

Lessons & Carols: The True Hope of Christmas

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 December 2015

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] As I said at the beginning of the service, not only are we glad to see all of you here who are regularly a part of our church, but I hope those of you who are visiting, those of you who are perhaps here from other churches or here from the city, but maybe you're not regularly a part of any church or believing community, or perhaps you're here from out of town, all of you who are visiting, I hope you know how glad we are that you're here.

This is a service that we look forward to for many reasons, but I'm so glad that we can be here to sing, to hear these readings, to see the kids and their parents sort of perform this pageant. It's a wonderful time. And all that being said, with all the beauty and all the reason for joy, I don't know about you, but this has been a very challenging season for me.

If I can be totally honest, it's been challenging for a lot of reasons, but I've really had a sense of struggle and division and unrest kind of in my life and in the world in a way that I haven't in years. I've seen it in my own extended family, deep hurt that's not likely to be resolved anytime soon. I've seen it in the news.

[1 : 26] You're hard-pressed to read the news for any length of time without coming across violence and division and unrest. The terrorist attacks, the gun violence right here in the U.S.

seems to be another incident or many such incidents on a daily basis. The ongoing refugee crisis. The racial tension that continues to divide not only our country, but our city, our neighborhoods. So my tendency, again, if I could be honest with you, this doesn't leave this room, but if I could be honest with you, my tendency is to use the Christmas season, this kind of coming holiday season, as a chance to escape.

What I really want to do is to eat a lot. I want to drink even more. I want to spend a lot. I want to get a lot of stuff.

And I essentially want to become numb for a few days. And it's easy to think, well, with all that's going on in the world and all that's happening, surely that would be good just to escape for a few days.

[2 : 37] To kind of escape the darkness that seems to be in the world. The problem is, escape really solves nothing.

That first week of January comes very quickly. And you realize that you're just delaying the inevitable. The thing is, the darkness in this world is real.

It's real. So we need something more than just a few days of escape. Now I would encourage you to eat.

I would encourage you to drink. I would encourage you to celebrate. But that's not going to solve the problem of darkness. We need something more than escape.

We need hope. We need real, lasting, substantial hope. Something to hold on to.

[3 : 36] And that's actually what Christmas is all about. Christmas is God's response to the darkness in the world. It's God's response to the darkness in our lives.

And one of our lessons, the lesson that comes from Isaiah chapter 9, shows us why Isaiah was writing in the 8th century B.C.

But when Jesus was born, all of the people who met him and got to know him recognized that Isaiah was talking about him. And so, there's a verse from Isaiah chapter 9 that I want to focus on tonight.

Here's God's response to the darkness. For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. The government shall be upon his shoulders.

And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This is a famous Christmas passage. We read it every year.

[4 : 40] And tonight, we'll see that it actually shows us how the Christmas story offers us real hope. And it does that by showing us three things about the birth of Jesus on that first Christmas.

First, it shows us that Jesus came as a child. Second, it shows us that Jesus came as a gift. And lastly, it shows us that Jesus came to be king.

We'll look at those each briefly. Before we do that, let's pray. Lord, many of us have come from all variety of backgrounds. Some of us are here having followed you for many years.

Some of us are here questioning whether you're even real. Some of us are here knowing that you're not, having decided that long ago.

And Lord, yet we know that there is a promise that you make to us that somehow through these written words, this veritable library that we call a Bible, that somehow you can use this to reveal to us your living word, your son, Jesus.

[5 : 49] You can speak to us through it. Lord, I desire to hear from you. We need to hear from you. And so we pray that you would speak to us for our good, but chiefly for your glory.

And we pray this in your son, our savior, Jesus' name. Amen. So the first thing that we see in Isaiah chapter 9, verse 6, is this, is that when Jesus came, he came as a child.

When God wanted to respond to the darkness of the world, he sent a child. And this is something that we're very familiar with, but I want to encourage you to remember this would have been shocking, unexpected, frustrating, confusing to the people who first read it.

We have to understand that Isaiah's writing to people who live in a tiny nation, a powerless nation, and they're surrounded on all sides by much larger, more powerful nations who mean them harm. They're surrounded by powerful enemies. And they're crying out to God and they're longing for a warrior, a champion who will come and who will have the power and the might to overthrow their enemies.

[7 : 03] And they're desperate. And Isaiah says, here, finally, is God's answer to your prayer. Here's God's solution to the darkness, this looming threat on the horizon.

Here's the answer. To us, a child is born. And you can imagine the response. That's not what we were really looking for.

A child, surely you can do more than that. You're the God of the universe. Here's the thing, that they think that the source of the darkness in their lives is out there.

