

The True and Greater Connection

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Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

[0 : 0 0] Father, we thank you for Jesus. We thank you for Christmas. We thank you for the birth of the Savior. Father, we confess before you that so much of what makes us happy depends upon circumstances and that much of how we understand Christmas has been shaped by secularism and consumerism.

And so, Father, we ask that you help us to remember Jesus, his birth, and to celebrate it. Celebrate it as much as we can with others. And we are so grateful that both online and in person we are able to remember and celebrate his birth today.

Pour out the Holy Spirit upon us. Draw us close to Jesus. And this we ask in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated. So, there's very technical things about the liturgical year.

If you are Lutheran or Anglican or Roman Catholic, you understand that the visit of the wise men isn't actually part of the Christmas story. That's epiphany.

The circumcision of Jesus isn't part of the Christmas story. That's on the octave day of Christmas. Christmas. And you can well imagine. Some Anglicans and Roman Catholics and Lutherans can be very anal about all of this type of stuff.

[1 : 2 3] But in our general culture, when we think of Christmas, we think of everything from the shepherds to the birth to the magi coming.

And we sort of, in our culture and in our imagination and much of our hymns, we think of all of them going together. But one of the things that we leave out when we're thinking of that big story is the fact that you have this very, very tender moment in verse 20.

Well, let's just read it and listen to this very, very tender moment in Luke chapter 2, verses 19 and 20. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

It's very tender. I'm not saying that in a dismissive way at all. It really is very, very tender. The birth of a newborn child is almost always a cause for great celebration.

And the mom looking at the baby and it's just a wonderful moment. And you could well imagine any mother, if there'd been all this talk about angels and all of that stuff and the message.

[2 : 2 6] And, of course, Mary knew how the baby came to be. And you can just well imagine her pondering them in her heart. And then in verse 20, it says, And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

It's all very good. And then the next thing is they said, oh, by the way, eight days later, this poor little baby, they took a knife to his private parts and cut off part of it.

That's usually not part of the whole Christmas story. In fact, you don't normally have Christmas cards with that as part of it. You'll see Christmas cards with the magi, with the shepherds, with the angels.

This part, they sort of skip out of the Christmas story. And actually, it's interesting. I bumped into a friend yesterday. I hadn't seen him in about a month. And he's Jewish, at least nominally.

And I wished him a belated Hanukkah. And he wished me a Merry Christmas. And then he asked me what I was going to preach on on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning.

[3 : 23] It's always very interesting. He's a secular Jewish fellow who always often asks me what I'm going to preach on. So I said that, well, actually, I said by surprise, I'm going to speak on the concept of dwelling, God dwelling with us on Christmas Eve.

And on Christmas morning, I'm talking about something that might interest you. I'm talking about the circumcision of Jesus. Jesus was Jewish. He got circumcised. And he went, oh, yeah, I guess.

But sort of had never thought of it, that Jesus was Jewish and he would have been circumcised. But for many people, it's sort of an awkward thing. The idea of circumcision is, frankly, for many in our culture, barbaric.

And it just seems like a horrible thing to do, that you would go and willfully hurt a baby eight days after he is born.

But we're going to walk into it. One of the things which is interesting, this thing which seems barbaric, is actually, it's actually really, it really is interesting.

[4 : 27] I watch a lot more Netflix and Amazon Prime than my wife does, mainly because if I exercise at home, I usually have something on while I'm exercising.

So I watch more things on Netflix and Amazon Prime than my wife does. And sometimes I'll watch something and I'm getting into it a little bit and I'll think, this is exactly the sort of thing my wife would like to watch.

And sometimes I'll stop it right there to watch it from the beginning with her. And other times I finish it because I actually, if it's a good movie or a good show, I enjoy watching it a second time.

And the second thing is, I actually get almost as much pleasure, maybe even more, knowing that Louise is going to like it and watching it with her. And knowing that she's going to like it and just as I experience, in a sense, her experiencing the movie is a good thing.

And one of the things I'll do, which is maybe Bada, she's a very good wife, so she doesn't complain about me too much. But one of the things I'll do, if it's a very, very well-crafted movie, we just watched something the other day that I'd already seen.

