

Walking the Jesus Way: A Christmas Sermon for 2016

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, thank you so much for the miracle of Christmas, that God, you so loved the world that you gave your only Son to be born of such a humble birth and to live a perfect life and to die as our perfect and all-sufficient sacrifice.

Thank you that your Son, Jesus, did not stay dead, but rose to life, and that as we receive the gifts of life through faith in you, that you make us fully alive as the people you made us to be.

And God, thank you that even just as two days ago we celebrated Christmas, we were not celebrating the birth of a long-dead hero, but rather one who is alive today. I pray that you would grow within us an awe of you and faith in you, that you truly would help us to be a grip by the gospel and live for your glory.

So Lord, would you anoint my lips afresh to speak your word, that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would speak through me to all of us, including myself, through your word today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Please be seated. If you could turn in your Bibles to Philippians chapter 2, verse 5, that's where we're going to be this morning, the words that Nora so powerfully read.

[1 : 14] And as you turn there, I just want to bring you back to whether it was earlier this morning or sometime earlier in your life where you found yourself underneath the covers of your bed, underneath your comforter, feeling warm and cozy.

Life is all as it should be. Except you know that you're awake and it's time, it's go time, it's time to get out of bed, put your feet on that cold, hardwood floor and live the day with all the chores, the tasks, the homework or the job or whatever it is, the appointment, the doctor's appointment, whatever it is you have that day, it's time to get out of bed and go do it.

And you're underneath those covers and that is your happy place and you're just like, oh! And there's that kind of hesitation within you as you think upon your day. I just want you to hold on to that image.

I hope, I trust that we can all relate to that. That was me this morning as much as I was pumped to come see you all at church. But just life was so good underneath my covers and my floor is so cold.

But hold on to the image as we read these words again. Philippians chapter 2, verses 5 to 11. Have this in mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

[2 : 38] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I know that some of us were at the Church of the Messiah Christmas services, the two on Christmas Eve and the one on Christmas. So for some of us, we've already heard Christmas messages quite a bit.

But as today's the first day, that's actually, there's some white stuff outside. I think it's fitting that we have just one more Christmas message before we move on. And actually, as I was looking at what to preach this morning, I wanted to preach a Christmas message for the new year.

And I really hope that there's something in today's message that will help define 2016 for each one of us. And as we look at this passage that Paul's writing about what Jesus did, and how Jesus, he writes poetically, saying in the form of God.

But you know from Paul's other writings, he's saying that Jesus, who is God, that he did not hold on to the omnipresence and the omnipower, those qualities of who he is as God, and the glory and majesty of heaven.

[3 : 59] But he emptied himself, being born as a frail human being, as he entered into the fullness of what it means to be human. And for some reason, a couple months ago, I was just, I was reading this passage, and it hit me in a whole new way.

For some reason, as I read this, that image of being underneath my covers came into my mind, and it hit me for the first time ever in this way of realizing, like, what was that, like, when we think of the sacrifice of Jesus, we so often think about him taking on the fullness of our death and our pain on the cross.

But it hit me, the sacrifice of Jesus in him entering into the fullness of being human. You'll remember that Jesus famously taught his disciples and us to pray, our Father who art in heaven.

And I never had thought about it until then, that when Jesus said, our Father who art in heaven, you and I would imagine what heaven is like. But Jesus, it wasn't an imagination for him, it was a memory.

As he speaks of the Father in heaven, the Son of God, eternally existent, had spoken, it was the Logos speaking the word, the universe into creation.

[5 : 05] He dwelt in heaven. If you read Revelation, where John gets a glimpse of what heaven is, you'll see that the Lamb of God there at the throne, and you have the elders bowing before him, and you have the angels and the seraphim and stuff that you and I can't even picture, just worshiping, crying out, holy, holy, holy is he.

As Jesus says, our Father who art in heaven, he knows, and there's such a beautiful memory for him. And then as he says, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, it's not just a wishful thinking for him, or imagine what that would look like.

Think of the longing that he has as someone who had been there in heaven where everything is perfect, and everything is good, everything is as it should be. And Jesus is now in the fullness of what it means to be human, sharing in the frailty and the brokenness that you and I are so familiar with, crying out, like, as life is in heaven, let it be like here.

This longing for heaven that he had. Like, what was it like? I cannot understand. And my analogy of the comfort of being under my covers and the world being as it should be, contrasted with that feeling of having to get out of bed into the cold.

It completely breaks down. Like, there's no comparison between the sacrifice of Jesus and us getting out of bed in the morning. But what was it like the moment before Jesus took on human form?