They think the source of the darkness, the real threat, the real problem, is across their border. They think that it's over there.

And if they could just have a champion strong enough to defeat their enemies, then the darkness will end and the good life will ensue. This is really what we need, they said. And I believe that actually we're the same way.

[8 : 03] If you're anything like me, you tend, your default, your default assumption is that the darkness, the darkness in this world is caused by those people.

It's caused by those circumstances. It's caused by those things out there. It doesn't matter who you are. We all have someone or something out there to which we can point our finger.

It's the conservatives. It's the fundamentalists. They're the problem. It's the liberals, the activists. They're the problem. It's the media. They twist everything.

They're the problem. It's the politicians. They never get anything done. They never follow through on their promises. They're the problem. It's the one percenters hoarding everything.

They're the problem. It's the 99% who don't appreciate all that the one percenters do for them.

They're the problem. Right? But we always have someone to blame.

[9 : 06] And in our own relationships it's the same way. Why is there darkness? Why is there darkness in my life? It's really my dad's fault. He was too emotionally distant. He wasn't there for me. It's my mom's fault because she did this or that.

She was bitter. She wasn't there for me. It's his fault. It's her fault. It's their selfishness. It's my family. It's their closed-mindedness.

That's the real problem. That's what's wrong with our family. That's why we don't have peaceful Christmases together. Why we always fight over Christmas dinner is because they're so closed-minded. It's my family and how darn open-minded they are.

Why don't they just believe something? Are they afraid of commitment? That's why we always fight around Christmas dinner. It's the stubbornness. That's what it's really all about.

And it goes on and on and on and on. And all along, we think, if I could just change that person, if I could just change that the way they think, if I could just say it right and have the breakthrough, then the darkness would be dispelled and the good life would ensue.

[10:14] Peaceful Christmas for everybody. But this is not how God responds. God's way of responding to a world in darkness is not to come in power. He doesn't look across the border and say, you're right, they really are a problem and bam, conquest.

He comes in weakness. Total weakness. He becomes soft. He becomes completely vulnerable. He comes as an utterly helpless infant, flailing, looking for his mother.

He's born into a very poor family in a very, very small, out-of-the-way backwater town. He remains poor his entire life. He's virtually homeless his entire adult life.

He eventually allows himself to be arrested. He allows himself to be tortured without speaking a word of protest and ultimately he allows himself to be executed like a common criminal.

And you realize when you look at the life of this Jesus, this solution, as Isaiah would say, to the darkness, it's painfully obvious that he didn't come to be a revolutionary.

[11:33] He didn't come to be a champion. He didn't come to be this great warrior. He didn't come to conquer, in fact. It's painfully obvious that he came to be killed.

And the reason is simple. It's because the problem with the world, the darkness, the problem isn't just out there. It's in here.

It's in here. In here. The problem isn't that some people out there practice injustice. The problem is that I'm selfish.

At the end of the day, most of the time, all the time if no one's looking, I want to do what benefits me even if it's at your expense.

The problem isn't that everyone out there, there are some people out there who are racist. The problem is that the seeds of racism are right here.

[12:39] that I feel as though I am hardwired to trust people and like people who look like me more than I trust and like people who don't look like me.

Our deepest problem is that we are sinful, what the Bible calls sinful.

Really, it just means we're addicted to our own glory. Like people badly in need of rehab. We're addicted to our own glory and that's destroyed our relationship with God.

It's obliterated it and it also hurts our relationships with other people. My addiction to my own glory hurts my relationships with the people I love most. This is why when the Times asked the writer G.K. Chesterton, what do you think is wrong with the world?

Would you write and tell us and write in our paper what do you think is wrong with the world?

Chesterton replied with two words. I am. So we don't need a conqueror, we need a savior.

[13:47] Someone to deal with the darkness not out there but in here. And I want you to imagine those of you who are here tonight, some of you are here and maybe you believe this.

You believe this about yourself and about God but some of you maybe you're not so sure and I want to just encourage you whether you believe this or not to imagine the difference this would make if you did believe it.

What would your life look like if this is something that you believed? I'm talking to you skeptic, seeker, non-Christian, other faith. I'm also talking to you, Christian, who've really forgotten this.

If we continue to think that the problem is out there then we're always going to have someone to blame. We will never run out of scapegoats. We will always have somewhere to point the finger. But when you believe that the darkness is in here, when you believe that this is the source of the darkness in the world and that we all need a savior, it's profoundly humbling.

It's profoundly humbling. And what that means is that whatever relationship there is in which you struggle, whatever the circumstances may be, you know that you're at least partially to blame.