[5 : 31] And she sort of had dozed off because we were watching it late night. And I said, no, well, let's start it off tomorrow. And then the next day, as we started to watch it, I said, just what happens right here is actually really important for the rest of the movie.

And there's many times in movies, and sometimes I'll sort of bugger, like a third of the way, and I'll say, this is actually really important. It's just something that comes up in the course of the story that you can either easily just yawn over.

But in terms of if it's a very well-done story, you'll end up seeing that actually something which happened at the beginning or the third or the two-third mark is really important to understand everything that went on.

It's really important to understanding how the movie makes sense, the type of story that's being told. And so here we have this thing, which for many of us in our culture, and many Christians, they see it as something barbaric.

The idea that you take this beautiful little baby boy, eight days old, and then take a knife to his private part and cut something off is just like I'm squeamish.

[6 : 37] It's a very squeamish idea. But this weird thing that seems barbaric is actually a really important bit to help bring together the whole big story of the Bible and to help us to really enter into and appreciate what it is that Jesus has done for us.

Because one of the things which is so wonderful about the Bible is it doesn't just sort of give us doctrinal truths like Jesus was the firstborn from the dead or that he set aside his glory and didn't cling to being God and they give these doctrinal things.

But much of how the Bible communicates its reality is told in the form of story. And there's this overarching story told with lots of different...

Sort of like if you ever read the novel World War Z. And if you read the novel World War Z, you have newspaper reports, you have interviews, you have actual stories, you have eyewitness accounts strung over all these different genres from the beginning to the end.

And it actually makes a very powerful story. And that's a good way to understand what the Bible is. You have laws, you have sacrifices, you have these weird wars, you have Jesus, you have all this crazy stuff in the book of Revelation.

[7 : 46] And God, the master storyteller, is telling this one big story by using all these different genres spread out because he's the same yesterday, today and forever. He can begin to tell a story in the year 2000 BC and end it in the year 33 BC or 50 BC or 60 or when all the New Testament's written.

So this idea of circumcision is one of those weird little things that if I was watching it with Louise and it first appears in the Bible, I'd nudge her and say, this is really important for the rest of the story.

So just before we get into why it's important, we're going to watch a little movie that just helps to bring the story of Jesus to life, a mini movie, and then we'll continue on.

And part of this shows a little bit of the angst that Mary and Joseph experience. One of the things which is the story with Jesus being circumcised actually touches on a human experience which all of us know.

Maybe some of us are living it right now. And if we aren't living it right now or if it's never been true in our own life, we know people for whom it's true. I know of three or four different women who lived when they were still in their late teens and early 20s that lived at home with their dad and mom and brothers and sisters.

[9 : 14] But the dad had done something so bad to them that in each of these cases, they went somewhere between two to four years living in the same house with their father without ever saying a word to him.

Like not once. That actually requires profound self-discipline. They treated him as if he was part of the furniture in the house because the dad had done something so bad that they just refused any type of conversation with them.

Many of us probably know friendships where something has happened in the friendship. Maybe a secret has been betrayed. A confidence has been betrayed. That leads to the cutting off of the relationship, that the friendship comes to an end, maybe permanently.

We all know, of course, of marriages where there can be a type of betrayal that leads to a cutting off of the other person and ending of the relationship completely and utterly. And then, of course, we have our normal types of things with mortgages and financial arrangements.

If you stop making your mortgage payments at some point in time, the promises of what happens if you stop making the payment is exercised and they repossess the house.

[10 : 30] I once... It's a very, very funny story. I mean, he's gone to be with Jesus. But even if he was here, he wouldn't mind it. But there used to be a multi-multi-millionaire who came to the church.

I've told you about him before. He'd like to take me to the most expensive restaurant in Ottawa and tell me to order whatever I wanted on the menu. It was also one of those remarkable times where you get to see how that, you know, the 1% of 1% of 1% of 1% lives where he would look at the menu and then he would just close it and say to them, I don't see anything on there I want.

This is what I want. And he would just tell them. And they wouldn't say, get a hike, get what's on the menu. They'd say, thank you, Mr. Blank. We'll do that for you. And that's, I guess, what it's like when you have lots of zeros, zeros, like a number and then lots of zeros in your bank account and your assets.

