

Christmas Sermon 2015: God's Brilliant Idea

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Luke 2:8-16⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

Those of you who know me, know that
I love Christmas!
I am kind of a Christmas junkie...For instance...I love this tree!
Don’t you?
I love the way Christmas looks, and smells, and feels...

I love the sparkly lights! I love presents, and singing carols and ornaments and the smell of pine.

You know I have been tempted...I really have... to get a plastic tree...it would save so much time and money....you can get these trees...right?...they are all decorated...you take these trees out of the box plug them in and BLING!

They are ready to go. And this is so tempting in terms of time-management, cost effectiveness, and mess.

Plus...the Christmas tree is really a pagan symbol that we have brought into the Christian tradition...

So even theologically it doesn't make sense that we spend money on a tree every year.

But even though it is tempting, because I am a Christmas junkie, I just can't bear the thought of it.

I can't bear the thought of giving up that great smell of pine that fills the house, and taking the time (I don't have) to go through all of the ornaments, with family, and re-live the memories so many of them hold.

I actually have a collection of ornaments that I started collecting way back in the days when I lived in New England. I love to decorate our tree in white and gold, and every year I add something special to our collection of ornaments.

And unfortunately I love cookies too....and I also like sitting around telling stories - by an open fire that we can't have anymore because of air quality control.

But I still like the nostalgia of thinking about chestnuts roasting on an open fire, even though I have no idea how to do that or what it looks like.

But what I love most about Christmas, (and this is the crux of what I want you to remember this morning) is that the Christian message of Christmas is not something we as humans could have ever thought up on our own...which makes it so real...and such good news.

Christmas really is an occasion to celebrate...

I love that about Christmas! Let me explain what I mean...

C.S. Lewis said that one of the reasons that he believed Christianity, is that it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up on their own. He wrote:

“One of the reasons I believe Christianity is that it is a religion that you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe we had always expected, I should feel we were making it up. But, in fact, it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up. It has just that queer twist about it that real things have... (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book II, chapter 2, “The Invasion,” page 36).

Let's look at the Christmas story...then...and see how it has that queer twist about it that real things have...

Rather than coming to earth as a powerful Messiah God, slamming us to the ground, making us shape up (that's what we would have come up with if we had made a religion up..or some variation of that)...with good works and better laws to keep us all in check...

At Christmas, God comes to us in an entirely different way. ***God comes to us at Christmas by making himself over into our image in a way that is almost impossible for us to reject.***

God at Christmas, in tiny baby Jesus, makes himself vulnerable, small, weak, unassuming...so that we will be more likely to receive him. Choose freely and joyfully *for him.*

That's the twist that makes this whole event so real!

How many of you have young children in your life? How many of you have ever been standing in a line at the grocery store and had a baby smile at you?

Who doesn't smile back I wonder?

How hard is it for most of us to not respond?

There may be a few that keep their grim expressions plastered on their face...staring at their cauliflower, but very few.

How can you stay somber when the face of the baby in front of you in line expands into a delighted grin just by looking at your face? *Granted, he or she may be laughing at your face...but still how can you not respond?*

We have a hard time, most of us, NOT responding.

And God did this amazing thing in Jesus.

Before the first Christmas, I can imagine God thinking...

"How can I come to them in a way that they will receive me? In a way that will draw them to me almost irresistibly? In a way where they are not going to be afraid. In a way where I can love them and they will receive that love?"

What are the angel's first words to the shepherds?

"Be not afraid"

It's our fear of God that separates us from him. It's our fear that keeps us from experiencing the joy of his Presence. It's our fear, based in our sense of unworthiness that robs us of a close intimate relationship with him.

I often tell people that God loves them through their young children. We are not afraid of children.

That's why God loves us so often through them.

If you raised your hands before...if you have young kids in your life, pay attention to how they love you.

They love you without any strings attached. They love you easily. They forgive you easily. They are full of joy, spontaneity and grace. They are innocent of evil and therefore very easy to love back. We don't distrust children...We know their love is genuine...and we freely receive their love with trust

And ***On that first Christmas that's exactly what was going on. God made it easy for us to freely receive him...***

It had to be free, of course.

Love can't be forced. So at Christmas, in Jesus, coming as he did, this God of the universe...

The God of all Creation

The God who Authored life, and brought human beings into existence with the breath of his mouth...

**Thought of a brilliant way to come to us, that would
make it easy for us to say YES to him...freely and without
coercion**

That's who God is. That's how relentlessly he pursues us. Becoming that small, that vulnerable, that weak, was a tremendous risk that meant God would suffer our pain.

But it was worth it. That's what love does. That's who God is.

Notice too...that the shepherds were the first ones to hear about his birth.

Shepherds were the lowest of the low on the social status ladder.

They really did smell because they were outside all the time dealing with livestock. Notice in the text...

"And there were shepherds living in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night."

If you are living in the fields, you don't have a chance to do laundry too often.

Shepherds didn't have Tide pods, or fabric softener, or even deodorant.

Shepherds were well known for their dirt and their grime ...Many of you know I ride horses, and one hour at the barn with the horse, and I have this grime all over me that requires a shower every time. There's just a kind of livestock smear that happens all over you when you work with these kinds of animals.

