

The Christmas Story for: Prophecy Lovers

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[0 : 0 0] Father, we are going to spend time listening to your word and thinking about your word and reading your word again. And we thank you, Father, that you are a God who speaks, that you have spoken in your word, and that every word in Isaiah is a word that you desire to have spoken. And so, Father, we ask that you would humble our minds and our hearts and our wills so that we might be willing to hear you speak to us, and that we might, Father, as well, while we are humble, that you would make us hungry for you, hungry for your word, not only to know about you, but to know you and to be known by you. Father, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us so your word will do a mighty work in our lives and will bear fruit for your glory.

And this we ask in Jesus's name. Amen. Please be seated. Amen. So, we have a two o'clock service in this place, and about at 1.30, I had just been coming back from getting a bite to eat on Rideau Street, and as I'm coming back down Rideau Street, I decided to go and have a cup of coffee. I thought I have a couple of minutes just to sit down, catch my breath before the service begins, and I get my coffee. I'm sitting, and I'm looking right at the beer store across the street on Rideau Street, and a fight breaks out. And in hindsight, I'm not sure if it was one guy versus two, with another guy in between, sort of trying to keep them apart by throwing punches, or whether it was two against two or what was going on, but there was a fight broke out on Rideau Street. It's sort of actually gripping, and I have to confess, because I'm a pretty peaceful type of guy, not experienced with violence, and it's a bit unsettling to see people slugging each other really hard in anger. Some people at the two o'clock service asked me if I intervened. I thought, no way in the world would I go close to that. There was a security guard, and eventually, you know, he got in and broke it up, and they wandered off, and cops came a few seconds later. Now, here's the thing. It's sort of a surprising thing to see on Rideau Street. I guess maybe not that completely surprising that we'd see a fight, but I, like you, I have no idea what happened. Like, I don't know anything about it, just other than the fact that there was a fight.

I don't know who any of the people were. I don't know what caused the fight. I don't know if the police caught them. I don't know if the fight continued around the corner. I don't know anything about it. It just sort of happens, and then it goes, and a lot of city life is like that, if you think about it. I didn't really think about it very much until I lived in a small village. I was born in Montreal, lived in Ottawa, and then a long, long, long time ago now, I lived in a little village called Eganville, which I think has 1,500 people who lives in it. I don't know if any of you have lived in a small rural town, but one of the things which is radically different about, and I, not only did I serve in Eganville, but I served another little village called Killaloo that had 700 people, and I also served a little church in Traymore, which I think had like eight people, and I served a little church called Clontarf that had zero people in Clontarf.

We Anglicans know where to put churches where there's piles of people. Anyway, so, but one of the things which was really surprising that caught me by surprise, having been from Montreal and Ottawa and living in a rural, in a small village, is you always know what went on. Like, if that had happened on the main street of Eganville, even if I didn't recognize any of the four people, I could, within half an hour or an hour, I could have found out the name of all the people. I probably could have found out who started the fight, what ended up happening.

I would have been able to find out a little bit about whether their fathers or mothers fought, like all sorts of stuff about this. And so, in small town life, there's far fewer things that just sort of happen that are, in a sense, meaningless, that you just see and then you move on.

[4 : 10] And it's us city people, we don't realize how much meaninglessness we are constantly surrounded with. And so, it causes, I think, a little bit of confusion in our thinking to be, in a sense, so unrooted and constantly surrounded by things which just pop up, go away, pop up, go away, things happen, whoa, doesn't mean anything, what's going to pop up next?

And this video that we're going to see, and if you haven't been to one of these services before, I intersperse my sermon with videos to make it more interesting for people. And so, this video sort of puts Christmas in that context.

You might not have noticed how that little video or mini-movie began, but it began with every year when we have Christmas, we, in a sense, come into the middle of a story.

And that's really not entirely how our culture thinks about this holiday anymore. It's just a holiday. It's, in fact, not even called Christmas, and that's fine. But it's all, in a sense, part of how lots of things in our culture just lose meaning. They just happen. But really, the fact that we give gifts and have lights, it's all connected to Christmas, which is all part of the story. But for many people in the city of Ottawa, maybe for many of you, it just sort of, all of a sudden, it happens. You have some obligation to buy gifts, to go hang out with family that you might or might not actually like hanging out with, and you might or might not be happy when it's all over and you can go away. And then it goes on and it just pops up. But in fact, just, it's in a sense as if we're in a little village now, and happy holidays is connected to Christmas. And in a sense, when we celebrate holidays like Christmas, we're coming into the middle of a story. And if you could wrap up the first point, Christmas is the story of the birth of Jesus, God's promised Messiah. Christmas is the story of the birth of Jesus, God's promised Messiah.