[6 : 35] The frailty that he took on from being the one who made the entire universe. Like, I don't know if you're big into astronomy, but the universe is really big. And Jesus, the Son of God, bigger than all of that.

And then he came to earth, not first as a baby, as we often say, but he actually came to earth as a fetus. Not even as a fetus at first, but as a one-celled zygote. As a one-celled being in his mother's uterus.

How precarious, if you know anything about biology, how precarious those first moments of life is, as that one-celled embryo implants in the mother's uterus, in the wall there.

Like, such frailty, the Son of God, who is bigger than all the universe, took on himself. And what was it like for the perfect God, Jesus, to experience temptation for the first time?

You know how painful, like, real, raw, full-body temptation can be. What was it like for him, who is perfect? I don't believe that he, before taking on human flesh, experienced temptation.

[7 : 37] Not like that. I remember some months ago, when George was preaching through either the book of Revelation or Luke, he talked about how sometimes we can feel as if Jesus can't really relate to us in our human temptation.

Because he's God. I mean, we all believe that Jesus is God and is fully God, fully man. But when push comes to shove, we often think of him just as fully God.

As if he had some kind of get-out-of-jail-free card, like get-out-of-temptation-free card, which when he was feeling tempted, he'd just be like, I'm God. And then he can get out of it. That's not what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches he's fully God, but also fully man. And he fully experienced temptation. I remember George speaking to us about how, I think he was borrowing from G.K. Chesterton, who said that. That it is, the man who gives into temptation right away knows very little of the power of temptation.

But the one who resists and resists and resists temptation knows much of the power of temptation. Because when you give into temptation right away, when you just gratify right away, you don't experience much of what temptation is.

[8 : 38] But as you resist, and as you resist, and as you resist, you know so much of what that is. And Jesus never giving in to the many temptations. The Bible tells us that he experienced every form of temptation.

He can relate to us in all of it. Jesus entering, what was it like for him? I mean, he's all-knowing. So before he takes on human flesh, he knows what he's going to experience.

He knows he's going to experience temptation to forsake the Father. He knows he's going to experience temptation for lust. He knows he's going to experience all of this stuff. What was it like the moments before all of that?

He knows he's going to have a crown of thorns pressed into his flesh, and that he's going to bear the fullness of our sin, and the fullness of death on the cross. He knows all that. What was it like the moments before he took that on?

In some ways, I think it's akin to us being in that happy place and underneath your covers realizing it's go time. But in so many ways, it's obviously so different. And the power of this image and how I hope Christmas will define our 2016 and is a sermon for the New Year's is that Paul is writing about the sacrifice of Jesus and in him emptying himself for us.

[9 : 53] He's writing about this as Jesus being, that being our example. And so the first point today is that Jesus is our true example for how we're to live.

In a world with so many competing ideas, so many competing messages about how we should think and how we should behave and how we should live as human beings, Jesus is our true, Jesus is our great example of what it means.

That's why Paul writes in verse 5 of chapter 2, Philippians, that we should have this in mind among ourselves. He's saying this is the way you should think, this is the way you should speak, this is the way you should live.

And then he defines it for us by the sacrifice, by the incarnation of Jesus, Jesus entering into the darkness. The Gospel of John, as it opens up with the Christmas story, says it in this poetic way, light has shone in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

And Jesus entering into the frailty of the human condition, and light has shone in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Jesus is our example of what it means to enter into brokenness, enter into frailty, to bring light and to bring hope.

[11 : 00] One of the rich heritages we have as an Anglican church is the movement to end the slave trade in England. I did my master's in history on this and one of the things that surprised me was that one of the core pieces that brought about the movement to end the slave trade was how the Christmas story captivated the hearts, the minds, the imaginations of these Anglicans in England and led them into politics, into all these various realms.

And what was revolutionary about this is that the generation of Christians before them and the few generations before them of those who were serious followers of Jesus made sure to not go into politics, made sure not to go into banking or finance or any of that stuff that was seen as part of the dark underbelly of human existence.

Sometimes you'd find stories of the generation before them of politicians who became Christians and then they'd quickly leave politics because they wanted to walk in purity and righteousness and be real followers of Jesus. But William Wilberforce, this famous Anglican, in reading the Christian story in the Bible and seeing how God took on the frailty of the human condition and entered into the darkness and the brokenness and the filth of this earth, he, after becoming a Christian, he was already a politician and he thought about leaving politics.

But seeing the Christmas story, he thought, you know what? I'm not going to leave this dark and messy world of politics. I'm going to enter right into the fullness of it. And like Jesus shone light in the darkness, I'm going to shine light in that darkness.

