

Dwelling

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Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

[0 : 0 0] Father, for many of us here, maybe for everybody who's here in person and for many of the people who are watching this online, either right live or later on, the Christmas story is very familiar to us.

And Father, sometimes when a story is really familiar to us, it loses its charm, loses its power. And so, Father, we know that that can happen, and maybe it has and is happening in some of our lives.

We ask that the Holy Spirit would do that supernatural work that only you can do, that you would bring this story home to us afresh, with power. And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen.

Please be seated. I don't get to preach at funerals very much anymore, and I'm not complaining about this, by the way.

It's a good thing not to preach at funerals too often. But one of the things I do at funerals, when it comes time for me to say a few words, and I always make sure that I say a few words.

[1 : 1 0] We don't just sort of do the liturgy and have people talk about how great the person was, etc. When it comes time to speak, I always do something. Usually I'll acknowledge the many different worldviews that are present, the historic religions, the people who would say that they definitely have nothing to do with religion or spirituality.

I acknowledge that we're all different people in the room. And then I say, I would just like to take a couple of moments and just share with you my hope as a Christian in the face of death. And then I go off and I do that.

I take five, I take eight or nine or ten minutes, and I just share what my hope is as a Christian in the face of death. I'm doing something a little bit similar here. Not that it's a death tonight, although some of us might be feeling that it's very death-like with this gray zone lockdown, which begins one minute after midnight on Friday.

And with all of our different senses of loss that many, many people have. But I just want to share to you and to those of you who are participating online that Jesus changes everything.

He really does. And it's not just, you know, you might say, well, that's fine, George. There's lots of people who change things for me. You know, I met a man.

[2 : 2 5] I met a woman. I had a baby. I, you know, C.S. Lewis has changed everything for me. Derrida, Foucault, they've changed everything for me. Marx, whatever. But it's not just that Jesus changes everything for me.

It's that what really makes Jesus special and unique for me is that he died on the cross and he rose again. That changes everything. There's been many, many times throughout my early years as a Christian where I came close to walking away from the Christian faith.

And actually, one of the things which will often keep me there, I'm sure in heaven I'll find out that it had nothing to do with me. I'll probably find out that there was some little old lady in my church who had a sense from God that George was weak and she was praying for me.

And it had nothing whatsoever to do with me. It was all that little old lady. If you're that little old lady, you pray for me and for other people. You don't know how important it is.

But it's one of the things I would say. I'm rambling a bit. That's fine. One of the things I would say to shut-ins, you know, is that one of the powerful things that they can do is pray for people. Because a lot of people today don't have time to pray.

[3 : 32] And who knows? It will only be in heaven that you will discover just how much was accomplished in the church and in missions and in people's lives by your simple prayers for people. Anyway, I digress.

One of the things that would often just keep me back was the fact that Jesus just, it really is. There's so much evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. And if he really did rise from the dead, then that really does change everything.

Because we know that death is that great enemy that defeats everybody. It defeated Buddha. It defeated Muhammad. It defeats everybody. It defeats the greatest, the most famous actor, the most powerful athlete, the richest man or woman on the planet.

It defeats everyone. And if Jesus really did say that he was going to die a very particular way that he couldn't arrange, and if he really did die on that cross, and that's what history would say.

And if on the third day, even the greatest skeptics of the Christian faith acknowledge that the tomb is empty and that the body was never found. Obviously, they have problems with the next bit, which is that all of the historical data points to the fact that Jesus appeared to many, many people in many different times and places over a period of 40 days to prove not that he had somehow survived death, but that he had defeated death.

[4 : 57] And part of the thing which is so powerful about that is that it's not just that Jesus did this random thing. When I was doing something online with Dig and Delve the apologetics thing, the guy that I was doing it with, I said, if I pulled out a gun and shot Ben in the head and then he died, and three days later he came back to life, that would just be weird.

It would just be something, one of those random things that just happens that nobody can really figure out. But part of the thing which is so remarkable about Jesus, it's because of Jesus' resurrection that I'm a Christian, and it means that everything in his life starts to become very, very different and important.

But it's that Jesus' resurrection takes place in the context of this overarching story that explains human existence so well. And it takes place in the context of writings, holy writings from the Jewish people and from the early Christians.

It is so profound in its insight about the human condition. Ecclesiastes is vastly wiser than postmodernism.

