

Christmas Eve - 2:30pm and 4pm
Order of Service

Welcome and opening prayer - Brian (2 minutes)

Christmas songs (Joy to the World, Joy has Dawned) - Kevin (6 minutes)

Scripture reading ~ Matthew 1:18-25 - HS seniors (2 minutes)

Children's Christmas story - George (8 minutes)

Christmas song (Good Christian Men, Rejoice - all 3 vs) - Kevin (3.5 minutes)

Scriptures reading ~ John 1:1-4, 9-14 - HS seniors (3.5 minutes)

Message - Pastor Brian (20 minutes)

Pastoral Prayer (Prayer of Confession, thanks; prayers for peace and joy) - Tim (4 minutes)

Closing song (Glorious Day) - Kevin (4 minutes)

Closing prayer - Brian (1 minute)

The two passages we heard earlier this afternoon have a very important common theme. In the Matthew account of the birth of Jesus we're told this baby would have an important theological name. The name "Jesus!" was going to be hollered by Mary when she wanted her son to come home for supper. But he had another name; a name that was more of a signal for the sons of men, you and me, letting us know that God was up to something new; that name is "Immanuel", which the passage says means, "God with us."

John tells us the same thing, but in a different way. John's story starts at the beginning of time and focuses on the cosmic plan of God in the birth of Jesus. Jesus is the Eternal Word of God who existed from before time began; Jesus is the Word on which all of Creation depends on. But what was so utterly amazing is that this Eternal Word would take on human flesh and dwell among us. The Eternal Word, Jesus, would no longer reside in the heavens and look down from afar; God came to us in the birth of Jesus and in a new way he would be with us.

That's what's so utterly amazing and important about Christmas. It's not just that God gave us a gift (he did) and it's not just that he fulfilled his promises (Oh, he did that) and it's not like the forgiveness of the sins of the world is a small thing (it's a big thing), but what's so shocking is that God accomplished all of these wonderful things in the most unlikeliest of ways; God would become a human being like you and me. How can that be? How can the fullness of God dwell in bodily form? How can flesh and blood, skin and bones package the true, perfect image of God when not even the skies can contain the glory of God? That's what God did to come to our rescue.

One of the reasons why this mystery might not shock us like it should is because we take the nearness of God for granted. We think God is our pal, our co-pilot in life. He's the big guy upstairs. But that's not how wise men and women have related to God throughout the ages. The Bible uses words like *holy* to describe what God is like. God is a sacred and pure; and becoming too comfortable with the sacred can kill you. Let me tell you about a man named Uzzah. Uzzah, most likely, was your typical, hard working Hebrew... a guy you could count on to get a job done. But he was given a job that was going to turn fatal. He was told to go get the ark of the covenant (if you don't know what that is, think of a golden box full of God's important stuff) and bring it back to Jerusalem the Holy City. The people who told Uzzah to go get the ark should have given him very specific instructions; God said that the ark must be carried a certain way by certain people - this wasn't just some fancy box to God; this was a symbol of his faithful presence to the people. But instead of obeying God, they threw the ark in the back of a wagon pulled by mules. King David must have ignored the appropriations bill for more highway funds because on the way the wagon tottered on the path and ark started to fall and Uzzah, trying to be helpful, put his hands out to stop the ark from falling and when he touched the ark God killed him in that moment; he touched the sacred at his peril.

Maybe you hear that story and you think, "Boy, what's God's problem?" You're not alone. When King David heard the news about Uzzah, he was angry and afraid. He changed his plans; in fact, he decided not to bring the ark back... at least for a while. But God didn't make the

mistake; Uzzah did. So did David and those he put in charge. God is holy and pure; he is to be revered and feared. Blessing comes when you obey God's word; curses come when you ignore it. You can't take God for granted.

It's instances and circumstances like this that communicated something very important to the people of God: don't get too close. When God met Moses on the mountain, God told the people, "Don't even touch the mountain or you'll die." Or when God gave instructions for the temple, there was this inner room called the Most Holy Place. Nobody could enter; it was sacred. The message is clear: stay away.

You might wonder: why would God be like that? That doesn't sound very loving. Well, you need to understand: the problem isn't with God; the problem is with us. While God is holy, we are unholy. While God is pure; we are impure. We miss the mark of God's standards because of our sin. So, in reality, God telling his people to stay out of the temple, to not touch the mountain, is a gift of his grace. God doesn't want us to perish, and we will if we get too close.

Maybe some of you feel that way; you can't get too close to God. Maybe you've kept your distance. Maybe, even, you've done it unknowingly. You've just felt uncomfortable, maybe you felt like you didn't belong. You've wanted to pray; you've wanted to ask God questions, but you've had a complaint or two. You know, you're not all wrong about that.

Christmas fixes this problem. While we can't get too close to God, the Lord decided to come close to you and me. While we can't make up or compensate for our sins, God can. And that's what God did in sending Jesus. That's why Christmas is such good news. God came to be with us when we couldn't go and be with him. While there are walls and barriers that separated the people from being close to God, God broke down those walls to be close to you and me. God broke those walls down not just in sending Jesus to become human like you and me, but ultimately by dying for your sins and my sins. When Jesus did that, when he died on the cross, he paid the penalty of all the sins of his people so that they could, once and for all, always be with God.

There's a great story in John 4 about Jesus interacting with a Samaritan woman. Jesus was traveling through the land of Samaria; when he got tired his disciples went to get some food while he relaxed at a well. And when this woman approached, Jesus reached out in love. Now, you need to understand: this woman had no right being close to Jesus. As you read in John 4, ethnically, culturally, religiously, this woman comes up short. She's breaking God's commands with her romantic relationships; she's part of a cultural group that has turned away from following God's law, and she doesn't understand the ways and promises of God. Her path is leading away from Jesus not towards him.

But Jesus wasn't waiting for this woman to find him; he went looking for her. And instead of criticizing her, he taught her words of life. He offered her forgiveness and grace. He treated

her with dignity and respect. This is such a great picture of the truth of Christmas. While this woman had no right to be close to Jesus, Jesus made every attempt to be near to her and to pass on the grace of God.

Did you know that Jesus came to earth to be near you? That's why he came. That's why Christmas is so glorious. Did you know this? Did you know God came to earth to be near you? Even though you've made mistakes, even though you've messed up so many times. Do you believe this? That's different than knowing, right? Believing it means it makes your heart happy. Believing it means it impacts you. It means that even though you have addictions that you've struggled with for years, God came to be with you. It means even though you have a secret sin that you've never mentioned to anyone, God still came to be near you. Believing Jesus came to be with you creates a joy for Christmas that transcends the family time, the presents and the time off of work.

You and I can experience the nearness of God, my good friends, through our confession and repentance. Confessing means you acknowledge the wrong that we've done; we acknowledge our problem. That we are far from God. Repentance means to turn or to change. So, after we acknowledge our sin, we need to turn to the Lord. To do that, we need humility; we need contrition. If we stay proud, we'll never know God to be close to us. And why would we do that? Confess and repent? Because we believe... we believe in God; we believe in Jesus; we believe in the message of Christmas. Believe today and know the presence of the Lord.