

Christmas 2024

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Preacher: James Tang

[0:00] But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish.! In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.

! Rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end on the throne of David and over his kingdom. To establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

[1:21] This is the word of the Lord. So Lord, we come to you now. As we open your word. Holy Spirit, would you cut to our hearts?

We yearn to hear from you. We rejoice because of you. But we come as broken people, hurting, in need of healing.

And while we know that you came to bring joy to the world, your kingdom is here, but already, but not yet.

And there is still pain. There is still suffering. There is still hurt. There is still grief. There is still darkness that surrounds us. For this morning we turn our eyes to the light.

Would your face shine upon us? In your name we pray. Amen. Please take a seat. You better watch out.

[2:28] You better not cry. I'm going to tell you why. Santa Claus is coming to town.

He's making a list. He's going to check it twice. And he's going to find out whether you're naughty or nice. He sees you when you're sleeping.

He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good. So be good for heaven's sake. You better watch out. You better not cry.

You better not pout. I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town. Santa Claus is coming to town. I wonder how much of contemporary culture and Christmassy things impacts the way we perceive Christmas.

I wonder how much our understanding of Santa impacts the way we see Jesus. I just wonder. Last week I talked a little bit about a quadrilateral.

[3:35] Does anyone remember what the name of the quadrilateral was? Angel Gabriel. The Wesleyan quadrilateral. I was talking a little bit about your theological method. What really impacted you to go on this journey of faith?

What has affected your approach to God? Bonus points for those who even remember what they were. What was the first one? Scripture. Scripture. Scripture.

This book impacts and tells you a little bit about your knowledge of God. What else? Reason.

Reason. Reason. That's another one. Another one? Tradition.

Just going to church week in, week out. Observing service. Maybe not quite like this service, but tradition. And the final one? Experience. One of those four impacted the way you approach faith.

I want to ask you, actually, as you look around and as you experience even just Christmas here, how much of Christmas that we see outside have we impacted how we even think about what Christmas really is?

[4:36] I was at an event a couple of nights ago and someone was asked, hey, when you think about Christmas, what do you think about? And you think about, oh, well, family, friends, food,

shopping.

I was like, those are such great things to say and those are such good things. But my goodness, have we missed the point of what Christmas actually is? As we look and as we see the wonderful portrayals, the incredibly accurate portrayals of the shepherds and the unwise men, it got me thinking, as we've been going through the book of Luke, we've been seeing different people approach Christmas or be confronted by Christmas in a very different way.

You've got Zechariah and Simeon and Anna who have just been steeped in tradition, just diligently. Every day, just following tradition, following the laws.

And then you've got the shepherds who are most likely brought out of their minds and then they encounter not tradition, they encounter experience. The whole sky lights up and it changes everything that they do.

And then you've got Mary. Mary is confronted by Christmas and you see something come out of Mary, which is actually, my prayer is that all of us would have this.

[5:54] She just bursts out in scripture. Teenage Mary knew scripture so well. If you look at her song, you will see that she knew scripture so well. Her song basically mirrors Hannah's song in the Old Testament and you can see she is just seeped in scripture.

And then you've got the wise men or the mad guy or the people who are looking. Of course, even that, how much of that has our knowledge of even the wise men, how much of it has been influenced by just contemporary culture?

We sing a song, we three kings of Orient are. We know they came from the east, but we know they're not actually kings. The song said they're kings, but they're not really. And I'm not here trying to deconstruct every part of Christmas.

I mean, why do we even have a tree? Why do we have fairy lights? Why is Nathan wearing a Santa hat? All these questions are kind of like, well, what is Christmas truly about?

And as I think and as we think about Christmas, I'm encouraging us to go, well, actually, why are we here? Why are we celebrating these things? And basically asking us the same question every week.

[6:57] Where am I? Where is my heart? How am I processing what these things are? And how am I living and responding to the truth of Christmas? What is it? What's your quadrilateral?

And how are you impacted by society when it comes to Christmas? And is your take on Christmas any different for someone who doesn't even know Jesus at all? Or is it really the same thing? Is it just the turkey?

Is it the holiday? Is it the family? Is it the friends? Or is there something more? As we've been going through the book of Luke, chapter one and chapter two, you see when people are confronted by Christmas, their lives are completely changed.

Completely. I'm going to use that term, confronted by Christmas, because I think Christmas invaded their reality. I don't think they were, well, they were, of course, Zechariah and Simeon were waiting. But actually, Christmas comes and just decides to come. The Holy Spirit decides to go, hey, now is the time. We've been waiting for 400 years. Boom. We're beginning. And you see, one by one, each person, their life is completely changed.

[7:58] And so my proposal to all of us here is this. If we are to be genuinely confronted by Christmas, it will lead to conviction and then it will lead to change. Just like what Braden said, there is no chance that they can sit in that field and watch the sheep in the same way anymore, considering what they just saw.