[15:06] Imagine if you thought of a troubled, tense relationship, maybe one, somebody that you're going to face over the Christmas holiday at some point and you don't know how it's going to go.

Somebody with whom you cannot seem to make any progress at all. Imagine if the next time you saw them you said simply that, you know I've been thinking, I've been reflecting and whatever else has come between us, I know that I'm partly to blame.

Will you forgive me? Those of us, by the way, who are Christians should always be the first to admit our sin. We should always be the first to admit, I'm at least part to blame for this.

So this is the first thing, God comes as a child not because he knows that we don't need a conqueror, we need a savior and so he comes in weakness to give his life to reconcile us to God. This is the first thing we see in Isaiah, the first reason that Christmas offers us true hope for dealing with the darkness of this world. The second thing we see is this, that when Jesus came, he came as a gift.

[16:20] He came as a gift. You know, this stood out to me this week. I was reading and I just, I never really recognized that it says for to us a child is born, to us a son is given.

And what this really means is the coming of Jesus is God's gift to the world. It's like the ultimate Christmas present is Jesus. So let me ask you, what makes a gift a gift?

You know, like when you're at the grocery store and the cashier hands you your groceries and the receipt, is that a gift? No, because you paid for it, right? Probably paid a little too much for it.

You earned it, right? Your paycheck, your salary, is that a gift? You know, does your employer say, hey, just from the bottom of my heart, because I'm such a generous person, here you go.

No, you earned it, you worked for it, probably way too hard. Knowing many of you, when you win an award, is that out of the goodness of the judge's hearts?

[17:22] No, you outperformed other people and so you've earned that award. These are not gifts. By definition, a gift is something that somebody gives you free of charge, something that you perhaps didn't earn, maybe something that you don't deserve, maybe something that you can never repay.

It doesn't, in other words, reflect your goodness, it reflects the goodness of the giver. I'm giving this to you purely as an act of grace and love.

No repayment necessary. So when the Bible says, for to us a son is given. This is the reality that sets Christianity apart from the other religions of the world.

This is the thing that makes the Christian gospel unique. There was an interview with Bono, the lead singer of a band called U2.

Some of you may have heard of them. They were before most of your time. But this band, U2, there was an interview back in 2005 between Bono and a French music journalist.

[18:35] And the two men, the topic of religion comes up in various religions and then the topic shifts to Christianity. And Bono begins to talk about what makes Christianity different. And he says this, he says, you see, at the center of all religions is the idea of karma.

He says, you know, what you put out comes back to you. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics. In physical laws, every action is met by an equal or opposite reaction.

He says, it's clear to me that karma is at the very center, at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. Karma is at the heart of every faith.

And he says, and yet, along comes this idea called grace to upend all that as you reap so you will sow stuff. grace defies reason and logic.

Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions. And then he says this, he says, I'd be in big trouble if karma was going to finally be my judge.

[19:43] He says, I'm holding out for grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins on the cross.

And here's the main thing. He says, he's holding out for this because, he says, because I know who I am and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity.

And that's really the difference. Here's the thing we need to be clear on. Christians are not the morally upright. They're not the morally superior people. In fact, it's often the opposite.

Christians are not the religiously inclined people. They're not often the good people. I know many, many, many people who are not Christians who are far better people. And the reason is simple.

Christians are people who say, I know who I am. I know the truth when I look at the mirror and I hope to God that this all isn't hinging on my religiosity.

I hope to God that this doesn't all hinge on my goodness. Because if it does, I have absolutely no hope. That's what a Christian sees when she looks in the mirror.

[20:53] When he looks in the mirror. I'd be in big trouble if karma was my judge. So Christians are people who recognize that their only real hope is God's free gift of salvation in Jesus.

Something that they didn't earn, don't deserve, and could never repay. And again, I just want to say this. Whether or not you believe this, whether or not you subscribe to this, imagine your life if you did.

Just imagine the shift that that would make in here. Because when you know, when you know that you deserve nothing, and yet God has given you everything, when you know that in your heart of hearts, it means that your entire response to life is one of gratitude.

It means you recognize that gifts aren't only at Christmas and on birthdays. You will begin to see every moment of your life as a gift.

All of the good stuff in your life as a gift. Many of the bad things in your life as a gift. Every day a gift, every breath a gift.

[22 : 19] Imagine how transformative that would be if gratitude was the foundation of your response to your daily life. So on Christmas, God responds to the darkness in this sort of crazy, counterintuitive way.

He sends Jesus who comes as a child because we need a Savior. So he comes in weakness.

Jesus who comes as a gift purely as an act of God's love and grace.

Not because we deserve it. Not for just certain people but for everybody. And then the last thing we see is that he came to be king. Though Jesus chose to come as a child and chose to come in weakness, the remaining portion of this verse shows us his true identity.

