

Christmas 2015

What Is Christmas All About?

Luke 2:14

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December 24, 2015

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Introduction

Several years ago RBC Ministries, the producers of *Our Daily Bread*, published a tract titled, “What Is Christmas All About?” I would like to share that with you tonight.

The First World War began in August 1914. It was brutal, bloody, four-year-long war that affected the lives of millions of people. The embattled sides settled into a system of trench warfare based on attrition, where the last man standing “won.”

A well-known story is told that on Christmas Day, 1914, a soldier popped his head over the top of his trench and looked across no man’s land. Rather than throw a few hand grenades across the field of death, he instead tossed couple of tins of corned beef into his enemy’s trench, knowing that both sides of the war lacked most of life’s basic essentials and were nearly always hungry. Within a minute or so, a dull thud sounded in the soil next to him. What was it? A hand grenade? No. It was the arrival of a packet of coffee and some candy.

Cautiously, men began to emerge from the relative safety of their mud coffins. Within a short while jokes were being translated from German into English and vice versa, food was pooled together for a Christmas dinner, cards appeared on makeshift tables and, finally, a game of soccer broke out between the two warring armies, amid shouts of delight and good humored rivalry. The day ended with handshakes, smiles, and even prayers for each other.

On December 26, the commanders on both sides outlawed any repetition of this event under pain of death, and the

¹ “What Is Christmas All About?” RBC Ministries.

slaughter began in earnest. The ray of hope disappeared, and most of the participants would be dead within a year.

This remarkable episode in military history is a marvelous story of kindness and goodwill in a terrible situation.

But why did this happen, and why on Christmas Day? Does this story tell us all we need to know? Are hope in the midst of darkness and the triumph of the human spirit the sum total of the meaning of Christmas? And today, where does that view of Christmas fit in with presents, war, Christmas trees, terrorism, feasting, depression, old movies, and so on?

Lesson

This evening I would like to answer the question, “What is Christmas all about?”

I. Different Views

If you were to ask people about the meaning of Christmas, many would sum it up in ways similar to the story above. Christmas is about being kind and caring, about doing good and looking out for each other, and about setting aside our differences for a while.

The Bible, however, describes the meaning of Christmas in an entirely different way. It tells the story of Jesus coming into the world. Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was born, the event was announced as a time of “peace on earth, goodwill toward men” – which sounds like the message of those trenches! So how do the two ideas of peace and goodwill meet, and what relevance, if any, do they have for us today?

II. Broken Relationships

To begin with, peace and goodwill are the hallmarks of friendship. But friendship is a relationship, and when friends have a falling out, that relationship is broken. What once was a relationship of trust can become a relationship of hostility. Formerly, friends, but now two sides at war – enemies.

How can that broken relationship be restored? In the case of the First World War, one side was the aggressor and the other side needed to convince them by means of force that what they had done was wrong and must not be repeated. The aggressors, of course, believed they had a right to pursue their own interests. This resulted in a deadlock and the war continued until one side finally surrendered and peace was restored.

That peace, however, lasted only 20 years before the whole thing started again. Why? To put it simply, the “relationship” had not been put back to what it had once been. All that had happened was that one side managed to subdue the other for 20 years. Nothing had really changed at the root of the issue, so the relationship remained broken.

This reflects a reality at the deepest part of our being. People (let’s be brutally honest) are deeply selfish and therefore want the best for themselves first and foremost. With this “default” position, the pursuit of self-interest will inevitably result in conflict. Moreover, it will always produce a cycle of conflict, continually fed by selfish ambition.

III. Restoration Needed

The Bible tells us that, long before the birth of Jesus Christ, this selfishness first showed itself when Adam and Eve (the first people) decided to disobey God who had created

them and “go it alone.” Their strong desire to live on their own terms broke the relationship with God and, in the words of the Bible, they “died.” This was not an immediate physical death, but an inevitable certainty of death brought on by time, decay, and the effects of wrongdoing (which the Bible calls sin). So, having been made in God’s image and destined to enjoy the friendship of God forever, Adam and Eve, through selfish rebellion, suddenly became dying creatures. The human race was now destined to suffer the effects of being outside the constant protection and friendship of our Creator.

