Rediscover Christmas

## (Luke 1:30-45)

Welcome. On behalf of my entire family, I want to wish all of you a Merry Christmas. It’s such a wonderful time of year and I consider it a great privilege to be able to celebrate with all of you the miracle of God. This child, the Christ, who became one of us in the form of this little baby named Immanuel, God with us. And so, I thank you for joining us today as we celebrate this Christmas week remembering the greatest gift that has ever been given to humanity.

The Bible says it this way in Romans chapter 6, verse 23,

“The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

And that is such good news, that’s worth clapping for, that’s worth shouting about, and so yes, we want to celebrate that. But as we are listening to songs about joy and peace and goodwill toward all men, maybe you’re looking at your life and you realize that your circumstances are really very different.

Well, today we want to Rediscover Christmas, because for some of you, and for many people in our community, this is an extremely difficult time of year. There can be many reasons, but I think the biggest reason is that Christmas is a family holiday, and yet we live in a time when there are more broken families than ever. And so, many of us are experiencing loneliness and isolation, separation and brokenness, and so your Christmas may be so much different from someone else’s. But it’s into that context that Jesus came, the Bible says it this way,

“The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:16).

And so, it’s important that we Rediscover Christmas, understanding that Jesus came to bring light to people living in darkness, giving hope to the hopeless, and joy to those who are grieving.

You see, Jesus is very practical, and so he didn’t come for those who are doing well, but he came for those who are poor, for those who are hurting, whose hearts are broken and who are in bondage. In other words, Christmas isn’t just for those who have it all together, it’s not just for the Norman Rockwell picture perfect family, but it’s for those whom God is about to make their life better, because he’s going to step into their situation giving them the hope of change and new life. This is why the words of the prophet Isaiah are so significant, he said,

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

This promise that this child, the son, this one whom we call Jesus, is Immanuel, God with us, is what separates Christianity from other religions of the world. Their focus is on being with God, finding God through some form of meditation or maybe by doing something so that they can achieve a higher level of enlightenment. But Christianity is different because we discover that God came down to be with us, and so we’re not just going to be with him, but he says, “I’m going to be with you.” Not only that, but he promises,

“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Now, God’s presence with you doesn’t mean that you won’t have any problems or challenges in this season, but his peace and his power will enable you to rise above those problems. In other words, when God is with you, you have power because you have his favor, and when you’re with God, you have peace. That’s why when the Angels came announcing the birth of Jesus they said,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

And so, his presence helps you to overcome the challenges of life, but just because you’re a follower of Christ, it doesn’t mean that you’re guaranteed a wrinkle free life. It’s his peace that helps us along the journey of life, but we’re not guaranteed a life without valleys. We’re promised that we’ll never walk through those valleys alone, because the Lord is my shepherd, he is Immanuel, God with us. And so, he empowers us to overcome difficult seasons in life because of his presence, and the Bible says,

“In his presence is fullness of joy” (Psalm 16:11, NKJV).

And so, in this season you may struggle with loneliness, separation, and isolation, and even though deep inside you may ache for answers, in his presence is the fullness of joy.

In Genesis chapter 35, Jacob was learning to obey the Lord, and he was beginning to walk with God by faith. He and his family had returned to the place called Bethel, the place where he had encountered the presence of God and seen the angels ascending and descending from heaven in a dream. And now he experienced another encounter with God, in verse 9 he was given a new name, and the covenant promises were reaffirmed. After building an altar and worshiping God there, the Bible says that Jacob and his family “moved on from Bethel”. Verse 16 says,

“While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth…” (Genesis 35:16-17).

Now, I’m not sure why this statement is repeated, it seems to be unnecessary because I’ve seen childbirth, and it has always been with great difficulty. But maybe it’s repeated here to emphasize the fact that this was not just a normal delivery. In fact, things were not going well, this had become a matter of life and death, Rachel was having great difficulty, and the midwife said to her,

“Don't be afraid, for you have another son." As she breathed her last — for she was dying — she named her son Ben-Oni…” (Genesis 35:17-18).

And so, in that moment Rachel names her son what is very true for her, and that is that this is Ben-Oni. It’s actually two words, Ben meaning son, and Oni which means trouble or sorrow, and it certainly understandable that she would feel that way. As she breathed her last, she named her son, the son of my sorrow, because she was in pain, and she was bleeding to death.

However, Rachel wasn’t the only one grieving, because at that moment Jacob lost the only woman that he has ever really loved. This was the bride that he had worked 14 years to obtain, and so he is hurting like crazy, but when she wanted to name the boy, “Son of my sorrow,” the Bible says,

“His father named him Benjamin” (Genesis 35:18).