Anyway, one of the things which was so funny, we came back, we'd walked somewhere just to have a coffee this particular time. When we came back, his car was gone. And it turned out that he'd forgot to be making the payments on his lease and it had been repossessed while we were out, which is a very, very funny thing.

But the point is, we're all familiar with the fact that commitments are made and that part of making commitments is that there's a sense, an important sense, that you have these things that you need to do to maintain the relationship, to maintain the covenant.

[11 : 54] And if you don't do it, you get cut off. It's a very, very common human experience. So one of the things which is quite remarkable about the Christian story is that we discover right at the very, very beginning, in fact, at the very, very, very beginning of the Christian story, we see that it's understood that God has made human beings to be in a relationship with him, a relationship where we are at peace with him, comfortable with him, in joy, in a sense, with him, and that it's human beings that break this relationship.

And even in the breaking of the relationship, which brings death and sin and suffering into the world, God, even there, makes a promise that he is going to make it right because human beings can no longer make it right.

And it's not very much longer in the story after that with this constant promise that there's going to be, in a sense, a line that God will, in a sense, orchestrate in the human race and it's out of this particular line that a savior and redemption is going to happen.

It's a little bit like if you read The Lord of the Rings and you imagine what it was like at the beginning of The Lord of the Rings long before Aragon comes onto the stage because when you meet Aragon and you figure out who he is, he's the son of, the son of, the son of, the son of, the son of, and you can see that there's this sense of destiny with Aragorn that long, long ago there was going to be this particular person that was going to set the evil right.

The same type of thing is there in the biblical story. And so we get this turning point in the story when Abraham arrives and Abraham is sort of an odd choice of God.

[13 : 28] He worshipped the moon. He worshipped the moon and God calls him to stop worshipping the moon and come to this land that he is going to give him.

And the way this covenant or commitment that God makes with Abraham, that he's going to make a relationship with Abraham, it's not done sort of in the way a lawyer would write up a contract.

In the Bible, it's told in the form of a story and it goes between chapter 12 of Genesis and chapter 17 of Genesis. And over those six chapters, this idea of a covenant that God is going to make with Abraham that's going to bless the entire world and ultimately lead to redemption is told in the form of a story in a variety of incidents.

And first we get the promise that God makes to Abraham that from his seed that there will be this blessing that will bless the entire world, all the people who have lived and are living and will live.

And then in chapter 15, we get this very, very odd story of Abraham, God speaking once again about this covenant. And in the ancient world, so if you make a mortgage nowadays, they just say, you know, you don't look at the fine print too bad, but basically there's all these things if you stop making the payments, they're going to do this, this, this, this to you and they come after you and they make sure they can get as much of their money back as they possibly can.

[14 : 49] That's how it works. And in a sense, God is going to make a covenant with Abraham and the bank doesn't usually, I mean, if you're really rich, I guess you can negotiate these things with the bank, but basically you just, you pick the best rates.

They said all the terms and all the penalties are on you. That's how it works. All of the penalties are on you. And so God, in chapter 15, he makes his covenant with Abraham and back in those days what they would do is they would, they would take an animal and they'd kill the animal and they'd cut the animal in half and they'd put maybe a couple of animals as part of the sacrifice and the person who was the weak person in the contract or in the covenant, he or she would have to walk between all of the killed, the animals that had been cut in half.

And it was enacting, they wouldn't write it down on paper, it was enacting, this is what's going to happen to you if you don't keep the terms of the covenant. You see these animals killed, cut in half that you're walking between, you don't keep up the covenant, this is your fate.

And one of the things which is so remarkable here, it's the beginning of one of these themes that comes throughout the entire rest of the Bible and culminates in Jesus, is that you'd expect now in the story for Abraham to get up and walk between these animals because God is vastly more powerful.

But what happens? No, God puts Abraham into a deep sleep. And it's obvious in the language that he's put him into a sleep that in a sense he's come into God's presence. And who walks between the animals?

[16 : 28] It's God, not Abraham. God walks between the animals. Does it symbolically in terms of some smoke and with a torch. In other words, God says, if you fail to keep the terms of this relationship, I'm going to be the one who pays the price.

And it's only after that in chapter 17 that there's something for Abraham to do. And you see, this is one of the things that begins this great pattern in the Bible. In the Ten Commandments, it begins, I am the one who redeemed you out of slavery in Egypt, therefore this is how you live.

