing. She leans over to her elderly husband and yells, "What did he say?"

He yells back, "He wants you to say grace!"

She responds, "Grace? Grace passed away 30 years ago!"

The old man screams in her ear, "He wants you to say the blessing!"

"Oh!" says Aunt Bethany. She bows her head and clasps her hands. One thing is clear. No one at this table is comfortable or familiar with prayer. Each member of the family awkwardly prepares for this sacred moment. Some close their eyes. Some put their hands together. Some look to each other for guidance.

Aunt Bethany closes her eyes and begins, "I pledge allegiance to the flag..." As if on cue, everyone else joins in, "of the United States of America..." Then they finish "...with liberty and justice for all. Amen!"²

It's funny, in an irritating sort of way, but it's also sad. Is that what Christmas means? Awkward prayers around a dysfunctional family table? I don't think so. Christmas, of course, is all about the birth of Jesus Christ. In celebrating his birth, we touch on the three most fundamental qualities of our spiritual lives.

CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT LOVE. Love is the sole motivation behind the coming of the Christ child: "*For God so loved the world he gave his only Son.*"³ As the hymn by Christina Rossetti goes, "Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine. Love was born at Christmas; star and angels gave the sign."⁴ There is no clearer indication of the love of God than the fact that he was willing to come down from his heavenly throne, assume human form, and be born among us as a weak, helpless, dependent baby. He went the distance for us; he came to earth before we deserved it in any way. The First Letter of John says, "*God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*"⁵

When it comes to love, God comes first. And he doesn't come riding on a heavenly horse or driving a celestial chariot. He doesn't come in all his pomp and circumstance and glory and awesomeness. He comes as a baby, born to a young, unmarried girl in a stable in a backwoods town in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. Mary laid God in a feeding trough where only hours before the cows and the camels had been slobbering and chewing. Even with fresh hay, it was nasty. It was not a royal welcome at all. But because God came into that nasty little stable, he also comes into the nasty little places in our lives—the places where we hide our bitterness, our hostility, our prejudice, our anxiety, our despair, our depression, our lust and our sin—and he brings love. He brings himself, and that's the greatest gift of all.

In one of his books, Max Lucado tells about a gift that singer Billy Joel gave his daughter. On her 12th birthday she was in New York City, and her dad, the pop star, was in Los Angeles. He phoned her

that morning, apologizing for his absence, but told her to expect the delivery of a large package before the end of the day. That evening Billy Joel's daughter answered the doorbell to find a six-foot-tall, brightly wrapped box. The delivery men brought it in, and she tore it open. Out stepped her father, fresh off the plane from the West Coast—the best gift she could have received.⁶

God comes first, and brings us the best gift we could ever receive—the gift of love. And because he gives us this gift, we can give the gift to others. This kind of re-gifting is OK. In fact, we encourage you to receive the gift of love and then give it away.

About twenty years ago there was a group of Methodists in this area who re-gifted God's love in a tough situation. In 1994 the State Department of Human Services established a wilderness camp near Mansfield, about 30 miles south of here. They would send a dozen or so troubled kids out into the country in the hopes that a different and more natural environment would help rehabilitate them. Unfortunately, the citizens of Mansfield wanted nothing to do with these young criminals. The grocery stores wouldn't sell them food. Their water line was sabotaged. Every interaction with the community was hostile and antagonistic, until the members of the Mansfield United Methodist Church stepped in and began to minister to these troubled teenagers. They made all the difference.

My friend Sara Bainbridge was the pastor there at the time, and she said that the first thing they did was to ask for a dozen people to be prayer partners and to pray specifically for one of the kids. Then they set up a program where the church members could actually meet the offenders. Once they met them, what do you think the Methodists wanted to do? Feed them, of course! So they took food baskets out to the camp at Thanksgiving and bags of presents out at Christmastime. It was nothing fancy or earth-shattering or unprecedented. But by simply sharing the love of God with a dozen wayward boys, that church changed the attitude of a whole town and made a difference in some young lives for the better. That's the story of Christmas; it's all about love.

CHRISTMAS IS ALSO ALL ABOUT FAITH. Every gift requires a response. If your mama raised you right, she taught you to send thank-you notes whenever you received a gift. Our thank-you note in response to the gift of God's love is to believe in him, to have faith in what God has done and is doing in the world.

Mary is the prime example of faith in the Christmas story. There she is in Nazareth, a young girl engaged to be married, her life laid out in a conventional way, when all of a sudden she gets this angelic visitor who completely upsets her world. She will become pregnant by the Spirit? Her child will be the Son of God? What utterly preposterous nonsense to the human ear! An absolute impossibility! But you know what? It *was* an angel speaking. Mary already had a faithful heart, or God wouldn't have picked her. Like the angel said, "*Nothing will be impossible for God.*"⁷

So Mary—sweet, young, innocent, courageous, determined, heart-of-gold-and-backbone-of-steel Mary—knelt in humble obedience to her God and made the choice for faith: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"⁸ With those words, the history of humanity changed. Christmas couldn't have happened, the Christ Child would not have been born that way, if Mary had not responded in faith to the announcement of God's plan.

