

The Miracles of Christmas: The Moment

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, Braymar. It feels pretty Christmassy in here, doesn't it? In the foyer and here on the stage. And so I have some thank yous to give.

I want to thank the Gilday family. They were all here in full force on Friday night. I want to thank Jessica, who's in the booth as well. She's serving all weekend.

Look at her go. I want to thank Anne-Marie, who just left. So Anne-Marie was here to help, and Connor and Michelle. And so that small but mighty team did all the Christmas work that you see around you, from the wreaths to the lights to the garland to decorating these massive new trees. Both of these trees are new for our church, new to us, not brand new. So I just want to thank everyone for doing that. I know it's going to be a blessing to everyone who experiences this. And I don't know about you, but I needed a shot of Christmas right now. I feel exhausted. My joy has been depleted. And so here it is. It's a good, good time.

[1 : 06] So raise your hand this morning if you know what Advent means. No shame, no judgment. Do you know what Advent means? I've got a couple of, kind of. I've got a lot of no hands raised.

And that's good. That's okay. I was prompted by Jessica again, who, Jessica's a fairly new Christian overall in the grand scheme of things. And she said to me, so what does Advent mean?

And I said, well, did you read your pastor's email this week? And she said, no. And I said, well, it's in there. But her encouragement and her question prompted me to think, well, you know what?

In many ways, it's new to me. I've always known the term. I've always somewhat understood it. But I think it doesn't hurt to have a refresher. And I don't think it hurts for us to anchor it a bit.

Because there's times of the year in the Christian church that we recognize. They're pretty obvious, right? Good Friday. Easter Sunday. We got it. We got those. Christmas Eve.

[2 : 05] Christmas Day. We've got that, for example. But what is Advent? Well, I touched on it in that email this week a little bit. But Jessica, again, bless her heart, said, she's shaking her head at me, stop referring to me.

But she said, it was two sentences, man. And I said, you're right, it was. So here's a little more. Here's an extra helping. So one thing is that connecting point email that comes on on Tuesdays. Through the course of the Advent season, I'm going to be sharing some prayers that I've gathered. And these prayers are to lead us, to help us to reflect on this time of year. So be sure to check out your emails.

But as I explained in that brief message this week, Advent comes from the Latin language. And the word means arrival. The holiday's purpose and the meaning of it are to look ahead to the coming of Jesus.

The arrival of Jesus. Jesus Christ coming to earth, the Son of God. Emmanuel, as we sang this morning. God with us.

[3 : 14] And just as the season of Lent, and I'll talk about it more when we get there. Just as the season of Lent leads us towards Easter. And a reflection of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Advent leads us toward Christmas. Because we're reflecting on the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah that had been prophesied for centuries. And then what that arrival, that Advent, would mean for the people of that time.

But also the meaning and significance that it still has for us and our world today. Christ's arrival brought the dawn of a new covenant between God and humanity.

It meant salvation. God's salvation was to come. And as we read in John 3.16, I should almost make you say it without me saying it first.

For God so loved the world. Rats. You say it. I can't manage it. That he gave his only Son. That whoever believes in him should not perish.

[4 : 25] But have eternal life. Amen indeed. Well this morning as we begin the season of Advent. You see a wreath and candles up front here.

And this is a traditional piece of Advent as well. And the wreath itself is, not surprisingly, shaped as a circle. And that is designed to symbolize the eternity of God.

And each candle, as some of you will know, has a significance as well. And we light each candle in sequence during the Advent season. So today is the first day of the Advent season for 2020.

So we're going to recognize through the lighting of these candles together each week, the four virtues that Jesus brings to us. Hope.

Love. Joy. And peace. And so this morning I'm lighting our first candle which symbolizes, do you remember?

[5 : 27] Hope. Today we celebrate the wonders of the Christmas season. Like children on Christmas morning. We celebrate this with eyes wide open and hearts full of hope.

And like Jesus, we say, let the little children come to me. For the kingdom of God belongs to them. We celebrate the wonder of that star placed above Bethlehem.

Sent as a sign from God to announce the fulfillment of our deepest hopes and dreams. The birth of Emmanuel.

God with us. Today I encourage each of you to focus on that hope that we have in knowing that Jesus is the answer for our deepest needs.

Well, just bear with me for a minute here. Hmm. Any time now. Sorry folks, just bear with me.

[6 : 34] Hmm. Awkward. Uh, pretty close. Not quite. Hmm. Bet you're wishing you'd made other plans this morning.

Well, that's odd. A minute just passed. Huh. That's interesting. Hey, I just kind of stood here in relative silence.