Additionally, since God had given Adam and Eve authority over the earth, their poor decisions affected both their own personal lives, their descendants, and the world itself. Today, the same kinds of choices that ruined their perfect relationship with God so long ago continues to be repeated by all of us in our own ways – with similarly destructive consequences.

At this point you might think that, since it was we who severed friendship with God, then it must surely be our job to make things right – to make amends. We expect this in our day-to-day life. The one at fault must put things right.

But we have a dilemma. How can flawed creatures like us, with all of our selfish desire, possibly put right a problem with the infinite Creator God? How can mere mortals repair all of the things we have done to cause that relationship to be broken?

It’s impossible.

IV. Jesus Arrives

Enter Christmas. Or more precisely, enter Jesus at Christmas time. Christmas is the beginning of God’s answer to this problem.

God knows that we cannot make peace with him – no matter how hard we try. Put another way, the only way to restore the friendship is to make it as if we had never broken it in the first place. Again, this is impossible for us to accomplish.

So God sent his Son to do the job instead. In the familiar Christmas story, angels appeared to shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth and declared, "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men." This is not the peace that ends all wars between nations and individuals. It is the peace that means people and God no longer need to be separated from each other. It is an offer of true peace that lasts forever. God has offered the solution to our human problem – to our sin – because we can never fix it ourselves. Jesus entering the world is like the first expression of love, concern, and compassion sent from that muddy trench on Christmas Day, 1914. But Jesus went even further.

By entering the world as a helpless baby, Jesus, God's Son, stepped into a messed-up world to give everyone the chance to get right with God – to get back into the relationship that was broken when people decided to go it alone. Rather than us having to try to claw our way back into God's favor, God freely offered the way back by stepping down to our level in order to lift us back to himself.

The arrival of Jesus into the world brought with it his plan to live a perfect life on earth, to show us the way back to God the Father, and ultimately to die in order to pay the price for all of our sin, selfishness, pride, and wrongdoing. He made the way for the trenches of our failure to be wiped away and for all those who are dying to live again – forever.

That is what Christians celebrate at Christmas: The arrival of real peace on earth and the goodwill of God himself toward a people that was, by its own deliberate choice, his enemy. The arrival of Jesus showed us that God still loves us and made a

way for us to get right again and live forever with him. For Christians, that goes so much further than festive meals, sharing presents, and hoping against hope that the world will somehow be a better place next year.

V. Peace Is Available

On Christmas Day, 1914, someone whose name has been lost to history decided to make the first move. That unknown soldier acted to restore a relationship horribly and bloodily broken by the trauma of the First World War. Others followed his example, and friendship and affection reigned for one day. It was more than most had believed possible.

For Christians, the true meaning of Christmas is that Jesus stepped down from the glory of heaven to become a man, endure all that living in the “mud and trenches” of a broken world could throw at him, and then pay the price for all the things that we have ever done wrong. The difference between his decision and that of the soldier in the trenches is that Jesus’ solution lasts forever, not merely for a single day.

Conclusion

The true message of Christmas then is that, because Jesus came to save people from their sins, all those who put their trust in him can be put right with God. We can enjoy a living, meaningful, and vibrant friendship with him, eventually culminating in everlasting life with him in heaven. Now that’s a gift to be celebrated!

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp
3. www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=FreddyFritz

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PRAYER:

Maybe you now understand for the first time your broken relationship with God and the incredible things he has done for you, and sincerely would like to put things right with him.

As with all broken relationships, we begin to restore them by admitting the problems we have caused and genuinely saying we are sorry. If we want to put right our relationship with God, then we need to tell him we are sorry for our wrong choices and rebellious self-interest and how grateful we are for all he has done to show his love for us. If you would like to do this, then you might want to use your words, or use a prayer like this:

Dear God,

I am deeply sorry for the ways in which I have tried to build my life without you, the very center of the universe. Thank you so much that you love me in spite of my sin. Thank you that you sent Jesus to die for the sake of my sin and to give me a relationship with you. Please help me to live for you with my whole life from this day forward. Amen.

If you really mean those words, then you have started on a journey with God. It's only the first step, and it won't always be an easy path. There are things you will continue to struggle with and fail at, but now you are not alone. He will help and guide you. When you are in a relationship with him you become a new person – not a perfect person, but a new and forgiven one. May God's blessing rest on you as you journey with God, beginning this Christmas Eve. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!