

The Christmas Message

by Carter Conlon

This sermon reflects on the first Christmas, drawing parallels to the challenges faced in society today. It emphasizes the message of God's willingness to dwell within us, despite our weaknesses and struggles, offering forgiveness, transformation, and a new life. The speaker invites individuals to open their hearts to Jesus Christ, experience His love, joy, and peace, and embark on a journey of faith and renewal.

Scripture: John 1:11, John 1:12, Luke 2:10, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Psalm 40:2, Romans 10:9, Ephesians 2:8, Isaiah 43:1, Revelation 3:20

Topics: "God's Presence in Our Struggles", "Embracing Transformation through Christ"

Description

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Transcript

Christmas time. I want to talk to you for just a couple of minutes. Just give me about 10 minutes.

The very first Christmas was a difficult day, perhaps somewhat similar to what you and I are experiencing today. There was a dominant culture called Rome that had come into the Holy Land, come into the place where God's people were supposed to be blessed of God and become the blessing that God intended them to be. And this dominant culture came in and started to ridicule the people of God and to ridicule their beliefs and to have them believe that somehow they and the Word of God that they represented could be subjected to this power.

And in order to do that, there was a lot of things that were happening. One of them was that one of the rulers decided that all of the world should be counted, the world as they knew it in their day, the world that they had conquered, for the purposes of knowing where the people were and who they were and ultimately to tax them as well. It was a hard time.

And maybe you're in a hard time. Maybe we are as a society in a hard time again today. And in this difficult time, it can happen that we build walls around ourselves and we really just try to survive.

And that's what a lot of people in that society were trying to do. The people in the inn in Bethlehem had somehow, I think, forgotten that they were God's people and they had forgotten that they were supposed

to be blessed of God and be a blessing of God to the whole world. And suddenly one day, God Himself in the womb of His mother Mary shows up at the door knocking, asking for entrance to where His own people were.

You know, the Book of John, the Apostle John says, He came to His own and His own didn't receive Him. But to as many as did receive Him, He gave them the power to become the children of God, the sons of God or daughters of God. He gave them power to whoever opened the door to Him.

He gave them power. And isn't it sad that sometimes God can come knocking on the door of your heart? Maybe He's knocking on the door of your heart today. You're here.

You don't even know why you're here. You feel it's an annual pilgrimage you have to make to the house of God. Your family invites you.

You feel it's maybe the cultural thing to do. And you suddenly feel strangely warmed as if somebody is actually knocking on the door of your heart. And the question is, do you open that door or do you say, look, I'm just busy.

I've got no room for this. I don't mind religion once a year or twice, maybe, but I just don't have any room for it. You say, I've got things on the go.

I've got things I've got to do. And God knows I'm just trying to survive. I'm just trying to get through life.

And religion itself even can actually cause us to build walls around ourselves where we pretend that everything is good when it's not good. Pretend we're happy when we're not happy. Pretend that we have everything under control when we don't.

Sometimes the walls are to shut out people so they don't see who we really are. We don't really have to share that we are struggling, that maybe we don't have it all together. And isn't it a tragedy that the Son of God had to go outside of where people had built walls around themselves to get the best of the day as they saw it.

And he had to go to people who didn't have any walls. And they were shepherds out in the field. And realistically, shepherds in those days, if you couldn't get a job, essentially you became a shepherd.

But it was in the open, may I put it that way. If they were discouraged, they were discouraged in the open. There was nothing to hide.

There was no door to lock. There was no inn where there was no room. They basically were just there.

And God was able to come and meet with them. Can you imagine being there on that particular night and suddenly an angel appears in the heavens and he says, don't be afraid. I bring you good tidings of great joy to all people.

I bring you good news. And this good news should bring great joy into your heart. And this good news is for all people, not just some people, not just the strong people, not just the wealthy people, not just the ones who have it all together, not just for people who have degrees on their walls.

It's for all people, everyone born into this world. It's good news and that's what it should be to you today. Good news.