Relative. And just like that, a minute snuck by. But how do I know that? Well, it's easy, right? I just took my watch out and I watch my watch. Is that why it's called that?

I'm watching my watch. That seems silly. But as you look at it, the little hand moves and every time it ticks is a second and it goes all the way around and it's a minute.

And the bigger hand gradually moves too. But it's fascinating, right? That a minute of silence can seem, did that seem awkward? It felt a little painful maybe even?

[7 : 34] But it depends on how the time passes, right? Usually time can slip away quickly. When you're with people that you love, whose company you enjoy, when you're doing something you enjoy, time goes by quickly.

Did you know that counting today, I double checked the math. I better be right because some of you will check. I know you too will. There are only 26 days left until Christmas.

So that means there are slightly less than 624 hours until we celebrate the birth of Christ. And that translates into roughly 37,440 minutes left.

And that's the time we have left to finish all the things we need to do before Christmas arrives.

Because there are presents to purchase and wrap.

And maybe some physically distanced gatherings to go to. You've got cards to mail and phone calls to make and video chats to have. And I think Whitney is doing the math to see if I'm right on that time.

[8 : 42] But we've only got 37,440 minutes. Actually less now. Because they keep passing. So why did I just waste a precious moment, a precious 60 seconds of your pre-Christmas time doing nothing?

Well, as we begin our Advent series, I want us to recognize not only the significance of one moment in time, but also the strategic nature of those moments.

And we're going to refer to this idea as, the idea of there being a strategic nature to time as timing. You've heard that word. Have you ever stopped to consider the importance and how important everything is in relation to time?

If Marg were here, and she's listening online, you don't plant a garden or fertilize your lawn in November, right? First of all, because in Alberta anyway, you'd have to dig down to the grass.

You don't build a fence in February, first of all, because you can't dig a hole to plant the post, but you don't grab lawn chairs to go to the beach either? Well, of course not. That's ridiculous, right?

[10 : 01] But why not? Because it's not the right time. We can recognize that there's generally a right or wrong time for most activities, can't we?

Have you ever wondered why there are so many ads for gyms and weight loss plans in January? It's because I think we would all agree that December is absolutely the wrong time. You won't get the market for it then. And think about the importance of timing in sports. If the timing is off when Connor McDavid, who is a hockey player, by the way, for those of you who don't know the magic of Connor McDavid, but when he races up the ice with his lightning speed, if the opposing defensemen have an opportunity to block him, or if the goalie has a chance to see him coming, which rarely happens, and gets set up, then the team misses an opportunity to score, right?

If a pass is attempted by a football player or a basketball player, and there's no other player there to receive it, the pass is incomplete.

It's a missed opportunity. The concept of timing is also important in our daily lives. Have you ever missed a bus?

[11 : 27] Rats! Have you ever missed a flight? Arrived late for work? Forgotten the timer on the oven when you're baking cookies or cooking a roast?

Rats! Then you get it. Michelle and I were late for our flight, a connection flight, I think it was from Calgary, on our honeymoon, on our way to our honeymoon to the U.S.

And we, so our luggage was late getting onto the plane. For whatever reason, if it was Air Canada or Canadian, anyway, WestJet it might have been.

But for whatever reason, they used the late sticker, the French version of the late sticker. So all of our luggage said retard on it, which was unfortunate and politically incorrect.

But it was sad, right? Because it reminded us over and over, every time we looked at our luggage, we were late. And we are shamed by the airline for being late. So for those of you who have raised children, have you ever turned, I turned my head for one second and someone has turned on the oven.

[12 : 41] Someone is up on a chair, on the counter, arm deep in the cookies. I turned my head for a second and that's it.

Have you ever known someone who arrived late for something only to discover after the fact that they narrowly missed serious injury or worse.

They missed a crash. They missed something. But does one minute really make a difference? Are you familiar with the mind bender roller coaster at West Edmonton Mall?

Well, on January 14th, 1986, a friend of mine in high school, his name was Jay, I'm not making this up, decided it would be fun one day to go and see how many times, he's kind of a nut, how many times he could ride that roller coaster over and over and over and over, back to back.

So that was the day. He rode it over and over that day and finally he decided to take a break. No kidding. Well, folks, while he was taking his break, as the roller coaster was operating, a car came off the tracks.

[13 : 57] That car struck a pillar and four people were hurled to the concrete below. And the mind bender roller coaster was shut down for more than a year after that incident.

Timing. Our Advent sermon series this year is called The Miracles of Christmas. And I think it's so easy to get wrapped up, pun intended, in the activity of the season.