And one of his best friends, his cousin Henry Thornton, he was really good with finances and as the Christmas story captivated his heart, he decided that he was going to enter into banking and I think he became the governor of the Bank of England.

[12 : 42] I'm pretty sure he did. He went on to be one of the most influential people involved in finance and banking in England. And that was a world at that time that many Christians just thought that finance and banking is such a dark place.

But he entered into the midst of it to bring light to all these other guys in finance and banking. And he helped with his, the great money he was able to amass through that. He helped fund that campaign to end the slave trade.

And the same is true for Hannah Moore who was a literary playwright and stuff. Playwrights were so derided. They were seen as like the worst of the muck of human beings. But she was gifted in that and as she became a Christian, she thought, I'm not going to leave this like the generations before me.

I'm going to enter into the midst of it. What's the point of all that? The point is that they saw Jesus and what he did at Christmas and entering into the brokenness of the human condition into the darkness as being their example for what it means to be followers of Jesus.

And truly we're called to be followers of Jesus. Often in North America today when we talk about Christianity, we tend to think of it as a set of things we believe about Jesus. But Jesus only about five times in the Gospels calls those who calls us as human beings to believe in him.

[13 : 53] But more than 20 times calls us to follow him. So for sure we're supposed to believe rightly about Jesus. But it's not simply supposed to be something that we're thinking right thoughts about who God is.

That we believe right doctrine. What it means to be a Christian, what it means to be born again, what it means to truly be human is that we're following Jesus. It's like we're playing follow the leader. The things he does are the things we're to do.

That's why what would Jesus do was such a big thing in the 90s is because that's really, as Christians we're called to join God in entering into the darkness of the human condition and to be a light.

And so I hope this truth is already defining and will continue to define the careers we choose. That we'll be able to intentionally see our jobs as places where we're making a difference among our fellow human beings.

I hope that it will affect us in big ways. That it will affect the things we do with our pocketbook, the things we do with our money, the things we do with our time. But I also hope that this truth of being fully present in this world to bring light will also affect us in small ways.

[14 : 57] Like say we're at some family reunion or you're at school and there's that person that is just so annoying, so awkward, and no one really wants to spend time with them. But you know that God loves that person and so just like Jesus sacrificing himself into the brokenness to bring light, you're willing to go and be kind and chat with your cousin who just gets on your nerves and everyone's nerves so much.

You're sure they must be adopted. They can't be related to you. But I hope that this truth will affect us in big ways and small ways that we see we're not called simply to believe rightly about Jesus, but we're called to actually follow Jesus intentionally sacrificing our comfort, stepping outside our comfort zones into the fullness of the brokenness around us to bring light.

I mean, for so many Christians today, I think that they found Christianity, even though they still subscribe to it, to be much more boring than they expected. That perhaps when you gave your life to the Lord, you had this great hope that in this you would find such meaning and purpose and there'd be a great adventure.

But instead you find Christianity that would be much more boring. It's nice, there's a lot of positive songs, and the music is safe and fun for the whole family, but there's no adventure, there's no teeth to it.

And I think it's because for many of us, Christianity is simply believing about Jesus. It's very passive. But the invitation to become Christians is an invitation to follow this God into the midst of the brokenness and the danger and the suffering of what it means to be human.

[16 : 31] I mean, we live in a political city, our capital, and so a lot of us, I think, are familiar with photo ops, where the rulers or whoever wants to have photo ops with the broken, photo ops with the vulnerable, and we're used to that.

I mean, we're suspicious of that. But through Christmas, we see that God was not wanting to have a photo op with broken humanity, but that he was actually entering fully into the midst of the frailty and the heartbreak and the pain of what it means to be human in order to bring us life, eternal life.

And he invites us to help bring that light into this world around us. So there's much for us to do as we live out following the example of Jesus. But if you've ever tried to follow the example of Jesus, you may have found, like I have found, that it's very difficult.

I mean, if you think that following the Old Testament laws, the Mosaic laws was hard, even more difficult is following the actual example of Jesus. Jesus, he was and is perfect.

And I don't know all of you as well as I'd like to, but none of us are perfect. And so what do we do when we see that we're called and we're designed to follow this perfect one? Maybe we keep on falling short.

[17 : 40] Well, that's where Paul continues writing. He says about the Christmas story of the emptying of God and being born in the likeness of man. Then verse eight, and being found in human form, Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

In this, we see that Jesus is not only our great example. He's not only a true example. He's our all-sufficient sacrifice. That each one of us has this penalty, this punishment we deserve because we're not living as we were designed to live.

And as much as we want to follow Jesus and we begin to follow Jesus, we don't do it as we should. And it's not just that it would be really nice if we followed Jesus. It's not just that it would be really nice if we obeyed God.