Now, you know, I worded that in a way, and I thought about how to word it. I mean, I guess you're all hoping that I don't just have things pop into my head and throw them up on the screen. But I thought about how to word that. And if you think about it for a second, there's words there like Messiah, which obviously have some type of context. One of the reasons we chose Church of the Messiah as the name for this church is because we're in a city which is always looking for the new Messiah.

[6 : 46] I mean, Justin was the Messiah for the Liberal Party, wasn't he? The Messiah for Canada, all sorts of promise. But there's obviously some history and baggage with that word, and even the word Jesus, and the fact that God would promise things. Here's the thing about the story of Christmas.

Christmas. I'm sort of dating myself a little bit, but I'm sure a few of us are old enough to remember this. But after Elvis died, there were Elvis sighting societies popped up because people would joke that Elvis didn't actually die, or that if he did die, he'd come back or something like that. In fact, there was a very well-known Elvis sighting society here in Ottawa that I think used to have as their meeting place. I think they had a regular monthly meeting of the Elvis sighting society in the... Newport, right. Yeah, okay. There's a few people who've been around the block a few times in this city at the Newport restaurant, which makes really good pizza, and they didn't pay me to tell you that. But anyway, but you see the thing, let's say Elvis actually did die and come back to life.

That would just be like normal city life. It would just mean like, whoa, what's going on with that? Like, it would just be weird. It would be in the National Enquirer. It would just be in like some, you know, just be odd. It would just pop up, not connected to anything, not meaning anything, and pop away, and we'd just scratch our head and, you know, say, good grief, you know, people are coming back from the dead. What on earth's going on, Martha? Like, that's all it would be.

But the birth of Jesus is in part of a longer story. So it's not only in the Bible, the story of the birth of Jesus, but when Jesus's birth comes, it's part of an overarching larger story in the Bible. And in the larger story of the Bible, we see that, first of all, God really does exist, and he creates everything that exists. And he creates everything that exists, and he creates it good. And then human beings, through Adam and Eve, they have this special relationship, just as we human beings have a special relationship with the created order. Outside of the pure flow of cause and effect of the created order, Adam and Eve are federal or covenant heads. They chose to be like God, rather than just being willing to be with God and have God be God. And when they desired to be like God, and so disobeyed God and did what they wanted because they wanted to set up their order, their control, their authority, their autonomy, everything in the created order became bent or twisted. Some of that bentness and twistedness you can see very, very clear because there's some very, very, very evil things that go on in the world. But all of us know that something of a bentness comes with even the best things in human beings. And I think that no story other than Christian story can explain human experience as well as this larger story. And so we were created good, bent and twistedness, or the fall, that's the technical word, came into human and the created life. And then immediately in the second part of Genesis 3, God begins to make promises that he will fix it. And what we call the Old Testament is a series of stories and events that all involve God both making promises about how he's going to fix it and also preparing us for when he does come to fix it. And so we're going to watch this other video. And as Andrew's just getting it set up, this sort of gives you a little bit of a sort of a sweep of the Old Testament coming up until the birth of Jesus. When I was watching this with my grandson, Ruben, the other night, what I did to him was I would whisper in his ear, you can do this to kids, what the different pictures represented.

So we had a bit of a context for the story. And if some of you aren't very familiar with Christian things, you're just going to look puzzling. But a lot of the best known stories of the Old Testament are all woven together to lead up to this point of the birth of Jesus. Andrew?

[10:59] I find it absolutely astounding that anybody could draw and paint like that. I would love to have almost had a separate video, probably would be too long, showing the person, man or woman, who did that. It's quite remarkable. So going back to the fight that I saw on Rideau Street earlier on today, where it just seems to happen. But obviously, there was meaning to that fight.

Words were spoken. Something led all of those four different men who were involved in the fight to that point where they would meet on Rideau Street and have that confrontation. And not only after they were finished punching and kicking each other, but they were yelling at each other and trying to punch each other again. So obviously, there was some type of meaning and conversation that went on.

