

12.24.2023 Christmas Sermon

Pondering the Gift

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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This is a part of the season: being with family, friends, and just taking some time for them, honoring you by spending time with you. Beyond all the gifts that you will receive and the food that you will eat, there's the weight you will gain.

It is the friends, the friends in the family. So, it's good to be here. Where do I start? Well, I'm going to be short, that's for sure. Because there are so many things going on. And I know most of you have commitments after this. And it just continues to go on and on in the season of your commitments to activity. But there needs to be a point in time where you slow down to enjoy one another. Because at some point in time, let's just be honest, you won't be able to enjoy one another the way you do today. So today, while it's called today, enjoy one another. I appreciate the praise and worship team and all that they do, the dancers in the choir. I appreciate you even taking the time to be here. And for that, I say thank you. I don't take it for granted.

In today's talk, which I will call "the talk", I don't want to go over too much. Because the story itself is enough. And at times we just need to be reminded of the story as it is, especially in our society today where it gets kind of cloudy on what happened, what was the history, and what history we accept and what we cast off. That becomes dangerous. So, the simplicity of today is: What is the story?

And I want to start with, what do you remember about Christmas? What stands out for you? This is an actual group participation. Who will be bold enough to be first? Go.

When I was a kid, we always had a nativity scene. Baby Jesus cannot be in the nativity scene until Christmas Day. Because Jesus had not come yet, right? So that is one tradition that lives

within her household. What are the other things? Mine is "Charlie Brown Christmas", so it doesn't have to be overly spiritual. It is just, what is the story?

Yes, "It's a Wonderful Life". Every year they were watching... What? "Sound of Music", the Elvis Christmas album, the mood, the picture, and the imagery that just hit my head while decorating the tree. And I see others smiling as others tell their traditions. So, it sounds like some of that is resonating, right?

Cookies, singing "The Messiah", watching "Home Alone". My daughter watched that yesterday. Oh yeah, silver Christmas tree - we had one too. I didn't know why we had silver because we didn't have money. Is that when... I did not know that? Yes, I thought it was a stylistic choice. Right.

Okay. All right. So, you see these traditions that are coming out from this story. So, I will want to read the story, because there are new generations of children for whom it hasn't become established yet. And it is our responsibility, of those who have come through time and those who have helped to cascade this story down through time, that it continues for, because there's such strength, warmth, community, love, kindness, fondness in this story.

Man, so I'm just gonna, it's gonna be a little bit of a long read. But it is what it is in order to tell the story. And it is Luke 2, verses 2 through 20. And then we'll elaborate a little bit about it. So, this was the first registration and was taken while Cananias was governor of Syria. All went to their own home, own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem. Because he was a descendant from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged, and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. She gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them. In the region, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people. To you was born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly, there was an angel and a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest of heaven, and on earth, peace among those whom he favors."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherd said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made

known to us." So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told to them about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, but Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them, the meaning of the word.

So, I just want to recap that story as it is. And I'm going to use a couple of thoughts that have already been shared with you by Kevin Brisbane, and a few weeks ago when he talked about the different perspectives that the Bible shares with us about this story. This story appears in multiple places within the Bible, and they tell about the story from different perspectives.

Because in the perspectives, it addresses different needs, right, so there you will see some of that. There's also some perspectives that our brother, Matt Kistler shared in terms of at times God reaches out to us, and it depends on how we embrace God's gift that determines what we experience next. Right. So, there will be some images of that in this story.

Pastor T had got was end up getting COVID Like on Thursday or Friday so she can't make it today. She was going to give this sermon and so she sent me her notes, she said, "Hey, take a little, take a lot, take what you want." And so, there'll be a little bit of that in there.

But then the primary theft that I am taking is from Terry Witmyer, from a few years ago, and she focused on this thing that Mary, in the midst of this party, pondered in the midst of this party of people and angels and heavenly hosts. What to silence? And ponder, what was the gift and what was going to happen next. So, we're going to get into that piece of how do you ponder your gift.

So, to set up the story, I don't know if any of you have ever traveled or been with a person that is pregnant, right? They are pregnant, you are pregnant, and you're traveling. But it's not an easy trip. For any of you. The person who is pregnant, and the person that is traveling with the pregnant person, I'm going to let you know. This is not an easy trip. But here's Joseph, and Mary, and baby Jesus, he's the passenger, traveling from one land to another.

And if you can imagine, again, traveling with this pregnant person, things don't seem to go as planned. So, I imagine they show up at the inn a little bit late. And there's no pre-registration during this time, just letting you know, for these young folks who everything is digital, there was no pre-planning, there was no book ahead. So, when you got to the inn, if there was room you could get in, if you were late, and there was no inn, there was no room, you could not stay.