It's a source of unending insight. The book of Job, the prophetic parts of Amos, and you think about how prophetic books like that inspired the civil rights movement.

[6 : 18] Let justice roll down like rivers, like a river, mighty river. And it's in this context of this, all these teachings that are so wise and so profound, and this overarching story, it's in that context that Jesus died and rose from the dead.

And so it is for us. And that overarching story has a deep beauty about it and a deep... Once you enter into it and you understand it's not just about Jesus defeating death, it has such profound emotional resonance with people in terms of what it says about the human condition and what it says about human hope.

And so it's within that context I just want to say a few more words about the Christmas story. And just to refresh your memory, it goes like this, the one that we're looking at tonight, which is Matthew 1, verses 18 to 25.

And in Matthew 1, verses 18 to 25, it says this, Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together.

She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her mother and her husband Joseph, being a just man and willing to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 50] She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus.

Jesus. We're going to show a video just in a moment. The first video, I interspersed my few words with three little videos that we'll watch. I'm just going to really talk a little bit about the powerful emotional idea of dwelling, that Jesus is Emmanuel, that he came to dwell with us.

But before we do that, this short little movie, I think, helps us to enter into these very, very simple words of Scripture in a very good and powerful way. If you look up at the screen.

If you could put up the first point, Andrew, that would be really good. You were made to dwell at peace, in joy, with the triune God and others.

[9 : 05] You were made to dwell at peace, in joy, with the triune God and others. I'm not recommending this movie, but if you watch the movie Palm Springs, I can't remember if it's on Amazon Prime or on Netflix.

It actually, it provides, it's a story about this man and then eventually a woman who continually relived the same day over and over and over again. That no matter what they do, if they try to drive away far, as soon as they fall asleep, they wake up the next morning, they relive the day.

If they kill themselves, they wake up the next day and they relive the day. It's actually sort of an idea that many people in our culture find is a very, and many different religions find is a very powerful idea, this type of the idea of this cycle of life, of this recurrence.

But as it's shown in Palm Springs in a very, very powerful way, what it creates is despair and meaninglessness. And on the other hand, there are many ways that we understand the world, that while we came as a result of just blind chance through undirected, first there was just all the blind chance that created all the matter in the universe and put it in planets and suns and galaxies.

And for some reason, there was eventually some different chance that created life, and life progressed and developed the strong eating the weak. But it's all just blind chance and the strong eating the weak.

[10 : 29] And then we came about and we now live. And if that's the origin of human existence, it's a very, very bleak type of origin. And it really ultimately means that there's an origin where there is no meaning to life.

The most that you can maybe say is if love happens to please you, then do love. If joy happens to make it, then do joy. Do the best you can. Maybe consume as much as you can or love as much as you can or do whatever it is.

But at the end of the day, you came completely and utterly randomly and you died. When you die, you go to nothing. And that's the story of human life. The Bible presents a very, very different picture.

And the reason I trust and believe the Bible is, as I said earlier, is because Jesus rose from the dead. And Jesus came within the context of the scriptures and said he fulfilled the scriptures.

And he is the one who helps understand the scriptures. And if he actually is able to defeat death, then I think it's very, very important that this story be considered. That, in fact, maybe it's true that this big story of the Bible is the true story.

[11 : 33] And in the true story of the Bible, we're not a result of blind chance or we're not as a result of some cosmic catastrophe as in many of the religions of the world when at first there was just a oneness and somehow or another a breaking apart of the oneness happened and our entire human existence is to have rebirth and rebirth until we merge once again with the one and we lose our identity, which is actually just another way of describing death.

But the Bible paints a picture that, in fact, human beings were created out of the fullness of the love and joy and beauty and glory of the triune God and that he made human beings to be in his image, to be fruitful and multiply.

He made us to subdue the earth, to love each other. And he made us so that we would dwell with him in peace. There's this wonderful image of what was lost in the beginning of Genesis 3 where it describes how God would come down to walk in the garden with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day.

And it's sort of only as it's in the context of the loss that we describe this because it happens after the fall when that great dwelling with and in peace and joy is lost.

And God sees that we have brought evil into the world by seeking to become gods ourselves, that we seeking to become gods, in fact, actually don't become gods. What we discover is death and evil.