Sheep are way dirtier than horses so you can imagine what those shepherds looked like and how they smelled after weeks of literally living in the fields with these sheep....

And not only that....the angels appeared to those dirty smelly shepherds who were serving ***on the night shift*** – you were the lowest of the low in the shepherd rank order system.. if you were on night shift!

Why did God appear to shepherds first?

I think God appeared first to the shepherds...because shepherds represent the true state of all of us...

Despite how good we think we are...and how pretty we all look today...And you all look great...We need God because we too are ragged, worn, and marred by the ways of the world...

Smelling of our own efforts to work hard...to be good – all our hard work to “make it”...doesn't add up for God.

I think the shepherds were an expression/symbol of all of humanity's dire sinful state and desperate need for a Savior.

As Brennan Manning said, **“We're all ragamuffins before a holy God”**

Notice how excited the shepherds were after the angels came...!

“Let us go and see this thing that has happened! C'mon! Can't wait!”

They were at first afraid when the angels in all their glory appeared, but unafraid and excited to go and see this little baby.

There is ...No coercion in their joyful desire to go and see! Again, no fear.

Just good news..and an eager response.

And in a nutshell **That's the gospel...**

The ragged, the worn, the smelly, the broken, eagerly running to Jesus... This was exactly the response God wanted from us. That's why Jesus came the way that he did...

"For God so loved the world, as it was in its smelly, broken, sinful state...that he sent his only son in a way that was almost impossible to resist friends..that's how much God loves us, eagerly seeks after us...almost throws himself towards us in loving genuine vulnerability....longing for our response..."

When you celebrate Christmas...you are celebrating... THAT

You are celebrating that kind of a God.

We could never have made this kind of a God up on our own! Were we sitting in a committee trying to "make up a religion" we would have thought that such vulnerability, such weakness was not worthy of God.

That's why I love the message of Christmas. It has just that queer twist about it that makes it real...that makes it God's story...not ours.

I heard recently about a family who was travelling from LA to their home here in the Bay Area on Christmas Day.

Christmas was on a Sunday and they had been with their relatives to celebrate already... but had to get back to work for Monday. And it was a long drive so they stopped in a restaurant to eat dinner.

I think it was one of those diner places on I-5.

The Mom who wrote this story describes helping her two children get settled around the table. She had a 1 year old son Erik and a 6 year old daughter Sarah.

The restaurant was pretty empty because it was Christmas day...and they were the only family there with children.

All of a sudden the Mom says...I heard one year old Erik squeal with glee: "Hi there."
(Two words he thought were one.) "Hithere."

He pounded his fat baby hand on the metal high chair tray. His face was alive with excitement-eyes wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wiggled and chirped and giggled.

Then I saw the source of his merriment.

My eyes could not take it in all at once. A tattered rag of a coat -dirty, greasy and worn, baggy pants-at half mast over a spindly body, toes that poked out of would-be shoes, a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over.

The face was like none other...gums as bare as Erik's...hair uncombed and unwashed, whiskers too short to be called a beard, but way beyond a shadow... a nose as varicose as the map of New York. I was too far away to smell him but I knew he smelled. And his hands were waving in the air, flapping about on loose wrists. "Hi there baby! Hi big boy. I see ya, buster."

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between, "What do we do?" and "Poor devil." Erik continued to laugh and answer, "Hi. Hithere." Every call was echoed. I began to notice waitresses' eyebrows shoot to their foreheads. Several people near us "ahemed."

Our meal came but it continued. Now the old man was shouting across the room: "Do ya know patty cake? Atta boy. Do ya know peek-a-boo? Hey look, he knows peek-a-boo."

Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance. I was embarrassed. Even our six-year old asked: "Mommy...Why is that man talking so loud?"

We ate in silence except for Erik who was running through his repertoire for the admiring applause of a skid-row bum. Finally I had had enough. I turned the high chair. Erik screamed and swung around to face his old buddy.

Now I was really mad. As my husband went to pay the check, he told me to meet him in the parking lot. I trundled Erik out of the high chair and looked toward the exit.

I thought, "Lord just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik."

But the old man sat waiting, his chair directly between me and the door. As I drew closer to him, I turned my back, walking to sidestep him- and any air he might be breathing.

As I did so, Erik, with his eyes riveted to his friend, leaned out from my grasp and reached with both arms in a baby's "pick me up" position.

In a split second I came eye-to eye with the old man.

"Would you let me hold your baby?" his eyes implored. But there was no need for me to answer, as Erik propelled himself from my arms into the man's.

Then, Erik, laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder.

The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes.

His aged hands, marked with grime and hard labor, so gently cradled my baby and stroked his back. I stood awestruck.

The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. "You take care of this baby," he said in a firm, commanding voice. Somehow I managed "I will" from a throat that contained a stone.

When he pried Erik from his chest -unwillingly, longingly-it was as though the man was in pain. I held open my arms to receive my baby and again the gentleman addressed me: "God bless you ma'am. You've given me Christmas."

This is indeed the message of Christmas...and in it is that twist that makes it real... instead of eternal God coming down in fire and judgment...God in Christ jumped from heaven's embrace into our sinful ragged arms and loved us...from the manger to the cross...

Let us Pray...