Christmas will not happen for you unless it becomes a response of faith. Sure, you can go to the parties and open the presents and even attend church at Christmas time, but the Christ Child will not be born in you unless you bow your head in humble adoration and say in your heart, "Here I am, your servant, Lord; let it be with me according to your word." That's not an easy decision to make. You have to believe some pretty outlandish stuff: a pregnant virgin—that's *not* the way it works—God as an infant, soiling his swaddling clothes. Our mind rebels at the thought, but our heart knows it's true.

Where will this truth take us? What will happen if we yield our spirit to God's? What will God do with us if we give him control of our lives? Can God be trusted? Where will we go? What will we do? What are signing up for here?

Rest assured, Mary didn't know the answer to any of these questions. She probably thought she would take her baby home to Nazareth and raise him as a good Jewish boy, and one day God would make him King of the Universe. Do you think she saw the crowds pressing in to hear his words and feel his touch? Do you think she saw him feeding thousands and raising the dead to life? Do you think she saw him being arrested and beaten and mocked and crucified? No, she just said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord," not knowing where it would lead, but knowing that God would lead and supply her every need.

The late Corrie Ten Boom, author of *The Hiding Place*, told the story from her childhood about a conversation she had with her father. She said, "Papa, I don't think I have the faith to handle real trouble. I don't know what I'd do if you should die. I don't think I have the faith that some people have to face trouble."

Corrie's father looked at her tenderly and said, "Corrie, dear, when I say I will send you to the store tomorrow, do I give the money to you today? No, I give it to you when you are ready to go to the store. And if you are going on a train trip and need money for a ticket, do I give you the money when we decide you may take the trip? No, I give it to you when you are at the depot, all ready to buy your ticket. Corrie, God treats us the same way. He doesn't give you faith until you need it. When you do need it, he will certainly give it to you."

Later on, in the midst of the Nazi Holocaust, Corrie needed it, and she received it, and her life became a witness to generations of Christians. Mary had no idea what the future held, but she knew that God held the future; so she responded in faith.

At Christmas, God sends his love. We respond in faith. Then we can live in hope. **CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT HOPE.** At Christmas, when we see the baby in that manger, we know there is hope for the world. God has come down. We are saved. No matter what trials we face, no matter what troubles come at us, no matter what obstacles the world raises in our path, we will strive, and we will thrive, because God is on our side. We will not give up hope.

Mary Fox shared with me some time ago a sermon given by her son, John, Jr., who is not a preacher but has a very deep faith. In the spring of 1995, John went in to wake his fifteen-year-old son Richard, and he found him unresponsive, lying on the floor, moaning in intense pain. The ER doctors diagnosed Richard with bacterial meningitis and put him in ICU on a ventilator to help him breathe. After about a day, they determined that Richard had profound brain damage. John quit praying for Richard to recover and began to pray to know God's will. When Richard died, they donated his organs and tried to come to grips with this new and horrible and tragic reality. Eventually John felt led to share where this journey had taken him, and in this sermon he pointed to three things that last in the uncertainty of life: love, faith, and hope.

John said, "What would become of us if we did not stand on our hope? If we did not move through the darkness of this world on a path illumined by the Word and the Spirit of God? It is that hope upon which I have tried to stand all my life, and it is upon that hope I stand now. ...I do not know the names or details [of those who received Richard's organs], and that is my choice, but I have learned that because of the healthy and vital organs that lived inside my son, that were freely given away, seven people now have new lives. Do you suppose they gave up hope? Hope and prayer was all they had. Just imagine seven families who had their prayers answered. Seven families that stood on hope. To them hope is real, and prayers are answered."⁹

Hope is indeed real; that's the message of Christmas. God doesn't take away our suffering any more than he heated the stable in Bethlehem. But God comes into our lives just as surely as he came into that stable, right in the middle of the nastiness of life, and God gives us strength and peace and courage and a witness to his power. Then as Paul said, "*we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy*

*Spirit that has been given to us.*¹⁰ Then we are convinced like Paul, that neither death nor life nor illness nor crime nor violence nor war nor hatred nor prejudice nor sin nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Then we know what love is. We know what faith means. We have hope, because God is with us. If we get that, we get Christmas.

As we continue on our Advent journey, we draw near to the mystery: “*For God so loved the world he gave his only Son.*” The little town of Bethlehem lies silently asleep, waiting for the birth of the Savior. Do you feel the love? Do you know the faith? Do you have the hope? Then you are ready for Christmas!

¹ John Lennon, “Happy Christmas (War Is Over), 1971. Sermon similar to “What Is Christmas?” 05-12-18 and 10-12-12.

² *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* (Warner Brothers, 1989).

³ John 3:16.

⁴ *United Methodist Hymnal*, #242.

⁵ I John 4:9-10.

⁶ Max Lucado, *Next Door Savior* (W Publishing Group, 2003), p. 113.

⁷ Luke 1:37.

⁸ Luke 1:38.

⁹ John Fox, Jr. “When the Waters Are Deep,” typed manuscript.

¹⁰ Romans 5:3-5.