Don't be fooled. It's as though Isaiah is saying don't be fooled by the weakness. This is who he came to become in this world. And Isaiah gives us four titles for Jesus.

And when you see multiple titles, when you see this before a king's name, you know, all of the titles, it's a way of saying you can't understand this king unless you understand all of these titles.

[23 : 32] They're all meant to be taken together. Four kingly titles. He says this king, King Jesus, is a wonderful counselor. That actually means supernatural.

The word wonderful means supernatural. In other words, he's a supernatural source of wisdom. He's the one, the only one qualified to tell us what it means to be human and what will make us flourish as human beings.

He's the only one. He's a mighty God. Jesus isn't just a man of God. He is God in the flesh. There's a clear claim this is no merely human king.

Thirdly, everlasting father. It's saying here that Jesus, as a king, loves his people like his own children. And then lastly, that he's the prince of peace.

That Jesus is the king, the only king who willingly, willingly endured the violence, the violence of the cross in order to bring an end to all violence. He's the prince of peace, the source of peace.

[24 : 35] peace. The last point I want to make is this. Do you realize how different this is from what most of us believe?

Christians, non-Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, do you realize how different this is than what most of us believe? There was a sociologist named Christian Smith who did an enormous amount of research.

He interviewed Buddhists and Muslims and Christians and atheists and agnostics and across the board, and he wanted to get a sense of what do people really believe on the ground functionally in their daily life?

And he said, you know, we have all these differences, but functionally, most people fall into the same category. He says, most people believe what he terms moral therapeutic deism.

Moral therapeutic deism. Moral, it's really just about being a good person, good people go to heaven, that's really what most religions teach. Therapeutic, the point of life is really to be happy and to feel good about ourselves, so do what makes you feel good.

[25 : 41] Deism. God really isn't involved in our day-to-day life, but he's there if we need him. Moral therapeutic deism. He says, most people functionally, this is what we believe in this country.

He says, this is the religion of America. Moral therapeutic deism. If you think about it, this is absolutely, really kind of reaches its zenith in the story of Santa Claus.

Santa Claus is the archetypal moral therapeutic icon, right? Santa Claus, he doesn't bother us much, he just comes by once a year, right?

Santa Claus, whose whole job description is giving us stuff that will make us happy, right? And Santa, whose entire moral ethical framework is summed up in, be good for goodness sake.

This is moral therapeutic deism on steroids. And what we need to see is that the Christmas story is the utter antithesis of this. It's the complete opposite of this.

[26 : 44] It's not about just being good for goodness sake. Christmas tells us we're so broken that it took nothing less than the death of God's son to give us hope.

Christmas tells us that it's not just about feeling good and doing what feels right. That God has given us himself as a free gift and we're actually called to love other people with that same sacrificial love.

Often you have to choose between your own happiness and loving others that way. And then lastly, God is not some distant being who only checks in now and then. He's actually come here in the flesh to be our king.

There's a scene in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series in the last book of that trilogy, The Return of the King, where Aragorn, who's the rightful king, he's been laboring in total obscurity, in total poverty, he's been fighting battles on behalf of his people, he's been risking his life, and finally at the end he's preparing to enter the great city for the first time as their king.

And the steward cries out his royal pedigree as he prepares to enter. He says, Here is Aragorn, son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dunedain of Arnor, captain of the host of the west, bearer of the star of the north, wielder of the sword reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the elf stone, Elessar of the line of Valendil, Isildur's son, Elendil's son of Numenor.

[28 : 19] All these titles and then the question comes, Shall he be king and enter this city and dwell here? Christmas is the story of another king who dwelled mostly in obscurity, was poor his entire life, was fighting unseen battles on behalf of his people, and he ultimately gave his life for those he came to serve.

And so Christmas confronts us as we tell the Christmas story, we are like the stewards crying out into the world, Here is Jesus, the son of man, son of God, the Christ, the second Adam, the bright morning star, the Alpha, the Omega, the incarnate word whose hands bring healing, the wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace.

shall he be king and enter our lives and dwell there?

This is the question each of us must answer for ourselves because friends, the darkness in this world is real and we need something more than escape, we need something more than Santa, we need hope, real, lasting, substantial hope.

And so hear, hear the hope of Christmas. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[30 : 13] Let's pray. Our Father, for many of us these are familiar ideas, for some of us they may not be.

I pray that you would illuminate, kindle, and ignite our hearts to see the beauty of this as though for the first time that it would pierce us, that we would see the reality of our need the reality of our spiritual poverty and the grace and the truth and the love of your son Jesus.

I pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.