And it should ultimately bring great joy into your heart. Great joy. In other words, the joy that this world knows nothing is greater than anything that this world can produce.

The joys of this world are temporary. You go to any show on Broadway. This is not a show by the way, but you go to any show on Broadway and they always finish on a high note and everybody gets up and everybody's happy.

But I've been out on the street when they come out and they're not happy when they come out. They walk in miserable, looking for joy. They receive like a momentary euphoric joy.

Then they come out the same person that they went in as. This is not the joy that the angel was speaking about. This was a joy the world doesn't know anything about.

This is an internal, an internal joy that only God can put there. In the Old Testament, he promised to those who would turn to him, he said, I'll give you a new mind. I'll give you a new heart and a new spirit.

King David once said, I was so down, I couldn't get back up, but God picked me up out of the place I was sinking in. He put me on a rock. In other words, he set me on a solid footing and he gave me a new song to sing.

He said, a song that people will see it long before they hear it and they will begin to fear and they will turn to God. Isn't that amazing? That's the song that God gives. That's the joy that God gives.

It's an inexplicable joy. It's past all the things that we understand joy to be in this world. Good news, great joy, all people.

Just remember those three things. If you remember nothing else, good news, great joy, all people, even you, no matter where you are, what you're doing, how deep your dungeon might be, how despairing your heart and your mind might be, how much of a failure you think that you've made of life, whatever, it doesn't matter. This message is for you.

And it's a message that brings great joy. He says, for this is, there is born to you this day in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord. Now this is amazing.

And the Bible says it's suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace and goodwill towards men. This is the way my mind works. I envision there's got to be thousands of angels, thousands, as many as the stars in the sky.

And they're all leaning on the canopy as it is that separates heaven from the earth or eternity from time. And suddenly there's just so many leaning. They just break through this canopy and all they know to do when they break through and start praising God, glory to God in the highest glory to God in the highest and on earth peace.

In other words, and goodwill towards men. In other words, the hand of God has come down to you. Not to harm you, not to point at you and judge you, not to pound you into the pavement, but the hand of God has come down with a willingness to have a nail put through it for your sake.

Glory to God. You know, in the book of Hebrews in the new Testament, this love that God has for you, the Bible says it's a mystery. The angels desire to understand, isn't it something they don't fully get it because they see the glory of God in heaven.

They see the pureness, the beauty of God, and they see us almost the complete opposite to who God is. And yet his affection is upon you. Do you understand that? His thoughts are towards you.

His heart is for you and his hand has come to you. And this shall be a sign. They said, you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

You'll find a baby and he's wrapped in rags. Really swaddling cloths were just rags. They were discarded pieces of cloth that really poor people would take and wrap the children.

And so they, when they were born, so they wouldn't be cold. This is the sign. You will find a baby wrapped in rags, lying in a manger.

You know, can you imagine being them, the shepherds and say, this is the sign God, all powerful God, God that is more powerful than a hundred million nuclear bombs put together in one place and detonated. God has much more power. We can't even begin to describe the power of God, the majesty of God, the glory of God, the ability of God.

He can think a universe into existence. He doesn't even have to speak. He can raise the dead.

He can walk on water. He can calm the storm. He can feed thousands of people with just a little boy's lunch, the things that God can do.

And yet he comes down in a baby, in the form of a baby into the human race. And this is supposed to be our sign. So what is the sign? Why is that such a good thing? Could he not come as a 15-foot bronze warrior? Could he not come with an entourage? Could he not come with chariots and horses? Could he not come with trumpeters and a display of power? Instead of that, he comes to the world as the weakest among us.

There's nothing weaker than a baby. A baby can't feed himself or herself. A baby can't change themself.

A baby can't walk. A baby has to be carried. God, God has to be carried.

God has to learn to speak in human form. God has to have his diaper changed. For real.

He's the son of God. But it was his choice. And why? Here's what I believe the sign is.