So easy to get wrapped up, in fact, that we miss these miracles that are all around us at this time of year and all year, really. The Christmas season, this Christmas season, we're going to invest some of these precious pre-Christmas moments reflecting on the significance of Christ's birth.

Galatians 4, verse 4, is an incredible verse. It says, Did you hear that?

God's word says, God sent his son at exactly the right time.

[15 : 21] The arrival of Jesus marked the miracle of the moment. Jesus came at the right moment.

Well, for many of you who know me know that I love movies in general. But some of my favorite movies are Christmas movies. And not the cheesy hallmark, doctor moves to small town, falls in love with teacher.

Not those movies. But classic movies. One of my favorite Christmas movies is Miracle on 34th Street. And maybe it's one of your favorites, too.

There are different versions. And we won't get into the purist conversation of which is the right version. There's definitely a right and a wrong version of A Christmas Carol.

And we can have that conversation another time. My oldest brother is an actor. And he actually played the role of Chris Kringle, Santa, in a stage production of Miracle when it debuted in Rosebud

Theater in southern Alberta a few years ago.

[16:28] And having Santa for a brother was pretty cool. Miracle on 34th Street is such a wonderful, magical tale. It's about an old man named Chris Kringle who believes he is Santa Claus and wants others to believe in him as well.

And we're going to use this movie just a little bit as a bit of a backdrop to our sermon series this year. And normally I would show clips, but it's a lot of work, and there's a cost.

So I'll just narrate the moments. It's much easier. There's important parallels between the movie and the Christmas story that I don't want you to miss.

And so I'll be referring to scenes from the 1994 version. So you may be familiar with it, or you may want to check it out over the holidays because it is very good.

At one point early in the movie, this elderly gentleman, Chris, is trying to instruct a department store Santa prior to the big Thanksgiving Day parade.

[17:32] It's Cole's Department Store, and they have a big, it's like Macy's, have a big Thanksgiving Day parade, and Santa is a prominent feature of that parade. Well, the Santa they've hired is inebriated, let's say, and so Chris is there to teach him how to wield a whip on a sleigh in an appropriate Santa-like manner.

And it seems as though in that story that Kringle shows up at just the right moment. Was it just a coincidence that he showed up, that he happened to be there in the crowd of the parade at that day?

No, because it represents the miracle of the moment of timing when things happen in a good timing sort of way. And at just the right time, Chris Kringle showed up at that parade, not only rescued the parade from this drunken Santa, but the jobs of several of the department store staff who were responsible to make sure this parade was a success.

Their bosses were watching. But those people in that moment failed to recognize that that was a miracle in that moment. A lady who ran the parade failed to recognize the significance of hiring Chris Kringle to be the store Santa at that time.

And folks, I want to be clear. I'm not suggesting in some way that a childlike belief in Santa Claus is the same as believing in God. I'm not drawing a direct parallel.

[19:09] I'm not saying that that is the same as believing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not even close. But I am saying that faith and trust can sometimes be in short supply in our lives, can't they?

The Bible says, when the time came to completion, God sent his son. But the reality is, most people missed the miracle of that moment.

Most people didn't recognize the significance of Christ's birth at that time. People were much, much too busy going about their own lives to pay attention to this poor young girl giving birth to her first child in a cold, dark stable, which if you've examined the idea of a stable, it's not like a barn as we would think.

It was a cave. Cold, damp, dark. But from our perspective, so many years after his birth, we can recognize that Jesus was born at just the right time in history.

The coming of Christ into the world was not a matter of chance or coincidence. His coming was part of God's divine plan, part of God's plan established before the foundation of the world.

[20:40] This isn't something that just popped into God's head one day and said, you know what I ought to do? It was part of the plan eternity before. Author Warren Wiersbe says, historians tell us that the Roman world was in great expectation, waiting for a deliverer at the time Jesus was born.

The old religions were dying. The old philosophies were empty and powerless to change men's lives. Strange new mystery religions were invading the empire.

Religious bankruptcy and spiritual hunger were everywhere. God was preparing the world for the arrival of his son.

From an historical perspective, the Roman Empire had helped prepare the world for the birth of Jesus. The Romans had constructed roads that connected city to city, making travel easier.

And it's no coincidence, by the way, that ultimately, you've probably heard this as a quote, but it's true in this case, all roads led to Rome. The world was at peace under Roman rule.

[21:57] Catch the last part, under Roman rule. Roman laws protected the citizens and Roman soldiers guarded the peace. Thanks to both the Greek and Roman conquests, the Latin and Greek languages were known across the empire.

They made communication possible between people, between communities, between countries. the Old Testament prophecies. The Old Testament prophecies that spoke about the coming of the Messiah were completed.

