

Christmas Eve Message

It's called different things; at Christmas time, we even have seasonal names for it. We might call it "good tidings" or maybe even a "Christmas Miracle!" I'm speaking of getting or receiving something good and pleasing; something beautiful and wonderful. The Bible has a word that defines such advantages and it's the word "blessing." Blessing is a good word. We want blessings, don't we? We want our marriages blessed; our homes and relationships blessed. During baseball games someone sings God Bless America.

What is God's blessing; and how do you get it? I'm happy to report to you this Christmas Eve that you don't have to work or be good enough for God's blessing. What a relief! While Santa might require to be nicer than we are naughty (though, I'm thinking he grades on a curve because I don't think I've ever been nicer than naughty and it hasn't impacted my Christmas gifts), God doesn't give blessings like that. God's blessings are truly gifts. He gives them freely.

But God's blessings are kind of like rain; you can run for cover when he sends them your way. Do you know what I mean by that? You have to be an active participant to receive God's gifts of blessing. And sometimes, we really don't want God's blessing. That sounds a tad strange, doesn't it? Why wouldn't we want the blessings of God? Well, they may not seem all that important to us; maybe we think we're doing well enough on our own. Or we might not like the blessings God has for us. An example of one of God's blessing that might not sound too important at first or all that appreciated is mentioned in Acts 3. (READ Acts 3:17-21, 25-26).

Let me tell you what's happening in this part of the book of Acts. The most amazing things are happening in Jerusalem at this point. The most timid and fearful band of brothers, Jesus' original followers, have turned into a bold army that nobody can scare. And after Peter heals a disabled man in the name of Jesus, everyone is interested in what's happening including the same group of people who killed Jesus just a few months earlier. And it doesn't seem they're afraid to give Jesus's disciples the same treatment. So, Peter is trying to explain everything that's taking place to everyone who's been watching.

And towards the end of his little sermon he mentions God's blessing. In vs. 26 he says "God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you." God's servant is Jesus. And Peter says Jesus was sent to you. This sending is what we celebrate during the Christmas season. This is the time of year, Jesus' birthday, that remember that God sent Jesus into the world in the most obscure way. And we know the story, right? Mary, shepherds, wise man and farm animals... and no crying did he make (well, he probably cried like most babies do). God sent Jesus into the world; and Peter says he did that to bless us.

But notice how Peter describes the blessing; let's read it (vs. 26). "God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you *by turning every one of you from your wickedness.*" Do you know that moment when you're excited, your anticipation is high, but then you hear the rest of the story and you kind of do a double take and you say, "What was that?" I think this is how this comes across a little. Jesus has come to bless you, my dear friends - we think blessing we think riches and comfort and healthy bodies and good relationships and job (promotions!); yes, send God's blessings our way - but the blessing Jesus was sent to give you was to turn you from your wickedness. Two things about that jump out at me.

First, he's saying we practice wickedness; or maybe we could say it this way: we are wicked. That's kind of a tough pill to swallow, especially on Christmas Eve when we are about ready to have a festive evening. That offends our pride. That's a tad insulting. It feels a little... judgmental. "Who says I'm wicked?" Well, God does. God. The Maker and Creator of the Universe. The one who said, "Let there be light" and there was light. I'm only saying it because God has already said it.

Friends, you will never find peace with God, you will never know God until you humble yourself and admit there's something wrong with you; that you are wicked. Not just your broken and weak. We are those things, but by saying Jesus has come to bless broken and weak people glosses over what's our biggest problem - our sin. Our own sin, which we are culpable for. Our own selfish, sinful desire that bends us towards the practice of wickedness.

I am struck how often I want my own, selfish way and how often I don't want to do what God says to do. That's wickedness. Friends, has God given you eyes to see your own?

The second thing that jumps out at me is that God wants to turn us from our wickedness; that's why he was sent. So, it's one thing to point out this reality to us, it's another thing for God to do something about it. He wants to turn us from our wickedness. What wickedness? He wants to turn us from our rejection and rebellion to God.