[13 : 00] And what we discover is corruption and fall. And God acts to prevent that from completely and utterly unraveling because the fact of the matter is, is that from all eternity, the Father is loved, the Son is loved, the Holy Spirit is loved.

And he loves you. And he loves me. And so he made a promise that one day he would dwell again with his people. And he began to give them promises of how he would come and fix that which they could not fix, that he would once again come and dwell with his people.

And that's what we see here, that God, after centuries and centuries of promises by prophets, by different stories that try to communicate what God was really like and what God was not like, and stories of covenants and his desire and his heart that there would be this time when in our very depth of our being, there would be a healing of the very depth of our being that we could dwell with God again and he could dwell with us.

God is keeping his promise. And so we have here a prophecy of almost 700 years being fulfilled. And what God does is he comes to be with us in a very special way.

Let's watch, just pause in this, our sermon, and watch yet another short, cute, cutesy little video about what Jesus was like. And in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

[14 : 38] 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. 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'll 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.

[15 : 41] No way. A big tech CEO. A movie star. Time-traveling cyborg. No, no, none of those are right.

The Shepherds, we couldn'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 swathing 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 would 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, I guess it's time you get some sleep.

[16 : 48] We got a big day ahead of us tomorrow. No, we're not done with the story. Okay, just a little longer. One of the things that's just so wonderful about the big story of the Bible is that human beings don't desire to be homeless.

We desire to have a place where we can dwell. And we desire that we can dwell in a place where there's safety, where there's beauty, where you feel at one sort of with where you're living and with one with the universe.

That's what we desire. And the Bible makes that clear that that is part of every human being's, in a sense, very deep longing and a knowledge that something has been lost.

And one of the things which is so wonderful about the Christmas story is, just as it was put in that short little movie, is that Jesus came among us fully human. God, the Son of God, comes to dwell among us, being just as helpless as every one of us was when we began, which was as a zygote in our mother's womb.

And going through that nine months of birth, or a little bit less if you were premature, or a little bit longer if the birth was delayed. And then to have all of that helplessness.

[18 : 28] One of the things which causes so much problem in the world is that we feel that people make decisions about us or have views about us without ever identifying with us.

You know, if just a few blocks from here, if you were to walk around the different parts of Ottawa, especially if you walk around Centre Town, one of the things which you see throughout all of that is that businesses are shuttered.

Many, many, many businesses close. I went to the mall, one of the biggest and most popular malls, for the first time in a while the other day. And I was surprised to see in that mall how many stores were shuttered, actually.

And you can well imagine that many of those business people would say, I wonder if those people making these decisions about how to handle things, do they know what it's like to be a small business person?

Do they know what it's like to work those long hours? And it must make it very hard for them if they have a sense that the person making those decisions doesn't identify with them.

[19 : 26] Think of all of the problems we have with racial tension in our country. And I'm sure that there are many, many of them, people who would say, you know what, if those people like George were making these statements about things, it would be very, very different if he had to walk in my situation just for a week, just for a month, just to actually see what it's like to be in my skin.

And I'm sure there are many people who complain about the way gays and lesbians and others are treated in our culture, thinking that for the rest of the culture, those who don't go along with some of the things, many of the things that they want, think that if they just actually were able to really enter into our experience and see what it was like from our point of view, how things would be different.

One of the things which is so powerful about the gospel is that it's not true of Muhammad, it's not really true of Buddha, who grew up rich and thought that the secret was to end desire, but that Jesus really did completely and utterly identify in all of human weakness and frailty that he entered into the world as one of us.

In fact, he didn't come and he wasn't born in the emperor's household or anything like that. He was born in a conquered people in a relatively unimportant, conquered part of the universe and he lived a lower working class life and he lived completely among us, but he dwelt among us to save us.

You see, if you could put up the next point, Andrew, the triune God cannot dwell with you without saving you. That's the great big mystery. I mean, how could you or I, with our pride, our vanity, our envy, our lusts, our jealousies, our desire for power, for recognition, our lack of forgiveness, our concern with material things, our concern with our own glory, I mean, even the most holy Christian often wants God just to leave them alone.

[21 : 44] How could it ever be that even the most holy human being could dwell with God, with God as God, when we are so rebellious and broken and bent? But Jesus came and dwelt among us and he lived the life that we could not live ourselves.

