

Christmas Eve: The Gifts of Christmas
Matthew 2:1-6, 9-11
December 24, 2016
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This place called home can evoke so much longing but also pain and fear – and when we go there it often does not match our expectations. I remember when we first moved to Plymouth. We'd been living in Brentwood, Tennessee. I came for an interview at this church and then I spent a day with a realtor, searching for a home for our family. At the time, there weren't many houses for sale and when a house was listed it sold in days. Amanda had given me a wish list and when I found one that seemed to have most of what was on the list, I signed a purchase agreement without Amanda or our daughters ever seeing what I purchased. Three months later when they arrived in Minnesota, I was nervous. Amanda had remained in Brentwood trying to sell the house we had there and I had moved here, living with my parents in Arden Hills. For three months I'd wondered if I made the right decision. And when the day came that Amanda would see the house for the first time I was nervous. Would this be the home they expected? And what would I do if it wasn't? Moves are hard enough – would this house that I selected be the one they were longing for? And I guess it worked out. Seventeen years later, we're still in the house. But as we moved into the house, I learned there's something far more important than finding the right house. What I learned is that home is not about the house it's about the relationships that are found there.

And that's also the story of Christmas. Joseph and Mary were traveling to Bethlehem because it was Joseph's ancestral home. They were going home to Bethlehem. In Hebrew, the word Bethlehem means "house of bread". Is there anything in the world that smells better than freshly baked bread when you come home? Bethlehem is the house of bread. It would be the birthplace of the one who would say, "I am the bread of life. If you are hungry – if you are empty or longing for something at the core of your being, Jesus says, 'Come home.'" What's home? It's the place where we are supposed to belong, the place where we are supposed to feel safe, the place where love is supposed to prevail. When we read the Old Testament, we are told it is a promised land. Could that be what we are longing for? It was the promise made to Abraham when he responded to a call from God to go to the place that God would provide. It was the promise made to Moses when he won the release of his people who had been forced into slavery in Egypt. Moses, I will give you a promised land. This was the promise that kept hope alive when the people were living in exile. A promised land – and one day, we will go home. But two thousand years ago, God sent a Christmas message in the child of Bethlehem that it's not the place but the relationship that matters.

Tonight, in the familiar stories from Luke and Matthew we heard how the birth of Jesus came about. But it is John's gospel that tells us what it means: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.** (Jesus is the Word, the full expression of who God is. If you want to know what God is like, look to Jesus.) **He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life,** (Jesus is the essence of what life really is, the purpose, and the reason for living.) **and the life was the light of all people.** (Jesus is the guide for us.) **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.** Or as Eugene Peterson translates that verse: **God became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.**

A few weeks ago, I was walking through a store when I noticed the song that was playing was Joan Osborne's song from 1995, "What If God Was One of Us?" And as I listened to the words,

I thought – that’s the Christmas song. *What if God was one of us. Just a slob like one of us. Just a stranger on the bus Trying to make His way home?* That’s what God was doing with Christmas. God decided to enter into the darkness of this world and the darkness of our lives. God was saying I will come and be like one of them and show them what it’s like to be human. John said, “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.”

Whenever I’m away from home, if there’s not a night light, I always leave a light on. So when I wake up in the middle of the night, I know where I am and when I get out of bed, I can make my way in the dark. Having a light makes all the difference, because on my own I make a mess of things. I didn’t use to think that. There was a time when I thought, if everyone would just leave me alone, my life would be perfect, but I’ve lived long enough to know how easy it is to end up in places I never meant to go. In my 17 years as pastor of this church, I’ve sat with many people, good people with good intentions, who found themselves on the wrong path. Their lives suddenly coming apart, their relationships broken as a result of the decision they made. None of them meant to be there. No one gets married intending to make a mess of things. We don’t choose a path because it will lead to pain and darkness. But we end up longing for something beyond our reach – will we ever find our way home again?

The message of the Gospel is for broken, hurting people – not that we are all rotten, sinful people who are going to hell. The Gospel is good news. God knows we do hurtful things, that we find ourselves far from home and so God comes to us. God sends his Son in the flesh to rescue us, to show us the way, to give us grace. God loves us. God never stops loving us. God wants all of us home. It’s like that Motel 6 ad from many years ago: God leaves the light on for you. The light that entered the world 2000 years ago in the manger of Bethlehem is still on, inviting you home. God is the God of the second chance: I will give you a new beginning and a fresh start.

This gift is not just given to you but it’s for you. As Jesus would say to his followers: “You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others that they will see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” The manger comes with a mission. Soren Kierkegaard, considered the father of existentialism, said his aim in life was **“to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.”** Have you found the idea for which you can live and die? Do you wake up in the morning and say, “I’m alive and this is what I’m supposed to be doing” regardless of what your job is. When you wake up with this driving purpose, knowing you’ve been created for something and living into that with joy. Kierkegaard decided the idea for which he would live and die was Jesus Christ. That’s where he found home.

When God became flesh and made his dwelling among us, the gifts to us become the gifts for us to expand the light of his grace and truth to others. It happens in all sorts of way, large and small. Tonight, I think of 2000 health kits assembled here and distributed to refugees left homeless. I think of meals served at Simpson Shelter for the homeless. I think of hundreds of feminine hygiene kits, quilts, baby clothing, persons who serve as homework tutors. The microloans empowering women to care for their families and the children in Kenya who have a chance because of you.

We have a congregational care team. They are the people who visit in the hospitals and nursing homes and when persons are no longer able to attend worship. They offer a ministry of presence. They show up to be the light when someone is experiencing darkness. Over the past few weeks, they have made 144 visits, delivering poinsettias to each person. One of the persons on this team told me about a visit that began a few years ago, bringing a poinsettia to someone who said, “Aren’t there others who need it more? I can’t believe you chose me!” But

each year as Christmas approached, he received another poinsettia. A year ago, his health failing, the end of his life approaching, he remembered the poinsettias and how loved they made him feel. Would he be able to make it one more Christmas to receive one more poinsettia? He was living in a care facility. He'd lost most of his independence. He didn't feel well physically or emotionally. He was all alone when the day arrived when he would receive what would be his final poinsettia. As the visitor entered his room, the only lights were the lights on his table top tree. He had dressed up for the occasion in Christmas red. His visitor gave him the poinsettia, and during the prayer, he began to cry. For the next few months as he health continued to decline, he cared for that poinsettia as if it was his most precious possession. And when he moved into hospice, the poinsettia went with him. Among his final words was a thank you to this church for bringing a poinsettia so that he would know he had not been forgotten.

God became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The light in the darkness. You are not alone.

So tonight, I want to thank you for coming, for sharing part of this season and this night here at Messiah Church. Just by being here you have blessed me and the people around you. Maybe you are here and you wonder – this is a sweet story – the angels, shepherds, wise men, and a baby in a manger, but do you really believe all that? But let me ask, what if it was true – that there is a God who knows you by name and loves you and is ready to move into your world? What if it's true that he is always with you and you are never alone? What would that mean to you? What if it's true that he came to save you from yourself – that he is the God of the second chance? John says, it's true, and my invitation tonight is simple – believe. Just believe.