When God turns people there are two dynamics at work. He turns us away from something and turns us towards something. What he turns us away from is our sinful way. The way we all have that disregards God and his words and prioritizes our own desires. God turns us away from that. And what he turns us towards is himself. Whom have I in heaven by you (God)? And there's nothing on this earth I desire besides you. My heart and my flesh may fail by God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. I count everything as loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ our Lord.

Friends, this is the Christmas blessing. This is the good gift that God is looking to give us this Christmas season and everyday - to turn us. And when we do, friends, when we humbly admit our sin and embrace Jesus in faith our sins will be blotted out and times of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord, the only place we'll want to be.... That is God's true blessing.

Reading 1:

Luke 1:26-33

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Our first Christmas candle to light stands for preparation. In the same way that the angel prepared Mary for the astounding news that she would be the mother to the Son of God, we want to prepare ourselves to see and savor Jesus Christ this evening. Consider what Gabriel told Mary about her future son: He will be great; He will be called Son of the Most High; He will sit on David's throne; there will be no end to his kingdom.

Jesus is not merely a historical figure that we might admire like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. Nor is he a mythical figure that's inspirational like Zeus or a jolly fat man we see once a year. He is the son of the Most High God. So get ready to see and worship him this evening. (Light the Candle)

Reading 2:

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

**"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"**

(which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Sin - it's what Jesus came to save us from. But if we are honest, we might admit we don't want to be saved from our sin. We like the reward we get from our sin. We like what our guilty pleasures give us. Our sins make us feel good (at least for a moment), they give us security, they give us power and control.

But our sin breaks God's law and separates us from God and each other; in fact, the Bible says sin leads to destruction. And truth be told, God's rewards are better than the rewards from sins. Do you have eyes that see that? Does your heart say, "Yes, my sin is wrong and bad for me and God is good and desirable?" To have God we must turn; that's what repentance means. To turn from sin and to turn towards God. That's what our second Christmas candle represents tonight - repentance. (Light the Candle)

Reading 3:

Acts 2:37-38

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We repent when we believe God's word. When we truly believe our sin is our biggest problem and when we truly believe that Jesus loves us even though we are sinners and died to save us, we will gladly turn away from our sin and turn to God. And when we humbly do that, we are forgiven.

How wonderful! To be washed of our sins; for our sins to be forgotten by an all-knowing God. These word-pictures in the Bible show us just how great God's forgiveness is.

Do you know if you are forgiven? Do you have past sins that haunt you? Our guilt before God is very real. But we all can be forgiven. Not because we are so great, but because Jesus is so great. And when we are forgiven, our relationship with God is restored. Forgiveness - it's the theme of our 3rd Christmas candle. (Light the Candle).

Reading 4:

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Our 4th Christmas candle represents service. Being forgiven, we now are controlled by the love of Christ; we stop living for ourselves and start living for him. Consider that phrase: the love of Christ controls us. Does being controlled sound like good news? Most people would say they don't want to be controlled. But consider what the Bible teaches.

The scriptures say we are always controlled by something. We are either controlled by our sin - which leads us to selfish, destructive results or we are controlled by Christ, who leads us to joy, peace and service to others. So our choice isn't between being free or being controlled. No, the Bible says we can be controlled by sin, which is called slavery. Or we can be controlled by God's love, which is called freedom. God tells us to believe that being controlled by Christ is better than being controlled by sin. And Jesus was controlled by love as he served you and me on the cross. We light the candle of service with hope in God that we will follow his example and be servants to others in his name. (Light the Candle).

Reading 5:

John 1:9-14

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Our fifth and final candle is the Christ candle. God's good news is a person, the person of Jesus Christ. We experience all of God's rich grace through him. May it be known to all of us this Christmas season that God invites us to receive his Son, Jesus. We don't receive Jesus by being good enough, by knowing the right information or even by claiming it is so. We only receive Jesus by being born of God.

God makes us followers of Jesus. He does so graciously and kindly. He does so by humbling us to admit we are sinners and by causing us to joyfully embrace Jesus for our rescue. This is faith in God. So then, be reconciled to God today by repenting and believing in him and know the joy of living in peace with God. (Light the Candle)