

Christmas Eve - I Believe Even When: Because of Tonight

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Date: 24 December 2023

Preacher: Pastor Scott Johnson

[0 : 00] Merry Christmas. Our scripture reading this evening is from the book of Luke, chapter 2, verses 1 through 20.

In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth and Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

[1 : 06] An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid.

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.

[2 : 11] And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Friends, let's pray together. Almighty God, we give you thanks for the joy that comes with this night. For how special it is to each of us in the difference you make in each of our lives and hearts.

By coming to us anew. By being born into our world in a fresh way. And Lord, as we celebrate what you have done for us, continue to pour yourself into our lives.

Give each of us what you know we need. In this moment and at this time, fall fresh on us, Lord. In Jesus' most holy name we pray. Amen. So, it's time to celebrate, yes?

I'm glad some of you think so. Because celebration should be what we're about today. And I hope that's truly where your heart is, that this is a time to celebrate.

[3 : 24] Now, we have seen celebration on many people's lives, and it looks kind of different than the way many of us do it at Christmas time. But it is a time to celebrate.

And especially given what we've been through in recent years, this celebration should be in a particular place for most of us. See, the thing that comes is, we had heard Sandra talk about having family with us, and most of us have some of that with us today.

There are those among us who are in a special time, though, where maybe someone who is usually at the table isn't. And we were mindful of you and see you as well. But we still celebrate what God has done.

You see, when we think about those things that family does that make us happy, those things that the loved ones around us do that put a smile on our face, that's part of why this day is so special to us.

You know, there's a family that I've had. There's a, well, of course, I've had my family for a long time. But there's a tradition that I've had for a long time in my family. That it's, I can't even point to when it started.

[4 : 32] It started when I was pretty young. I was elementary school age. I was raised by a single mother. And before we would go and celebrate Christmas with our extended family, that we would have our time at home.

And one year we fell into this. And as I said, not sure when exactly. But it turned into this thing because she was so busy working and paying for our lives that Christmas morning was one time she could actually slow down and make a really large breakfast.

And so that became kind of a special thing for us. That on Christmas morning we would do this whole thing. And it turned into a specific thing that we had for breakfast.

Still do it to this day. That blueberry muffins became this thing. And it happens every Christmas. And it just became this way that we knew that we were in this moment with each other.

And it was Christmas and we were experiencing that special love. That God had done this thing in our world. And as we celebrated, this was a special thing between the two of us.

[5 : 47] And it's become part of our family tradition to this day. Now the thing about it is whatever that is in your world, it can be something else. And it doesn't have to be food.

It doesn't have to be anything in particular. But one of the things that happens is every group of people who love each other, every group of people who spend time together, develop their own rhythms and habits at this time.

And they're part of why the day has such special meaning. We know we are loved in that way. It brings it out of us.

It's truly special. But friends, as you consider that piece of your Christmas celebration, I hope you remember something else.

That while you are experiencing the love of those around you, while you partake in those things that are uniquely yours and make your heart sing during this particular time of year, that there's another way you should experience and remember how loved you are.

[6 : 54] And that goes to the meaning of Christmas itself. You know, you heard Jan read for us tonight the main Christmas narrative.

And the line that stands out in that narrative still rings true. And I hope it lands on your heart tonight. For you, this day, is born a Savior.

You see, we have gotten so used to the other things about Christmas. And we tend to emphasize so many of those other things about Christmas. That the miracle it is that God loves us like that, we sometimes blow right by.

To remember that there was a world that was overrun with sin and with violence. That there was all kinds of corruption everywhere.

That people were held in place by a brutal occupying army when Jesus was born. And might made right. And people were searching for the truth and the meaning of God.

[8 : 10] And there had been this long period of silence. Where people hadn't heard from God in the ways that they were used to hearing from God. And into all that pain, into all that confusion, into all that sense of loss, God broke in.

God showed up. And the challenge that was true then is still true for a lot of us. Because the way God shows up in lives doesn't always make sense to us.

That we keep thinking that God is supposed to show up and look a certain way. That God is supposed to show up and act a certain way. That God is supposed to show up in certain places and at certain times.

And unless God shows up according to our rules and our expectations, we start to think that God hasn't shown up. And yet, powerful people.

People who really thought they understood and loved God. Didn't understand what happened in that stable. Didn't understand that it was possible that a young woman from a nowhere town.

[9 : 30] And a young man who didn't have a lot of social status. Would be welcoming almighty God into this world. That it had to come from some powerful family, right?

He had to be born in some big glamorous city. And everybody would have to recognize him right away. Friends, what's the ways in which you have told yourself that if God is going to show up in your life, if God is going to show up and show you that you can be exactly who God knows you to be.