Jacob understood that what was true in this moment wouldn’t be forever, and so in the middle of his pain, in the middle of his loss, he decided to name his son, not according to the love, the hope and the dreams he was about to bury, but about what was born out of what he buried.

You see, Jacob had some experience in renaming, and so when Rachel said this is the son of my sorrow, he says no we’re going to call him something else. He took what was born out of this horrible and devastating situation and he named his son something different. He said, “We’re going to call him Benjamin” which means son of my right hand. And the right hand is the hand of blessing, it’s the hand of authority, and so Jacob refused to accept what others would call sorrow and instead called him a blessing.

I think this is so powerful because many of us have had to bury a lot of things this year. For some of you it may have been something as painful as a funeral, for others of you maybe it was your dreams, your plans, or the way that you thought you were going to do something. But no matter what it was, the truth of the matter is that you don’t get to choose what comes into your life, but you do get to choose what you do with it. In other words, you get to choose what you call it, and so what may be true about you right now, doesn’t have to be true about you later, and you can name it something else because God’s power is so much bigger than your past.

I believe this is important, but what really caught my attention about this text in verse 19, was not that “Rachel died and was buried.” It wasn’t what Jacob buried, but it was the fact that she was buried,

“On the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)” (Genesis 35:19).

Rachel, the woman that Jacob loved, was buried just outside of Bethlehem. And this is so powerful because we’re uncovering prophetic significance. The Bible says in Micah chapter 5,

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2).

“Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites” (Micah 5:3).

The question I want you to consider as we Rediscover Christmas is what is the significance of Bethlehem?

For many of us we’ve got this Christmas card picture of Bethlehem with candy canes and gumdrops ingrained in our minds. Some of you even now may be thinking or even humming “O Little town of Bethlehem”, but I want to try to help you get it in the proper perspective. Because Bethlehem wasn’t where Mary was planning to give birth to the Messiah, she just happened to be there when her water broke, and so for her this was inconvenient. For Joseph and Mary, the birth of Jesus came at the worst possible time, they were only in Bethlehem because of the census, and so I wonder how many of you recognize that what may seem to be a great inconvenience, may actually be the place where God gives you the greatest opportunity?

What often happens to us on the journey of life is that along the way we lose some things, and yet we fail to recognize what God is doing, and so the temptation for us is to identify with what we lost instead of what we gained. That’s what I love about the story of Jacob, because for him Bethlehem was the place where Rachel died, the place the love of his life was buried, but instead of naming his son in the sorrow of what he lost in that moment, he renamed his son Benjamin, the son of my right hand, the hand of blessing. And so, he didn’t name him after what he had lost, but after what he had gained.

This week I want to encourage you to Rediscover Christmas, making a conscious decision to reflect on what you have gained, remembering that the angel said,

“You are to give him the name Jesus” (Luke 1:31).

You see, it was Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, he came from the place where Rachel was buried, because Joseph went “to Bethlehem the town of David,” according to the decree of Caesar Augustus,

“To Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David” (Luke 2:4).

And so, Bethlehem is the same place where that boy came from who took down that giant with a rock. Bethlehem is the birthplace of David, the birthplace of Jesus, the son of David, and that’s why Micah said,

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah…out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel” (Micah 5:2).

It was out of that little place, that little town of Bethlehem, where Rachel died giving birth to her baby. And so, out of Bethlehem came Jacob’s greatest pain, and yet out of Bethlehem came God’s greatest purpose. In the very same place, there was this tension, because God said, “Out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel.”

Mary had to believe that; she had to believe that she had the favor of God; she had to believe that God was fulfilling his purpose in her life. And so, when the angel came to her and said,

"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:30-33).

Mary had to believe in the midst of this tension, Mary had to choose to believe that what was going to be born was so much greater than what was buried.

This was a difficult thing because so often all we can think about is what we buried and we don’t yet know what is going to be born, but that’s what I love about Jacob’s response. Jacob was able to focus because he knew that God had changed his name, he knew that God had said to him,

“Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel” (Genesis 35:10).

And so, he decided to change the name of his son that was born in pain, because he believed his son was born for a purpose. Jacob refused to have his son identified by the place where he was just passing through, he renamed Ben-Oni, that which was born in pain, refusing to have him defined by the struggle and he wouldn’t allow it to keep him from his destiny.

Jacob knew the promise of God, he knew that it was from his descendants that would come the ruler of Israel, just as Balaam prophesied to Balak,

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17).

And so, in spite of the difficulty, in spite of literally walking through the valley of the shadow of death, Jacob recognized that it was only a shadow, and that God still had something waiting on the other side. And so, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, but there was still one to come, a descendent promised, one who will rise out of Israel.

