

CHRISTMAS EVE, ZION, 2020

Christmas Eve is a very special time. Indeed, it is a time like no other. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way. Christmas Eve is the time "**...when the membrane between heaven and earth is so thin you can almost see through it. Tonight, is the night... we measure all time against.**"

Tonight, is the night we measure all time against. The birth of Jesus Christ is the most significant event in the history of mankind. His birth split history into two separate eras. The years B.C. before Christ and the years A. D. Anno Domini. The year of our Lord. Every time you write a check, celebrate a birthday, fill out an application form, or use a date, you are using the birth of Jesus Christ as the basis of measuring time. It is the night we measure all time against.

Tonight, is the night that our God came to this world. It is the night of His incarnation. His coming in human flesh. His coming to live among us. He is Emmanuel. God with us. On this night: **Heaven came down and the glory of God filled our world.**

The Birth of Christ is a classic love story. As in all relationships of love, there must be that first meeting. That first encounter. The time when you see and notice each other for the first time.

That's what Christmas is. It is the first direct encounter between man and God. Christmas is a crossing of paths. Christmas is where we find the Christ of God intersecting with humanity! Christmas is our first meeting with the God who has desired us from the very beginning. If not for Christmas, we never would have known the intensity of the love that God has for each of us.

Mary and Joseph are far from home. A teenage peasant girl is about to give birth. She delivers a son. They laid him in the manger. They watched his little face. They listened for his breathing. They touched His little hands and fingers. Just as every new parent does.

This child is the Christ of God. He Loves us. Not some of the time. Not when it is convenient. But in every moment of every single day. It is the birth of that love into our world that we celebrate this night!

This crossing of paths. This intersection of the divine and the human. It took place in a remote, speck of a dust village called Bethlehem of Judea. In that most unlikely of places. At that most inopportune of times. Jesus was born into our world. He who would become the light of the world had arrived.

This is the night when God sent out a love letter of cosmic proportions. This is the night when Christ entered the world fully God and fully human. Jesus is nothing less than the incarnate Son of God. In Him the fullness of God's person, God's character and being dwells in human form. Fully divine. Fully human. Not only did He come, He came for a purpose. He came to bring a message to all of us.

In this regard, Martin Luther wrote, **"That the Son of God became incarnate, took on human flesh, became one like us, and came so close to us in such a friendly way is a great story. But if the story stopped there, that is all that it would be: a great story! There is more to this story, though. It is that it has a messenger and a message."**

Christ is the messenger, but He also came with a message. A message of renewal. A message of restoration. A message of reconciliation. A message of hope. A message calling us all to come back to God.

C. S. Lewis said it well: **"The Son of God became a man that men might become sons of God."**

This is the night our God came to us offering us a love relationship that is so powerful and so deep, that St. Paul tells us, **"That neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

So many people are searching for peace and love. Seeking a sense of purpose and meaning. Wanting an anchor in the storms of life. But they are looking in the wrong direction. So many believe that true peace and true love is just over the next horizon.

Charles Schultz has been gone now for a long time. But his Peanuts comic strips are now a part of our Americana. In one of them Lucy is speaking with Linus at the base of a hill. She says, "Someday I am going over that hill and find the answer to my dreams. Someday I am going over that hill and find hope and fulfillment. I think, for me, all the answers to life lie just over the grassy slopes of that hill!"

Linus removes his thumb from his mouth. He points toward the hill, and responds: "Perhaps there is another little kid on the other side of that hill. He is looking this way and thinking that all the answers to life lie on this side of the hill." Lucy looks at Linus, then turns toward the hill and yells, "Forget it, kid!"

Are you searching for peace? Are you searching for love? Does it seem like life's answers are just out of reach? Just over the next hill? You can find peace. True peace and true love in Jesus. He has come into our world. He has brought a Peace that the world cannot give. A peace that passes all understanding. A peace given to us by Jesus himself. He said, **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."** As you trust Him, He will give you a peace that cannot be taken away.

The angels declared it that night, **"Glory to God in the Highest and peace on earth, good will toward men..."**

Jesus is the living, breathing sign of the immeasurable love that God has had for all of us from the very beginning. Christmas is the living promise that we are never ever alone. No matter where we are in life. No matter in what condition we find ourselves. No matter how far we might have strayed. No matter how unfaithful we've been. God in all his love, will continue to pursue us! It's a love that never stops calling us home to Him.