And there was no Airbnb during this time. So, you couldn't have a situation where I leave my home, because you got to register, let's say, and my hometown was Saginaw, Michigan, I couldn't leave you access to my home, while I come to your home in Westchester, there was no ability.

So, you show up in this town that you haven't visited for years. Cranky? Because you're traveling with a pregnant person. And they have no room. These are just the practical classic, practical, is this. Is this foreign to you? Is traveling with a pregnant person, the joyful delight. So, these are the situations they get there. There's no room, and so you do the best you can with what you've got. So, I imagine that all of you, including Jesus in the womb, is cranky. And now it's time for Jesus to be born. And in that moment of Jesus being born, the scene changes. The scene changes to some shepherds in a field that's in the area, but not right there.

And I've always wondered, why tell the shepherds and not Joseph and Mary directly. Why tell the shepherds? Because the shepherds, out there minding their own business watching their flock, had angels show up. They tell them the story, a heavenly host comes out, starts singing and praising, and then goes back to heaven.

Then the shepherds take the information and say, "Hey, let's go see if this is true." They follow the instructions, get to this young woman Mary, and this new father Joseph, and they are watching this baby. They turn to one another and to them and say everything that we were told. We now see. We were told about you and how you would be, and now you're here. And there were people around that also heard this story. And all of them start having a party, glorifying and praising God. That's what they say. Everyone's having a good time. And then the unfortunate part is they all went their way.

So why tell them first? And then they come and tell me if you're Mary and Joseph. And my thought, or I imagine it's this: can you imagine the torment and pain? The ridicule that Mary and Joseph received when they said, "we are having a child, birth by God." Can you imagine? What society did to them? Can you imagine the doubt? Because Mary heard about this through the angel coming in. Angel disappeared, nobody was there, but the two of them. Joseph was taught about this through a dream, and then he woke up. What was the tangible evidence that everything that had been told was true? Nothing but faith, nothing but belief. Nothing tangible.

And this is where the story moves from Mary and Joseph to you. There are gifts that have been given that you have been told to dream and inspiration. And you have been tormented by this dream. Or this thought, or this belief. You're looking for your tangible evidence that this is

true. Where is it? Where's the thing that's going to satisfy this? The thing that only you know, but you believe it with everything that's in you?

This is why I propose to you. It had to come through the shepherds. It had to come through other sources. Yes, those sources will leave but you needed something. Mary and Joseph needed something. Because here's the one thing that's true in life today and was true then: society at times just won't shut up. And let you be. It is in those moments when the gifts that have been given to you by God will need a little bit of confirmation. And when that confirmation comes, it won't stay long. It may be more miraculous. It may be dramatic. It may be awesome.

But it will then leave. And now what will you do? When the party ends? What will you do? When those of your supporters leave? What will you do? Mary chose to ponder. Ah, I got my confirmation. Ah, it's real. But now, what will you take care of your promised gift the way Mary would take care of her newborn child by her gift was materialized within a baby.

And I'm wondering how you treat a baby. Because I want and submit to you to take care of your gift that God has given you, promised you like you will protect a baby, that you will nourish it the way you would nourish a baby, that you will protect it the way you will protect a baby, you will set the environment for that gift, for that promise. In the same way you will set the environment for a baby.

I don't know how many of you have been a new parent or not. Even though I love hugging and kissing on all of you all's babies and you've been at this church, you know I do. But when I had my kids, most of the people I told no. I would not let them touch my baby. I was selfish with my children. Okay, okay, okay. My wife is telling the story on me. But I was very protective. Right? It was special for me. Just like I would imagine. It's for you. So why is there a difference in how you protect your children than how you protect the gift that God has given you?

Do you think about it in the same way? Do you connect and remember the stories that have been told to you both in promise dreams, and supernatural engagements? I need you to take your gifts that seriously. Because it is only through that pondering and that serious reflection, that those things can grow, that those things can mature. And those things can be. This is the reason we celebrate. Because ever since that moment, we have protected our memories, our love, our kindness, the concern for what is our Savior, that started out as a vulnerable baby that was protected in a way that then it could blossom into full power. Your gift, your gift, say my gift, will blossom into full power as I protected a man. So, let me pray for you.

So God, I thank you for today. I thank you for sending your son. I thank you for the story that is Jesus Christ. And how even through coming through being a vulnerable baby rose to the point of all powers now in his hands. The power to protect others, the power to save others, the

power like no other on Earth than it has ever been seen. We thank you for the sacrifice that you made to allow this to happen. We thank you for this moment in time to share in remembrance of this moment. And we ask that the gifts that have been imparted into your people today will be protected in the right environment that it will also grow to its full power to bless other people. In Jesus name, I pray Amen.