There is no chance that Mary can be the same anymore. There is no chance that Elizabeth can be the same anymore. And you see, it's interesting.

Christmas is confronting these people and different kinds of people. The shepherds, actually, they were not worthy, reliable witnesses in court. So they would actually, it was a bad group of people to introduce yourself to, as they said.

LeBron James would have been much more appropriate. But it's not just the lowly, it's also the prominent, the wise men. How do they get a time with the king? Of course, they were people of prominence, of influence.

They were approaching, their theological method was reason. They were trying to figure it out. They were trying to search for answers. All of them left after being confronted by Christmas, convicted to change.

[9:10] Are we confronted by Christmas and convicted to change? Or are we merely comforted by Christmas with warm fuzzies that leave us feeling, oh, it's the most wonderful time of the year?

And last week I asked, hey, why was Christmas even needed? Why was peace needing to come to earth? It was because there was no peace. Because there was war, not just war between nations, but there was war between families, within families, between people, within people.

That's the brokenness that we exist in. Even this morning as we gathered as a family and as we have all this fun and we have candy cane hanging on the fairy lights. I didn't see that. I think that was you, Ellen, wasn't it?

Oh, and Bonnie, thank you. But we know, you know as well as I do, that this world is not a peaceful place right now. We turned on the TV the other day and we wanted to watch the BBC news just to kind of help ourselves feel a little bit more at home.

And my goodness, just news after news after news. I was like, man, you know what? Let's just stop watching the news. This world is not in a good place. We are not in a good place. And actually, can we be a family that when we ask each other, how are you doing, be able to say, actually, no, I'm not doing well.

[10:38] It's been a really tough week. Things have not gone my way. I couldn't even get out of bed because I'm at war with myself. I know why I should do, but I don't do it.

I know I shouldn't do, but I keep doing it. If that's you, and I'm pretty sure that's you, I know that's me, then may you be confronted by Christmas in a good way.

Because Christmas comes and it changes people. You see Zechariah, who was someone who was doubting. I mean, he's just like, what? How can this even happen? And suddenly he goes from someone who's doubting to someone who's now filled with faith.

You see Mary, who's afraid because a big angel shows up and tells her, do not be afraid. And that, of course, helps. And then she's just filled with joy.

The shepherds, maybe we're reading too much into this. The shepherds were bored. But then they're confronted and they're spurred into action. The wise men had an audience with the king.

[11:42] Had prominence. Politically, it wouldn't have made sense to disobey the king. But yet, after what they saw, they had to change. They had to avoid him. They had to turn.

Imagine, if you are genuinely confronted by Christmas, this Christmas, what would change in your life? I know we're all sat here as people of hope. People who are pursuing peace.

People who want to have joy. But we know that we're not fully there. But what's the one thing that you can actually surrender and go, God, would you swap my anxiety for peace? Would you swap my hate for love?

Would you swap my anger for reasonableness and patience? Can you change me from the inside out? Can you confront me with the truth of Christmas again?

Which is actually there was bad news and there is bad news. But then good news invades into our reality and seeks to change and transform. And last week I said that sometimes requires, that is a sword.

[12:40] That's what Simeon, the prophet, well, Simeon, he prophesied saying, this sun is going to cause the fall and rise of many because he's going to pierce you. And you can't stay on the fence.

You have to respond. You cannot respond moderately to Jesus. But so often maybe in this day and age, in this kind of Christmas, in this kind of city where each mower is just trying to one up each other by creating a more outrageous Christmas display in the atrium, we've lost the truth of what really Christmas is.

We're given warm fuzzies by the mulled wine, but we're not really convicted to change. We're simply mildly religious. Oh, yeah, Jesus, yeah. Can you understand how outrageous the story of Christmas is that mankind couldn't save itself so a baby was sent?

Can we not lose sight of that? And may that change our reality. So I'm going to ask you today, and I'm going to keep this message very short because I want a little bit of time, a reflection for all of us. Your approach to Christmas, your approach to this next week, what is it influenced by? What's your quadrilateral? Is it tradition? Is it, hey, every family, every Christmas, my family goes to Disneyland.

[13:59] I was with a family that does that on Christmas Day, go to Disneyland. Or if you're into Japan, you're having KFC. Your approach to Christmas is just seeped in tradition. You open your presents on Christmas Day, or you do this, and you go and visit this family, or this family, or you do this.

Or your experience of Christmas is all about experience. You want to go out into the Christmas markets. You want to sing carols. You want to do those things.

Or is your actual approach to Christmas is, my goodness, I'm a sinner. I'm living in darkness. I'm confronted with the truth of Christmas, which is that I need a savior.