We owe God our allegiance and our obedience for he's king of the universe. And as we break his laws and fall short of the things we should do, we do deserve punishment. We do deserve the punishment for breaking his laws.

And in that, Jesus, as Paul writes, this is what Jesus dying on the cross is about, that he provided, that he took the punishment you and I deserve. Why this is so important to speak of just after we talk about the example of Jesus is that if you've spent any time as a kid in Sunday school, so much of what goes on in Sunday schools around the world, not just in Canada, in so many Sunday schools, we teach the Bible as if it really is simply about and only about following the example of Jesus.

[19 : 07] Like, Jesus was kind, so we should be kind. And I don't know how they construe Jesus as always being polite, but they say Jesus is polite, so we should be polite, and all this kind of thing. So we're trying to teach boys and girls, little Christians, to be good, little polite, nice, kind of sharing Christians.

But that's not actually the point of the Bible. The Bible is so clear from beginning to end that from the beginning of time to the present day, each one of us as human beings has turned our backs against God, that we have opposed God and been enemies to him.

And as we try as hard as we might, we can't do it. And this is where the gospel turns all religions and all spiritualities on their head. Because whether you're looking at Islam, Judaism, or even secular humanism, in every type of thought, the idea is if we think or do the right thing, we can climb our way to heaven.

And I really mean that true of not just Islam or Judaism or Buddhism, but also of secular humanism. This past year, I went with some others in our congregation. We went on the streets and we evangelized.

And one of the things we would ask, we'd go up to people in the borrowed market. We would say, hey, if you die today, do you think you'd go to heaven or hell? And just about everyone we spoke to, surprisingly, most people didn't say, oh, well, I think I just like, you know, go into the earth and become a tree or something.

[20 : 24] I think that's what a lot of us expect, people who don't believe there's a God to say. But a lot of these agnostic or atheist people said, oh, I'd go to heaven. And I'd say, well, why would you go to heaven? They'd say, well, I'm a good person.

What they're saying, even though they don't really believe in much of a spiritual realm, a lot of people, even our neighbors, believe that if they do enough good, they can earn their way into some beautiful afterlife.

So that would be secular humanism. A lot of people believe that. Islam has five pillars. Judaism, 613 laws. And the idea is, if you do enough of these good things, that you're going to get your way into heaven.

And Buddhism and other Eastern religions, the idea isn't so much what you do, but if you can learn to think rightly, you'll eventually be able to enter into nirvana, if you can detach yourself from the world around you.

In all these religions, spiritualities are no religious, no thing. In all of this, it's about if we can think rightly, if we can act rightly, we'll climb our way into whatever that afterlife is.

[21 : 21] But in the gospel, it's completely different. And that's what Paul's talking about, about Jesus, God coming to earth and dying for us, is that heaven has come to earth. And so you and I can have true confidence, just like the people on the street, that we will, if we die tonight, we'll go to heaven and we'll spend eternity with them.

And that we'll not only go to some spiritual heaven thing, but that when Jesus comes back, we'll rise back to life and live on this earth in the way we were designed to be.

And that confidence comes not because we've learned to think rightly or do rightly, but because of Jesus' perfect life, death, and resurrection. And so we see that Jesus is not only a great example, but he's also our all-sufficient sacrifice.

And in the sacrifice of Jesus, not only does he take our punishment, not only does he make it possible for us to receive forgiveness and life in him, but it's through the power of his death and resurrection, through his all-sufficient sacrifice, that we receive the power to begin to change from our failing of following his example, to begin to increasingly be able to follow his example.

I mean, in us receiving his forgiveness, we're justified, that's justification, to use a theological term. And then in receiving his life and his power that changes us and makes us more like him and more following his example, that's our sanctification, to use that theological term.

[22 : 44] That's us becoming more like him and being able to follow his example. And so as we look at the new year and some may make resolutions or at least want to see your lives more reflect who Jesus is, I want us to be able to do that as a church, not by just resolving harder to try harder within ourselves, but to look more fully to Jesus, asking him for his power to live the life that we're called to live.

But Paul doesn't end it right there, as glorious as that truth is, but he continues. Here, as Paul writes about every knee bowing before Jesus is Lord, he's saying that, yeah, there are many kings out there in the world, but Jesus is king, he's Lord above all lords, he's king above all kings, and everyone is going to bow before him one day.

We're living in a world where we know, though every human is designed to follow Jesus, we know that that isn't the case. And we know that so many of us have experienced heartbreak, and not just like disappointment in small ways, but where our heart, our ability to express and experience love has been broken, has been smashed beyond repair because of harmful things done to us by abuse or by neglect or by exploitation.