God sent his son at just the right time. I think we can recognize that many people will be content to just go about the motions at Christmas, right?

Checking off the boxes. Well, the reality is, surprise, wearing masks, physically distancing, shopping for Christmas, and getting together at Christmas is not quite as easy.

And I hope that, if anything comes from the pandemic, it has slowed us down in our tendency to rush. It has opened our eyes to more of the world around us.

[23 : 15] But even though things are different than in previous years, many people will still endure the busyness of the season without experiencing the miracle of Christmas at all.

And for many people, the very thing they need this year, the thing they need most this holiday season, is nothing short of a miracle.

Friends, the good news is that Christ comes to us at just the right time. God comes to us at just the right time with just what we need for the moment.

God knows exactly what you're going through. He knows exactly what you need. At just the right time, He will come to you and He will provide what you need for the moment according to His will. Because God's timing is always, always perfect. God not only came at just the right time, He continues to come at just the right time.

[24 : 22] And just when we need Him most, He is there. Can you recognize, I've said this before, that He never left? Romans 5, verse 6 says, you see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Have you ever considered when you most need a miracle? Well, usually I'd suggest that it's when you have no other options. When you're out of resources, when you're out of ideas.

It's at that moment when I believe that you're in the place you need to be to receive a miracle. God has promised to come at just the right time and provide what you need for the moment.

And God promises, as we've learned in our other series before, that God is true. He's faithful. He's reliable. And when we are utterly helpless, Christ still comes to us today.

He is still for us today. Humans often seem to be in a constant state of waiting. Right? That's a regular theme we've talked about.

[25 : 37] We're waiting for just the right moment, just the right time to do something. Well, maybe you're waiting for something this morning as you're listening to this message.

Maybe you're waiting for just the right time to commit your life to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Maybe you're waiting for just the right time to make a commitment to church membership.

Maybe you're waiting for the right time to take the plunge and be baptized. Maybe you're waiting for the right time to commit to a closer walk with God.

I'll get there. You know, I plan to do that. That's on my list. I will do that one day. Maybe that sounds familiar. Or maybe you've been waiting for just the right time to give up that bad habit.

Stephen Herbert from our church, Facebook messages me periodically and lets me know the milestones that he has reached in his work to, by the grace of God, quit smoking.

[26 : 45] And so, I think back fondly to Pastor Kent, it's been three days and now it's been, I believe the last message he sent me was about eight months.

And I just keep saying to him, Stephen, when you feel that dragging on your back, do two things.

Pray and walk away. Walk away from the temptation.

But maybe there's a habit that you think that it's time to break. 2 Corinthians 6, verse 2 says, In the time of my favor, I heard you.

And in the days of my salvation, I helped you. My friends, I'm telling you that now, now is the time of God's favor.

And now is the day of salvation. Maybe God is telling you that now is the right time for you to take the next steps in your walk with him.

[27 : 46] Mark 1, verse 15 relates how Jesus proclaimed God's timing when he said, The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.

Repent and believe the good news. Timing. Now is the right time to make that commitment to Christ and receive the gift of God's salvation.

Now is the time to join the church. Now is the time to recommit to your marriage, to your family, to your children. Now is the time to return to a commitment to walk closer with Jesus.

The right time is now to draw close to the Lord. God's gift is the right time to receive from God's blessing.

Today is the right time to receive God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. And you may have heard this many times, but I'm going to say it anyway. If you have never made a commitment to your life, of your life, to Jesus Christ, receiving him as your Lord and Savior, then I want to invite you to make that commitment today.

[29 : 16] Because this moment can change your earthly direction as well as your eternal destiny. For some of you, you may have said these words. You may have said them over and over.

But I want you to choose Jesus. And as you are choosing Jesus, you recognize that you choose an abundant life on earth as well as an eternal life with Christ in heaven. Friends, make this Christmas, make Christmas 2020, this season, the miracle of the moment when you take a step forward.

Don't put off making the commitment that you need to make today because now is the right time.

Moments are precious. And in fact, there's no time better than the present, especially at Christmas.

Christmas. So again, if you want to make that commitment of your life to Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, then repeat this prayer quietly along with me as I pray. And if you've prayed a prayer like this before and given your life to Jesus, I invite you to pray it now in this moment as a declaration of your who left heaven and came to earth to die on the cross for my sin. I believe he rose from the dead and is alive today.

He came at just the right time just for me. Today, I want to receive Jesus as my Savior and Lord. Father, forgive my sin.

[31 : 29] Cleanse me and fill me with your Holy Spirit. I choose in this moment, Lord, to receive the greatest gift ever given, the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

And it's in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.