And my goodness, I'm so grateful that he came. And he came and he turned the world upside down. Because we thought he would be a warrior that would first overthrow the Romans, and then the rest of the world, and then we Christians would be on the top of the world.

And he comes as a baby, right next to where the pigs poop. And he shows us, hey, change everything that you've ever thought you've known about me, about God, about the kingdom of heaven.

[15:09] Things are not as they seem. There is more to life than what we see. Christmas is way more than the fairy lights, or the reindeer, or the gingerbread.

It's an offensive story. It truly is an offensive story about a people that needed saving and couldn't save themselves. May we be confronted by Christmas.

May we be convicted in our hearts. And may we then lead us to change. So we do better watch out. We can cry. We better not to pout. And here's why. Because Jesus Christ is coming again.

The story of Christmas isn't that Jesus came as a baby in a manger. The story of Christmas is that the baby didn't stay there. That he grew up in stature and wisdom, was without sin, and then gave his life for many.

[16:14] And the story of Christmas doesn't even just stop there. Otherwise, that's not really that. I mean, one guy did great stuff. The reason why we've carried on so many years is because we believe that this guy is coming back.

And he is coming to town. But not in the same way that the song sings about Santa. He's not coming to see who's naughty and who's nice and who deserves to go.

Whose church attendance is 80% or above. The whole point of Christmas is that we are all not nice. That we all don't deserve to sit here.

And yet all we have to do is just welcome him in. And we can be sure. And scripture tells us so. He won't come as a baby in a manger next time.

He will come in glory. Riding on the clouds. With trumpet sounds. And every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Let us be confronted by the truth of Christmas today.

[17:24] Let us be convicted. And let us change. I'm just going to spend a moment now. And I want to ask you, before we have Alex and the team leaders in one final song, it's just, is there one thing?

Is there one thing that you actually want to be transformed in? That you want to change in? Maybe it is fear. Maybe it's doubt. Maybe it's anxiety. Maybe Christmas is just horrible for you.

Because each time you have to go and hang out with your family. And they'll ask you whether you have achieved the next stage in life yet. Because you're never enough just showing up. It's always, are you dating?

And then when are you getting married? And then when are you having? And you're just so tired of the same question over and over again. Maybe it's just you're filled with trepidation for this Christmas season. Or maybe you're so caught up in the Christmas season that you've actually forgotten why you're even celebrating all of this stuff.

Can I ask you to just all spend some time now and ask the Holy Spirit, what is the one thing that you are confronting me with today? Because Christmas is really, truly bringing change and bringing life.

[18:31] I'm going to spend a moment of quiet reflection and then we're going to finish with a song. Holy Spirit. We welcome you.

I'd say would you invade our reality, but the truth is would you just make us aware that you are our reality, that you are the truth that surrounds us. And just as you did 2,000 years ago, would you confront us now with the truth of the gospel?

Jesus said that you would come to convict the world of sin and righteousness. We sit here as a family of people who, actually we have no way of making the nice list, the good kids list ourselves. but with you. We can.

We are. Meet us now in a moment of just showing us what we still yet need to surrender to you. We've had the privilege of hearing from different people today in different ways.

[20:12] We will not let you go without you participating in some way yourself. And so this is the final part that I'm asking all of you to engage a little bit with the person sitting next to you. And remember, I always say, introverts, don't worry.

It'll only be five minutes. It will be over soon. What's one thing you want to swap this Christmas? Is it like Zechariah and you want to swap doubt for faith? Is it like Mary and you want to swap fear for joy?

What is it? Is it like the shepherds and you want to just swap boredom for action? Can you share to the person next to you? I mean, what else are we good for other than being able to speak to the people around us?

We're going to have a few minutes. Just talk to the person next to you. Is there something that you feel, okay, God's telling me that I need to swap this. Share it now. Thank you, everyone.

Before we finish with one last song, actually, I'm going to hear from a few people. Choo-Coo, what was yours? There's still some fear in rooms of my heart that I'd like to swap out for courage.

[21:19] Fear for courage. Love it, love it. Still doubt for faith. Doubt for faith. Great. What do we have here? Imbalance for balance. Oh, imbalance for balance.

Profound, profound. Can we have... Can we have one of you? Who do we got? That's an impatience for patience. Impatience for patience. That's good. Let's have two more.

Anxiety for the future. Anxiety for the future. And you swap it for... Peace and calmness. Peace and calmness. Great. Come on, Matthew. Matthew's always hiding behind the camera, but he takes wonderful pictures for us.

So we're going to hear from you today. I actually don't have any. I never thought of it. Anyone want to find one? Jay, one here. Thank you. Fear with joy.

Fear with joy. Let this Christmas be one where we are confronted by the good news of Jesus and may lead to conviction and change. And I'm going to pass the time to the team to have one final song.

[22:16] We have one final song.