Which brings us back to Mary who asked the angel,

“How will this be since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34).

And I want to encourage you, whatever you are walking through in this season of Advent, keep walking by faith, walking towards that blessed Christmas morning, don’t let your circumstances, don’t let your pain define you, but Rediscover Christmas. In verse 35, the angel answered,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:35-37).

And so, it’s an amazing contrast, because at the same time that Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth had discovered that she was pregnant and had been in seclusion for five months. And so, we’ve got Elizabeth who is too old to have children, and Mary who is too young to have children. Elizabeth who is past the point of having children, and Mary who is a virgin and isn’t ready for this yet.

That’s the context with which John and Jesus come into the world, because nothing is impossible with God. And the Bible says that God brings these two women together to encourage one another. “At that time” verse 39 says,

“Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth” (Luke 1:39).

And so, the first thing Mary did when she found out that she was pregnant with the Son of God was go to be with someone else who was carrying something significant. She traveled about 50 miles to get to Elizabeth’s house and the Bible says,

“When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored?” (Luke 1:40-43).

Honestly, this is something that I have never noticed before, but it is something that I have thought about a lot over the past several weeks. You know, why is this church so favored, why have we been so blessed? And Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, ask this question,

“Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43).

Not only did Elizabeth recognize the favor of God, but the baby inside of her knew. The baby, John the Baptist, who came to prepare the way for the Lord, knew that he was in the presence of the Son of God, the Messiah, who would save his people from their sins. And so, even in his mother’s womb, John recognizes the presence of Jesus. We know that because the Bible says in verse 44, that Elizabeth said,

“As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:44).

Even while he was in the womb, John leaped for joy in the presence of Jesus, because he recognized that God’s purpose was working in his life. And so, even in the womb, even on the inside, he’s experiencing something that he just can’t wait to experience on the outside. John is jumping and kicking, recognizing that the kingdom of heaven is near. He leaped for joy because this is the one who knew him before he was formed in his mother’s womb.

As I thought about John rejoicing in the presence of God and I was reminded of David when he brought the ark back to Jerusalem. When Luke said that the baby leaped with joy, he was echoing David’s experience in second Samuel chapter six. The Bible says, as they brought the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David they were rejoicing, worshiping in the presence of God and,

“When those who were carrying the ark of the Lord had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf” (2 Samuel 6:12-13).

And so, every time they took 6 steps, they stopped and gave a sacrifice of praise. They offered a sacrifice, and watch what David does, the Bible says,

“David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the Lord with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets” (2 Samuel 6:14-15).

David leaped for joy because he had the favor of God, he danced before the Lord with all of his might, because he got the presence of God back. The favor of God was coming into his house, the provision of God was working in his house, and he rejoiced.

In the same way, when Mary arrived, John knew that he was in the presence of God, and even though he was in his mother’s womb he leaped for joy. He couldn’t see anything, but he sensed his purpose was near, and it’s in those moments when you can’t see it, you can’t even feel it, but I want to encourage you to believe it by faith. The apostle Paul said in Ephesians,

“We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

I pray that you can sense that, that you can feel that, and believe that God has a plan and a purpose for your life. I want you to get ready to celebrate, ready to rejoice, ready to leap with joy, because you’ve got to believe just like John believed in the womb, that in every season of your life, God has plans prepared in advance for you to do.

And so, you’ve got to believe what Elizabeth said in verse 45,

“Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (Luke 1:45).

What Elizabeth told Mary is the same thing that God is telling you today. Blessed is the one who believes what the Lord said, and I believe there are some of you today that need to get back in his presence so that you can get your joy back. This may be a difficult season, you may not feel like doing it, but you’ve got to believe that your joy doesn’t depend on what’s happening around you. God has anointed you, the Bible says,

“Therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy" (Hebrews 1:9).

And so, you can’t change your circumstances, but when you choose to rejoice, it’s not an emotion, it’s a decision. And when you choose to be joyful in spite of your situation, you are making a conscious decision to worship God, to celebrate what God is doing, to rejoice in what God has done, celebrating who he is and who you are in Christ.

There may be some of you who look at your life, you look at your situation or circumstances, and it looks to you like the son of my sorrow. But what is true at this time, in that moment, doesn’t have to be true in the future, because you can rename it. You can call it a blessing, you can say you are Benjamin, you are the son of my right hand. And what others may call a curse, you choose to call a blessing, because you know how good your God is.

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

And so, you can’t always choose what comes into your life, but you can choose what you call it, because there is a name above every name, and that the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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