He suffered the trials and temptations that we suffer only without sin. And then he comes and he dies in our place. I mean, he even identifies with us to the very, very point of experiencing death, but his death isn't random.

Death could have no hold on him. He dies out of love for you. And he dies in a sacrifice. In a sense, saying to you or me that when we put our trust in him, that the death that we deserved, he would die.

And the life that we could never live, he offers to us in exchange. And so it is that he dies upon the cross and rises from the dead. And so the arch of the story is that God creates everything good.

We human beings bring in evil and death and rebellion. God goes through this lengthy period of promise, culminating in Jesus, God keeping his promise. And that by the death and resurrection of Jesus, when we put our faith and trust in him, he really does come and dwell within us.

[23 : 02] In a way, well, if you could put up the final point, Andrew, that would be very helpful. Jesus, Emmanuel, saved you to dwell with him and others into eternity.

Jesus actually does come and dwell with you when you put your faith and trust in him, and he dwells with you into eternity. The very, very final chapter of the Bible, which describes the very, very final time, because the way the flow of the story goes is that God makes all things good.

Death and evil enters into the world. There's this time of promise. Jesus comes. He rises from the dead. We live in this time period of what's called the already, not yet. We have Jesus dwelling within us.

In the midst of our sin, we were made right with God, but he slowly works in those who have put their trust and faith in him as Savior and Lord to begin to fit us for heaven and for all eternity.

And then there will come the time when Jesus will return, and when he returns, this entire order will be capsized away and swept away, and a brand new heaven and earth will be created.

[24 : 07] And the end of the story is that we will dwell with God and he will dwell with us. Listen to what it says in the book of Revelation, chapter 21, verses 3 and 4.

After Jesus is returned, and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with human beings, with man and with woman.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

See, Jesus Emmanuel saved you to dwell with him and others into eternity. And when you put your faith and trust in him, that is the end of your story. He's with you and dwells with you now as you go into lockdown.

He's with you and dwells with you now as you experience times of loneliness or as you experience times of great joy, comfort in having a friendly voice that knocks a friendly person who knocks on the door or a friendly person who calls you up.

[25 : 24] He's with you in the lonely hours of the night. He's with you if you're sick. He's with you if you're healthy. When you put your faith and trust in Jesus, he is with you and dwells with you and will never leave you and will never abandon you.

And you and I will be weak many, many, many times, but our hope and confidence is not our strength but Jesus because he is the strong and mighty one who has defeated sin and defeated death.

It's not my grip on him that matters. It's his grip on me because my grip is very weak, but his is very strong. And as I hold his hand and he holds my hand, he changes me and will change me.

And one day I will see him face to face and I will be like him, able to dwell with God at peace and in joy with others in the new heaven and the new earth. And that is what Jesus asks of you is to humble yourself and come to him.

He comes to bring you peace. He comes to bring you joy. He comes to bring you healing. He comes to fit you for heaven. He comes to walk with you in your day and to promise to never leave you or forsake you.

[26 : 35] He knows your true good and your true end. And all his words, even the hardest ones, are words that ultimately are moving you towards that true good and that true end.

Just want to finish with watching this wonderful short telling of the story in spoken word. And then we'll stand and pray. Amen. Why?

Why? Why did Jesus come to earth? Why forsake the majesty and fellowship of heaven?

Why? 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

[28 : 36] And unable to bear your distress He renounced His eternal throne Walked the earth Bored 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 Behold 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 I invite you just to stand Let's bow our heads in prayer Father, we thank you for Jesus You know the different states of affairs that we're in tonight Maybe some of us pretty happy and healthy Some of us may be struggling with silent illnesses Or worries Some missing people Some of us looking forward to the people we will see tomorrow Or tonight Father, you know the different states of affairs we're in And we give you thanks and praise That you are a big God And that Jesus is a big Savior And that He can walk and does walk With each one who puts their faith and trust in Him That He will never let us go

And Father, we open ourselves to you this evening You know what our true and deepest need is And we invite you to come and move in us In our true and deepest need We hold nothing back But ask you, Father, sovereignly In your loving wisdom To come and move with power With gentle power At our point of deepest need And we ask that you help us to Once again fall in love with the story And fall in love with your Son And help us, Father Rather than turning to idols Or despair To pour out our hearts to you In both our joys and our sorrows And we ask this in the name of Jesus Your Son and our Savior Amen