And redemption always precedes living with God. And so even here in chapter 15 and 16 and 17, first you have the promise in chapter 12, other things happen.

Chapter 15, then something else happens in chapter 16. And then in chapter 17, when Abraham is to enter into this covenant that God has already said that he is going to be the one who bears the punishment, the cost, if the covenant isn't made.

And then for the whole covenant to be completed, what happens to Abraham? He's circumcised. In the story, he's 99 years old when it happens.

[17 : 42] Everybody in his household is circumcised. Ishmael is 13. And it's a very, very interesting thing. The Bible would find female circumcision completely abhorrent because we know that one of the reasons that women are circumcised is a part of a male dominance over women.

And in particular, it's to remove any sense of pleasure for them in conjugal relations between a husband and a wife. It's a very oppressive thing to do to a woman. And the Bible knows nothing of it.

In terms of this, for a man, it has nothing to do with his eventual ability to sire children or experience pleasure in the conjugal act. But there's this symbolic thing, so to speak, of the source of life, of ongoing life, which is cut in a tiny way.

God takes the big promise upon himself and to be part of this covenant, to enter into it for the Jewish people, Abraham takes this small, symbolic, but still costly and very powerful, symbolic act that he's entering into the covenant.

And as you see the rest of the story develop, you see that God desires not just mere lineage of one person circumcised to another and biological inheritance because the entire original point of the covenant in Genesis 12 is that there's some way that the entire human race is to be blessed, that this covenant is to point to something beyond that which is merely physical, which is to be, in fact, something deeply spiritual.

[19 : 11] And so we see here this promise of some great gift of life and it's in that context that we have Jesus coming and his circumcision. And before I say a few more words, we'll watch another movie that helps to bring home something special about the person of Jesus.

Is it going to work? Okay. Throws off my rhythm. Anyway, so one of the things then, we have this interesting thing at the beginning of this story which continues on, these variety of different images of the fact that God wants to enter into a relationship with us.

There's consequences for breaking the relationship and the fact of the matter is if you read what we call the Old Testament and our Jewish friends call the Torah or the Tanakh, you'll see that human beings broke it constantly, that the Jewish people broke it constantly.

And it's not that we are to take from that that the Jewish people are particularly bad or particularly virtuous. In a sense, they are everyone and that human beings aren't able to keep the terms of God's covenant or relationship.

So here we have Jesus entering the story now and he gets circumcised. But we, and in other words, he now enters into the covenant people, the covenant relationship that God has desired to have with his people.

[20 : 41] But at the same time, Jesus is going to be the one who ends up dying upon the cross. So what we actually see in the person of Jesus is this wonderful coming together of the story.

We see that on one hand, Jesus is part of the covenant people. He identifies with those who are to be in a relationship with God. And while all of us aren't able to keep the covenant in the way that we should, he is able to keep it perfectly.

And yet at the end of the story, he in a sense experiences the true and greater circumcision. He is both part of the line of chapter 17 where Abraham is circumcised and he is in fact reenacting chapter 15 where God himself takes upon himself the consequences and punishments that come if people aren't able to keep the covenant.

And so it is that by Jesus' in a sense physical circumcision and the true and greater circumcision that happens with his death upon the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he both represents the people and he represents God to create a new covenant, a new covenant where God begins to dwell with us in a new way.

That everything in the, what we call the Old Testament and what our Jewish friends call the Tanakh, everything is pointing to this time where God is going to keep not only chapter 15 and chapter 17 of Genesis but also chapter 12.

[22 : 10] That it's only when God, the Son of God, perfect God and perfect man dies on the cross that there is this possibility of a blessing that will go to all in the human race who put their faith and trust in Jesus.