It was God saying to you and to me, I'm not offended by your weakness. I'm not offended by your struggles. I'm not offended by your mess.

I'm not offended when you can't walk. I'm not offended when you can't feed yourself. I'm not offended.

I am willing to come and dwell inside of you. And that's what the Bible tells us. When we open our hearts to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, when we acknowledge that we can't save ourselves, that he had to come and die on a cross to pay the price for the wrong that we had done.

When we open our heart to his sacrifice, the Bible says that he calms and actually takes up his residence inside our earthly bodies by his Holy Spirit. And he begins to carry us when we can't walk. And he feeds us when we can't feed ourselves.

And he clothes us, gives us new clothing when we feel full of shame for the things we are or have done. He changes us from the inside out. And it's his way of saying, I don't care how weak you are.

I'm not offended by you. Praise be to God. This is the sign.

That's what makes it good news of great joy to all people. The message is not for the strong. It's not for those who have it all together.

It's not for people who have never made mistakes. It's not for people who read their Bibles 15 hours a day or pray 25 hours a week. It's for those who know that without God, I'm nothing.

Without God, I'm going nowhere. Without God, I can't even get up. Without God.

And my life is just a pile of rags. I tried to be a good husband. I tried to be a friend.

I tried to tell the truth. I tried to be a good father, a mother. I tried to be the person that I felt that I should be, but I failed.

And my life is just a pile of rags. And God says, well, let me wrap myself in the rags of your life. Let me come and dwell inside of you and wrap myself in the rags of all your mistakes and all your failures and all your struggles and all your trials.

And let me be God to you. And this shall be the sign. You see, just as the baby was assigned to the shepherds, we now become assigned to our generation when we say, let me tell you what God has done for me.

Let me tell you the rags of my life. He came and by his Holy Spirit and he took up residency inside this body and he wrapped himself in the rags of my failure, the rags of my pride, the rags of my stupidity. He wrapped himself in the rags of my life.

And he began to change me from the inside out. He began to clean up my mess and he began to feed me what I need to eat. He began to help me to walk.

And every time I fell, he picked me up again and he transformed my life. This is true. This is not just a Christmas story.

This is true. This message caused angels to break through the canopy of heaven. This message came to the night shift, may I say.

It didn't come to the strong. It didn't come to those who had it all together or were using their power and influence for their own good. It came to people who knew and were open and understood that they needed a savior.

And so now the choice is yours. And the choice was mine back in 1978. I remember being told this truth and I remember thinking, could this be true? Is this possible? Can I be forgiven? I don't like what I am.

I don't like the kind of person I've become. And I have nothing to offer God. I remember going to an altar in the church one time and I said, God, I have nothing.

I got a bad temper if you need that. But I have nothing. I have no speaking ability.

I'm not really kind. I really don't care about people. I don't like myself even.

I have nothing, nothing. And so I went in 1978 and I gave Jesus Christ my life. I said, if this is true, God, if this is true, then I open my heart and I ask you to come in and be my Lord and savior.

I didn't feel anything. Some people think you have to hear angels and trumpets. I didn't feel a thing, nothing.

I was working. I went to work. I was a police officer.

I worked my shift. I didn't feel a thing. But the next morning as God lives, as God lives, I got up and I put my feet on the floor out of my bed and I knew something had happened to me.

I felt different inside. Good news. Great joy to all people.

God had come into this frail vessel, taken up residence and wrapped himself once again in rags, me. And little by little over the years, it didn't all happen overnight, but over the years, the Bible says, if anyone is in Christ, he becomes or she becomes a new creation. The old things in your life pass away.

They lose their power source. They lose their ability to govern you, your present and your future and all things become new. So little by little, line by line, step by step, the changes began to come into my life and are still happening today.

You asked me how I know he lives. He lives in me. There's no other way this could be happening in my life.