And we're living in this world where brokenness is so real. And Paul and the Bible elsewhere expand on this thought, telling us that as Jesus has come once at Christmastime, he's going to come again.

And just as he came in real bodily form back then, it wasn't just an inspiring story, it's real in real time, real space. So we await the day that he'll come again in real time, real space. And though it seems today in the world we live in that there are bullies and there are abusers and there are people who have done great injustice to us and to our loved ones and they've gotten away with it, the Bible is clear that injustice will receive its due, that justice will be achieved, that we live in a world where there is war, and we live in a world where there is homelessness and heartbreak and pain, but that the king of kings is coming back in real time, in real space, and he will make the world right.

[25 : 10] And whether you like it or not, every knee, including mine and yours, will bow before him and acknowledge him as king. What it's saying right here is that every knee, it's saying that Muhammad will one day bow his knee to Jesus, and that one day Adolf Hitler will bow his name to Jesus, one day Elvis Presley will bow his shaky knees to Jesus, and one day you and I will bow our knees to Jesus.

I remember back in my undergrad, there was my study buddy, he was a brilliant student named Jake, but Jake, if you're listening to this, know on the recording, no, I'm not talking about you, different Jake. Just kidding, Jake, I'm talking about you.

No, there was a guy named Jake, and he was this brilliant student, we were in philosophy classes together, and we would talk about God a lot, and he would come so close to surrendering his life to Jesus, but then there'd be always something, and it would change from time to time, but there'd be something about God that he didn't like, and he'd just be like, hey, I see all the logic for why God is there, and I see the historical evidence to believe in the resurrection, but I just, I don't like this, and so then he would just not be a Christian, and what this is telling you and me and Jake and everyone is that whether you like it or not, you're gonna bow to Jesus, like you'll bow or you'll bow to Jesus, and the invitation that Paul writes in these words is that that you and I can experience the fullness of what it means to be alive, not just the best version of life, but life itself, the only way to live, by surrendering our lives to Jesus, by becoming followers of him, entering into the fullness of the pain and darkness to bring light to this world as we follow Jesus, or we can turn our backs against God, that there's just two options, we follow him, or we turn our backs to him, that the option of seeing Jesus as an inspiring teacher from the past, simply, but not as king of our lives, is not an option, that seeing Christmas as a beautiful nostalgic story is not an option, either we follow Jesus, and we give him our allegiance as our king, or we're his enemies, those are the two options, and so I hope that as we look back at Christmas a couple days ago and still see the Christmas lights around us, and I hope that, though you'll likely forget this sermon in a couple days time, that you will remember this truth, and I hope and I pray that you'll remember this biblical truth for the rest of our lives, that as you see the Christmas lights and Christmas trees and Christmas time next year and the year following, that we'll remember not just the regular stuff we hear about at Christmas, but we'll remember the awe-inspiring, majestic, beautiful sacrifice of the all-powerful, all-knowing, pure, holy God, not content to stay in the perfect realm of heaven, but entering into the brokenness and the pain and the darkness of the human condition to bring us light, and that he has called us not just to believe that true story, but to follow him and to receive his forgiveness and to receive his power to follow him through his death and resurrection and that we would give our allegiance to him, not waiting for that final day of judgment, but giving our allegiance to him now so that as we look forward to that final, final day of judgment where he makes the world right, we'll find ourselves not as those forced to bow down, but bowing down in worship to his glory.

Would you stand with me? Heavenly Father, God, I know it is so much easier to speak about following you than it is to actually do, and if this was something we would only do in our own human strength, it would be impossible, but God, I thank you that there are so many in this room who have experienced already the incredible forgiveness that is found in you and the power, the sanctifying power from you achieved through us through the death and resurrection of your son to be saved from our ways of thinking and living to truly be followers of you.

And yet, God, we know there continues to be a battle within each one of us to follow you or not. And Lord, I pray that you would help each one of us to enter into the fullness of what you made us for as followers of Jesus, that we would join you in your global mission to bring rescue to this broken world.

[29 : 38] And God, I pray that as we go from here, Lord, that you would help us, especially in this new year, to see new opportunities in our jobs and our homes and our communities to join you in bringing and shining light in the darkness and pointing people to you and helping bring healing and life to those around us.

Lord, would you help us to do this by your strength and not try to do it on our own. And Lord, would you help us and our loved ones and our neighbors and even those we don't know to be those who would willingly bow down before you that we would give you our allegiance as your true subjects and you our true king that you would be glorified, that you really would make us disciples gripped by your gospel who live for your glory.

In Jesus' name, amen.