And that when we put our faith and trust in Jesus, in a sense what happens as we've talked before, you reach your hand out to Jesus and you can't reach him but his hand can reach yours and he takes you and you in a sense enter into him and he enters into you and so that all that he accomplished by his life and all that he accomplished by his death and all that he accomplishes by his resurrection, you enter into that as he enters into you taking away your sin and your punishment and your shame and all that you deserve for not having lived a holy life and I'm just going to finish this thought you'll just be ready to point okay and so that is this true and greater it's also the promise of a spiritual reality that now enters into you that you now by being united to Christ you're united with him now and into eternity that death is the ending of this one created order and the entering into what God has promised of the new heaven and the new earth and now we finally have the video that I would have shown a few minutes earlier and in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night and an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with great fear and the angel said to them fear not for behold

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord and this will be a sign for you you will find a king wearing a magnificent crown no dad that's not it oh really let me try it again for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord and this will be a sign for you you will find a powerful well trained soldier no dad you did it again that's not right okay how about this and this will be a sign for you you will find a democratically elected president what no a trendy motivational speaker no way a big tech CEO a movie star time traveling cyborg no no none none of those are right the shepherds we can't find any of those okay then little miss know it all what did they find for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord and this will be a sign for you you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger oh that's right a baby does that even make sense a baby is totally helpless yeah but if

Jesus didn't come as a baby then he wouldn't have known what it was like to grow up ah but wait why did he have to grow up that's easy to save us ah well then that means that the best part about Christmas is the baby right the baby oh well guess it's time you get some sleep we got a big day ahead of us tomorrow no we're not done with the story okay just a little longer and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is Jesus was cut off that we could be connected in Jesus was cut off that we could be connected in one of the things that makes human life so hard is that you are the one who has done that wrong that makes you cut off and in many of our relationships there's no way to redeem that there's no way to make atonement for it there's no way to fix that and this is this profound part of the Bible of Jesus being cut off of entering into what it means to be cut off in the most complete and perfect way when he dies upon the cross saying my

God my God why have you forsaken me that is in fact the very very means that Jesus' death upon the cross is that true and greater circumcision that we see promised first with Abraham in the stories in Genesis and then in Jesus in his birth and then in his death and resurrection that Jesus enters into our life in weakness that when we put our faith and trust in him our separation from God is ended that in a sense a very real and true sense our eternal destiny with him is guaranteed that we can hope in that and trust in that and that he is present with us now even in our weakness even in those moments of abandonment or breaking that seems so insoluble and maybe on this side of the grave they are but we have Jesus to teach us and help us to humble us to make amends of life to say that we are sorry that we are guilty because our identity is no longer rooted in our ability to keep control of things our identity begins to be rooted more and more and more in Jesus and his true and greater circumcision his being cut off that we can be connected into him and into

[28 : 08] God for all eternity let's watch this final movie why why why why why did Jesus come to earth why forsake the majesty and fellowship of heaven exchanging a palace for a stable immortal comforts for a feeding trough and robes of glory for the feeble body of an infant an unparalleled irony this supreme unrivaled nobility experiencing absolute and total humility our sovereign God Emmanuel as a baby he didn't come to heap shame upon sinners or to judge and cast out the impious but to break bread with those called unrighteous he didn't come to illuminate every mystery of the cosmos or to enlighten the intellectual but to fulfill the testimony of prophets clothed in rags he didn't come to elevate a single nation or to advocate a particular political affiliation he came because he saw you broken in need of salvation he saw you lost and abandoned crying out surrounded by deaf ears fighting through the tears but beaten down by the torments of this world and unable to bear your distress he renounced his eternal throne walked the earth bore the stripes accepted the nails and gave up his last breath so that you could receive the breath of life our

God our holy infinite God beheld your pain perceived your heart and determined that your soul was worth dying for from the manger to the cross to the empty tomb it is all a story of profound love of a savior who rescued his children from darkness of a blameless king who declared that no sacrifice was too great for the sake of his beloved creation why did Jesus come to earth he came for you just stand and bow our heads in prayer in closing now father we give you thanks and praise you are a great storyteller that you are very wise we confess before you that there are parts of the story that when we read them we find it a bit fearful a bit barbaric we ask father that you help us to trust more and more that if we are to dig down into your word we understand and see how even in these parts which seem so hard and difficult in fact your great love and your great goodness is revealed in different ways we ask father that you fan into flame within us once again a deep appreciation for the humble birth of the savior in in in

Bethlehem 2000 years ago that that story father will be true and deep and real to us and help to shape and form our heart help to shape how we understand politics how we understand being good neighbors how we understand business how we understand service and family friendship and love how we understand prayer and how we understand hope father we ask that you bring this story deep into our hearts that we might live lives that bring you glory and we ask all of this in the name of Jesus your son and our savior amen