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“Why Christ Came”

Christmas Eve, 2009
Luke 2:1-20

This past week I was trying to remember what I said last Christmas Eve, without looking in my files, and I could not. I am not even going to ask if any of you who were there if you could remember either. Christmas Eve 2008 seems like a lifetime ago. We were still recovering from a very divisive Presidential election, still reeling from the shock of a global economic meltdown, Beverly Hills Chihuahua was in theaters, and Brittany Spears had released her 5th top album. Those were the days! And now another year has passed, and here we are, older, maybe wiser, definitely heavier and poorer.

I know that since last Christmas some of you have lost jobs. Some of you have lost loved ones, and some of you are just feeling lost. So here we are, and no matter what our circumstances, we are drawn together on a night like this. There is an irrepressible longing for hope, innocence, new beginnings.

On Christmas Eve, it's not enough to stay home and watch TV, you need to get out, to be with other human beings, breathe the same air, light a candle, sing songs, and experience the miracle of what God did by entering human history a long time ago. So I hope you will feel blessed because you made the effort to be here tonight.

This past week I also realized that this is my 15th Christmas here, as pastor of this church. That realization shocked me. Honestly, had I known I would be here so long I would have been a much nicer. Words cannot even convey what it has meant to be a part of this community for so long, to have shared life with you, raised our kids here and participated in making the world a better place. If you are new to our church or a visitor tonight, I am here to tell you that this is a great church. Certainly not because of its pastor, because of its people, vision and mission. Our church exists to be a blessing, to give itself away in love every single day and make God real, so it's great fun to be a part of that.

Tonight we conclude the Advent sermon series I have been preaching this month on Where, How and Why Christ Came. Now the why of things tends to be both complicated and subjective. I remember those years when our kids were small and always asking why: “Why do I have to go to bed? Why do I have to eat vegetables? Why does Santa come down the chimney?” Saying “Because I said so” never seemed to satisfy them.

It is human nature to seek an evidential reason for things, but in many cases we will never know why. Why do good people suffer? Why is life so challenging? Why are Reality TV shows so popular? Tonight I want to offer just a few of my own reasons for Why Jesus Christ Came and what his coming means to me: To give us Rest, Release and Resurrection.

First, I believe Christ came to earth to give us Rest. By rest I do not necessarily mean sleep, although sleep is wonderful. There have been times in my life when I could not sleep, so I really appreciate the gift of sleep. But by Rest I mean peace of mind, serenity, mental and emotional relaxation. We need more restfulness in our lives, more silence, and more solitude because we are on overload: information overload, activity overload, anxiety overload. We go and go, give and give, and eventually we feel empty inside, depleted and exhausted. One study from the Women’s Health Resource Center recently discovered that 2/3 of all women reported being exhausted and depressed in the last year. All of us, men and women alike were created for renewal, rejuvenation, so that we can go deep into ourselves to remember the reason we were born.

It is no accident that Jesus said: “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you _____. I am meek and lowly and in me you will find _____ for your souls.” I believe God showed up in the form of a helpless baby to invite us to relax. To trust that God is with us and to believe that somehow, someday, all will be well. God entered our human condition in all of its strangeness and complexity, to demonstrate that God understands. When we are tired and sad, beaten down and

discouraged, God gets it. We do not have to try so hard all the time, to manage the universe, to worry about the future.

A local elementary school had their annual bring your father to class day, and not very many fathers could come, but a few did. One boy introduced his dad by saying, “My dad owns his own business and travels all the time.” Another girl said, “My dad is a pharmacist and sells people drugs.” The last student to introduce her father was a girl whose dad had been unemployed for almost a year. With great pride she proclaimed: “My dad... is here.” Showing up is a great gift, and that is the priceless gift God offers to us.

The second thing God’s showing up here brings to us is Release. Release from the need to prove ourselves, release from the past, from guilt, shame, regret. So many people are enslaved by their past. They are haunted by negative memories and filled with remorse and they just can’t get beyond it.