Christmas was God's idea. He planned when it would happen. He planned how it would happen. He planned where it would happen. He planned why it would happen. On the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem, God sent an angel to announce his arrival. The God who created the universe and set the stars in place and the world on its axis says, **"I love you... no matter who you are, where you've come from, or what you've done in your life."**

Any time a newborn child is brought home from the hospital, friends and family start to speculate. Who does he or she look like? We all play that game with our children and grandchildren. But 2000 years ago, when a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed there were no cameras to record the birth of a baby. When Quirinius was governor of Syria, an imperial edict took the young family of a carpenter named Joseph and his future wife, a very pregnant Mary, away from family and friends.

They journeyed to a little town called Bethlehem, about 80 miles south of Nazareth. If the phone had been invented, Joseph might have called ahead for reservations. If the internet had been around, he might have checked out the likelihood of finding a room. As it was when they arrived there was no room for them in the inn. Finally, an inn keeper offered them his stable. It was hardly ideal. But it would work so there they were in a stable with all the animal smells and sights and sounds, the baby Jesus was born. In the fields nearby there were shepherds who were watching their sheep. As the sheep settled down, they would have expected the night to slowly slip by like a thousand nights before.

But this night would be different. Special. Unique in all of history. The Bible says: **"An angel appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them."**

We who live in a world where technology can turn midnight into midday cannot fully understand, just how dark, dark can be. We who can have light at the flick of a switch cannot comprehend the blackness of the shepherd's night.

One moment the sky was dark. The next moment the sky was bright...reflecting the glory of God. The shepherds were no Magi. They had not studied the night skies. But they knew what they were seeing was not normal. Angels show up for a reason. We do not know what they were thinking. But we do know they were afraid. The angel spoke: **"Fear not, I bring you good tidings of a great joy. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."**

The angel didn't wait for the shepherds to speak. He went on. **"This is how you will know Him. You will find him bundled in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Suddenly the entire sky was filled with light... angels were singing "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to mankind."**

Having sung their song, the angels went back into heaven. The light was gone. The shepherds found themselves standing in the darkness, in the middle of the field. The shepherds didn't argue about the "reality" of what they had seen and heard. They didn't compare notes. They didn't set up a congressional fact-finding committee. They turned to each other and said, **"Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened."**

This birth in Bethlehem is the hinge point of history. True man and true God, Born into the world. Born into human history to change everything. Because he was born, death no longer has the final victory.

J. Sidlow Baxter in "Awake My Heart" writes: **"Separate Christmas Day from Good Friday, and Christmas is doomed... doomed to decay into a merely sentimental or superstitious or sensuous "eat-drink-be-merry" festivity of December."**

Is that what Christmas has become? It has for a lot of people. Bethlehem and Golgotha, the Manger and the Cross, the birth and the death must always be seen together if the real Christmas is to survive.

"For the son of man came to give His life as a ransom for many."

In 1865 an Episcopal preacher by the name of Philip Brooks visited the fields of Bethlehem. Then like the shepherds, he went and worshiped God's Son. Later remembering what he had seen. Brooks wrote;

**"O Little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie:
above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by
yet in thy dark streets shineth, the ever lasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.**

**O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today
We hear the Christmas angels their great glad tidings tell
Oh, come to us, Abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel."**

Did you hear those words? "Cast out our sin..." That's why the angel proclaimed... **"I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all people, a Savior has been born..."** Do you hear the promise made to Joseph months before... **"do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife... she will give birth to a son and you shall give him the name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins."**

The greatest need in our nation, in our world is peace and reconciliation. That's why the angel proclaimed that "peace on earth" would come to humanity through this child in a manger in Bethlehem.

God saw our helplessness. He knew our faults. He knew our flaws and our failings. He came himself to rescue us from Satan and from ourselves. When God wanted to defeat sin, his ultimate weapon was the sacrifice of his own son, Jesus.

On Christmas, just over 2000 years ago the birth of a tiny baby in an obscure village in the Middle East was God's supreme triumph of good over evil.

Jesus never sinned. When Jesus died on the cross God transferred all of our broken commandments, all our sin to Him. Then in the mystery of God's grace He transfers to all who believe and trust in Jesus, His holiness. When Jesus rose from death on the third day, he proved Himself the Savior of the world. Our friendship with God is restored through faith in Jesus. With nail pierced hands He and He alone, beckons the lost world to a new and eternal life.

On this Christmas Eve the angel said: "**I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.**" It is why we celebrate Christmas.

On this Christmas Eve the angel said: "**for unto us is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord.**" Our friendship with God is restored through Jesus. We can hear the voice of God saying: "I love you. I accept you. I forgave you at the cross."