It covers your shame, forgives your failure, gives you power over your struggles. This is who God is. And so this morning, Christmas 2019, one more time, he knocks, knocks on your door and yours and yours and yours said, do you have room for me? Can I come into you? Can I sit down with you? Can I begin to be the best friend you've ever known ever? Can I be God to you? I'm not, I'm not going to ask you to do anything other than just let me be God in you.

I'll feed you. I'll lift you and I'll lead you. This is great news, good news, great joy to you.

Father, I thank you God with all my heart for men and women and young people that are gathered here in this sanctuary and listening to this great, great song and gospel presentation online. Oh God, I pray that you would give each of us the courage to acknowledge our need of you. Enough games, enough closing the door, enough pretending everything is okay.

Enough trying to make it through on our own when you have something so much better for each of us. I'm asking you Lord Jesus Christ to save men and women and young people in this sanctuary today. I'm asking my God that you would become God to them in a way Lord that they've never known before, that when they leave this sanctuary they don't have to leave their joy here as they do all over Broadway.

I can take this joy home. I'm going to ask if you're here today and you want to give your life to Jesus Christ and you say, well pastor, I don't get it all but I feel it. I feel that what you're saying is true or at least I just hope what you're saying is true.

That was my prayer. Oh God, I hope this is true. But he heard me and if it is, I want it.

If it is, like who wouldn't want this to be free from my sin, to be in back in relationship with God, to become a new creation, to become the person Lord that you designed me to be, not that I ended up becoming. If

that's you today and you want to give your life to Jesus Christ, would you join me and just raise your hand wherever you are. God bless you all over the sanctuary.

Just raise your hand in the balcony. Join those. There's many.

Raise your hand. Go ahead. Go ahead.

Now we're going to stand up in just a moment for everybody who raised your hand. I'm going to ask you to come and meet me right here. Just come and meet me and I'm going to lead you in a prayer that will change the rest of your life.

And if you've come with your family, bring your family with you. If you've come with a friend, bring your friend with you. I'm going to even ask that you turn to the person beside you in just a moment when we stand and say, if you want to go, I'll go with you.

Okay. You might not even know who that person is, but the invitation just to not have to get up and go alone might make an eternal difference in that person's life. We're not playing games here.

This is about eternity. This is about God. I'm going to ask you to stand.

And when we do turn to the person beside you and ask them if they want to go. And if your family, if, if your wife is here, your, your children, your, your husband, your cousin, your aunt, your uncle, whoever it is to say, I'm, I'm going to go. Would you come with me? I'll just see.

I just see so many new faces here. And this is going to be the best day of the rest of your life. The beginning of a journey with God.

Now it's hard to understand these things, but when you pray this prayer, there's a book in heaven called the book of life. And God's word says, he will actually write your name in that book. You'll be born again by the spirit of God forgiven for the wrong that you've done and starting a journey of a brand new life in God.

People are still coming. God bless you. Thank you so much.

Praise God. Just keep coming. Thank you, Lord.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord.

Thank you, Lord. One day, one day we're going to be together at the throne of God. You're going to be so thankful.

You didn't quit that. You kept going. You let God be God in your life.

I'm going to lead you in a prayer. And I'm going to ask you to just make this prayer your own. I'm only praying it to help you.

It's not any kind of a mystical formula or anything like that. I'm just helping you to pray. So say these words with me, Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me.

You love me so much that you came to get me when I couldn't get back to you. I need you, Jesus. I need your forgiveness.

I need your love. I need your strength. I need your power.

I surrender my life to you. All the rest of my life, I give it to you and I don't want it back. I want the new life, the one that you have for me.

I want this joy that the angel spoke about. I want the peace that the angel sang about. I want to walk with you, Jesus.

And thank you for picking me up, helping me and not being ashamed of me. I'm not ashamed of you, Lord. I love you because you first loved me.

From this day forward, I confess with my mouth that you are the son of God. You died in my place and I've opened my heart to you. And because I did, I am now a child of God forever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever.

Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

Glory, glory, glory, glory, glory, glory.

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