I think of one man who made a series of unfortunate decisions in his life. Several years ago he took one wrong turn, and he stepped across one line and then another line and another. Nobody knew about it or found out, until he stepped across one too many lines. The police showed up at his door, with a camera crew from the local news station, and they carried him away in handcuffs. He was sentenced to a year in prison and he lost everything. He lost his wife, job, friends, dignity, reputation; he lost a year of his life. But the one thing he did not lose was his faith in God, the God who came to save us from ourselves. In prison he let go of his pride, and was eventually able to create a new life for himself and be a blessing to others.

At some level we all need to be released from the tyranny of self. A visit to any book store reveals an endless supply of books on how we can get rich, get fit, get thin, and get better. And there are blogs, websites, articles, that will bring us happiness, fitness, fulfillment, perfection. Now that is a worthy effort, to try to become better, we all need to do that, but after all is said and done there will still be

something missing. We need to be changed from the inside out, not the outside in. We need to be released from ego, pride, and endless concern about ourselves. God releases us from all of that because ours is a God of new beginnings and second chances. God sets us free and gives us wings.

Finally, Christ came to earth to bring us Resurrection. I know that is the message of Easter, but it is worth remembering at Christmas too. In the birth, life and death of Jesus, God showed us something beyond the grave that forever freed us from the finality of death. We follow the story of Jesus from the crib to the cross, but the story gains its meaning from cross to crib. We would not be here tonight celebrating his birth, if not for his death and the victory over death that the cross represents.

We had a funeral here last Monday for Ralph Street, and funerals close to Christmas are especially hard. Ralph was a member of our church 57 years, and a really positive man. He was still bowling in a bowling league at the age of 85, he had a charming nature, and he was very funny. At least I hope he was being funny when he once to me “Melanie, you’re a good minister, but you would be a great minister if you were a man!” Anyway, his grandson Todd spoke at the funeral and as he did, Todd got really choked up. He just couldn’t go on at several points, thinking about what a good man his grandpa was, how grateful he was for his example and how much he would be missed. It reminded me of the people I have loved and lost, and how losing somebody you love is the hardest thing in the world. But it would be unbearably hard if not for our faith. This message that Jesus proclaimed is that there is another reality beyond the physical. We have souls, we were created for eternity, and there is much more to us and this universe than we can see and test and analyze. We are surrounded by a spiritual, mystical reality.

The gift of resurrection is not just for those who have died, either, but a promise while we live. We do not have to live on the sidelines, afraid of failure, being hurt, or embarrassed. We do not have to be afraid of suffering or loss, to go around like

the living dead. Maybe it has happened to you, it has certainly happened to me. You experience something horrible or traumatic and you walk around like a zombie for weeks and weeks. You are not yourself, and don't think you ever will be again.

And then one day.... you hear yourself laughing. You notice that your appetite is back, you can hear the birds sing, and you feel hopeful. You have been brought back from the dead, and that is what God does for us again and again. That is the promise we have in the resurrection of Jesus: life beyond death, and new life during life! So...Rest, Release, Resurrection, those are just a few of the gifts we are given in the birth of Jesus Christ. Of course, there are many other gifts and you know the ones that are most meaningful for you.

But there is one more gift, and it is the most important one of all. More than anything else, God became human in Christ to show us that we are loved. No matter what we have done or failed to do, no matter how troubled or tired, bitter or cynical, faith or no faith at all, we are dearly loved. You came to the right place tonight, my friends. My wish for you this Christmas is that you will realize that Jesus Christ was born for you—to bring you rest, release, resurrection and to let you know that you are loved more than you will ever know.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord: Help us tonight to open our hearts to the magic and mystery of Christmas. Help us to experience the true meaning of Christmas: love, wonder, joy, and new life. Change us tonight, as only you can. Help us to be more loving, generous and kind. Give us the eyes of children, as we celebrate the birth of another child who came to be our Savior, Teacher, and Friend. May the living Christ be born in all of our hearts tonight, and remain with us throughout the coming year. Amen.