To know how loved you are. To know that you've been saved. To know that all will be well. Because God is who God always promised he would be.

What are the rules you have set up in your own mind for what that's supposed to look like? Because friends, I would remind you. What happens if God shows up on his own terms?

What happens if God shows up outside of what you think might be the way God's supposed to work? Because what we have to remember on this night, what we have to remember every night, is that God will be God.

[11 : 01] And sometimes we underestimate him. God's ways are not our ways. And yet as we sit with those things in our hearts and in our lives that are breaking our hearts, those things in our lives that are overwhelming us, those ways in which we know we have fallen short, those ways in which we keep crying out for God to do something, maybe we might have missed a baby in a manger along the way.

Because we were looking for something else. But don't forget that simple truth. That even if we may have looked past it, even if we may not recognize it, even if it makes no sense to us, don't forget the simple truth that God still shows up.

That God still shows up and God shows up from a place of love. Not a place of domination, not a place of condemnation, not a place ready to send you to hell, but the exact opposite.

God is here because God wants you to be with him. God wants you to understand how it works. God wants you to understand who he is and God wants you to understand what he has in store.

Because that's who the baby in the manger became. The living, breathing, walking example of love incarnate.

[12 : 47] Love so big, love so wide, that it would teach the truth even when the world didn't want to hear it. Love so overwhelming and amazing that even when we couldn't handle its reality, we couldn't handle how pointed and challenging it was to our basic sensibilities, we turned on it and chose to kill it.

And he let us do it. Love so big and so wide, that death couldn't hold it. That he rose again to show us that no, not your petty animosities, not your confusion, not your violent nature, nothing will stop me from loving you like this.

Friends, when you remember that kind of love, when you have encountered that kind of love, when it's present in your life, you understand why we say, I believe, even when.

Because those things that we are worried about, those things that weigh heavy on our hearts, whether it be something medical, some pain in your own body, maybe it's something that happened to a loved one, maybe it's a financial challenge that you're not sure how you're going to get out of.

Maybe some relationship is not where you want it to be and you know it's less than ideal. Maybe there's some question or problem in your life and you don't know what the answer to it is.

[14 : 33] Maybe you're not clear on what your next step is supposed to be in life and you're trying to figure out that direction. Maybe you think you've done something so awful, so terrible that you are not forgivable, that no one would ever want you, love you, or understand you.

No matter what it is, there is absolutely nothing in this world that the baby in that manger is not prepared to address. That's why.

We believe. We believe even when. When the storms come. When the confusion comes.

When we are overwhelmed by all of it. If we have had any slight taste of who he is, we know that this world can't touch us.

It may do things. It may be hard. The road will be rocky and steep and it will not always be fun and it will not always be easy. But in the end, all will be well because Christ has come to us.

[15 : 49] For us, this day, a Savior is born. receive him. And let him change your world. And no matter what your world feels like, believe, even when.

Amen. And amen. Almighty God, we do thank you that you are who you said you are. That it is because of this night, the ways in which you have been born into our hearts, the way in which you came into the world and changed literally everything.

We know that we do not look to the world for our answers. We know that we do not look to the world for our peace. We know that the world does not give us true joy.

We know that the world is not capable of putting clear and real and authentic hope in our hearts. Only our trust in you, only our walking with you, only our love for you and your love for us helps us to know those things.

So Lord, as we come to celebrate tonight, and we do celebrate, no matter what our traditions and our homes may be, no matter those things we are looking to and value so much, we know that all of it springs from the fact that for us this day you have come.

[17 : 36] May our hearts receive you in all the ways you would have us know you for all you are and all you bring. This we pray.

Amen. As you see the light is with you and we all carry the light with us and hold the light within us, let that be your lesson for the evening that the light of Christ that shines in you is yours and you take it into this hurting world.

Let it continue to shine no matter what's going on, but choose to believe even when and don't let the dark think it can overcome the light that shines through you.

And now as we prepare to receive our final blessing, please know that it is responsive. The responses will be projected for you. we wait for justice.

We wait for restored health. We wait for wholeness.

[18 : 50] We wait for peace. And so my friends, like bells ringing out the news that Christ is born among us, fill the night left by sadness with messages of hope, love, joy, and peace.

Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep the light alive in you and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Like those in the Christmas story, hear the angel telling us, do not be afraid.

We believe in God, we are not afraid. For us had a day long ago and tonight in a new way our Savior is born.

We welcome you into our hearts and our world. God is with us. Praise be to God. Amen. Now in the name of God, our Father and King, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and our Sustainer.

May God bless us now as we leave to love and serve God and all God's children. Amen. Amen.