I mean, part of the things about us as human beings is that we need meaning. To have no meaning at all is absolutely almost completely impossible for human beings. We desperately crave it. We constantly are asking in relationships, well, what did they mean when they said that? What did that mean that that happened to me? We need to have meaning? And so it's not surprising that there's spiritualities and religions which claim to give meaning, and that in fact, that God claims to be able to tell us about things that have meaning. And when I said that there's this overarching story of the Christian story that begins with creating everything's being created good, and then from that it goes to the fall, or evil enters in, human beings decide they want to be like God, and that changes them in their relationship with God, and a twistedness and a bentness enters in. And then God, as I said it, God then prepares people. He promises that he will fix things, and he prepares people for how he's going to fix it, and that means that God speaks, and that he speaks into our situation so that he makes clear to us the meaning of things that are going on in our lives, and he also speaks about things that he's going to do in the future. And if you think about it for a second, that's exactly what we're very, very familiar with. On one hand, there's individual psychic types or channelers, Ramtha, Celestine prophecies, too many to count. Maybe some of you know a whole pile of them. And they are both, these individuals claim to be able to speak into your life in terms of how you should be living your life and the meaning of your life, and also claim to be able to predict things in the future that are going to happen. And there's not only individual people who talk like this, but there's collective movements and ideas. Marxism, communism, Nazism. When we talk about thought today of being progressive thought, progressive thought implies that somehow there's this collective understanding about the nature of the future, what the future is going to be like, and we're to live in line with what's moving towards this future where things will be better. And that's what progressive thought is.

And Nazism thought it knew the future, and communism thought it knew the future. And so there's these collective things, and we see the same type of thing in Christianity. And so now we're actually going to open the Bible, because what I want to just talk to you a little bit about is one of those prophecies in the Bible. So I mean, on one hand, we're surrounded with human beings being familiar with this.

That's what progressive thought is. It's what communism did. It's what Nazism did. It's what individual psychics and channelers all claim. And in the sea of this apparent human desire that there could be something that speaks about the meaning of our life and what the future is like, the Bible does the same type of thing. And I'll give you an example of it. It's Isaiah chapter 9. John just read a little bit earlier. If you have Bibles and you want to follow along, we're just going to look at it very briefly.

[15:19] Isaiah 9. And it begins like this. But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. And as soon as I say those two words, I can hear the brains going shut, and the eyeballs going glaze, and the ears going Zebulun and Naphtali. Now that's really clear. Here's the thing about this, just to give it a little tiny bit of a context. The person who's writing this, it looks very fancy now because it's in sort of a fancy book that I'm holding. But the person who wrote this was writing 733 years before the birth of Jesus when he wrote this. And so he's talking about the land of Israel. And at this point in time, there's Israel in the north, which is most of Israel, and a tiny little bit at the bottom called Judah. And in the year 722 BC, a very powerful empire known as the Assyrians, they were able to complete their conquest of all of Israel and completely and utterly defeat it.

And in fact, take its people away so that all of the people who lived in what was then Israel, we don't know whatever happened to them. They completely disappear from history. But Assyria didn't eat up all of Israel in one big gulp. Think Russia and Ukraine.

And so Isaiah is talking about that part of Israel, which is at the north where the Assyrian invasion begins. And so the first part of Israel that gets gobbled up, in other words, humbled, treated with contempt, is the northern part. That's Zebulun and the Fatali. So I'll just keep reading.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the northern part. But in the latter time, he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, the Galilee of the nations. Now just sort of pause here for a second before I read anything farther.

One of the things which is very unique about biblical prophecy, and it's very confusing for some of us when we try to read it, is if you were listening very carefully, which maybe you weren't, it's all past tense.

[17 : 48] It's all past tense. This is stuff that's happened in the past. And it's the reason is, is that Isaiah believes that God has revealed this to him. And so the future is so certain that he writes it in the past tense.

That's what he's doing. The future is so certain because God tells him this, that he writes it in the past tense. And so all the way through this, it's going to sound like past tense, but it's as if Isaiah is standing well in the year 35, after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's as if he's standing there, and the things which led up to the time of the birth of Jesus and his life and death and resurrection.

Now all of these other things that were going on, they make sense. But here's his prophecy. It continues like this. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they defy the spoil. And so it pictures this time of people being in great darkness. And in the midst of the darkness, God is going to bring light. And he's going to bring a type of victory and liberation and freedom. He goes on in verse four to say this, for the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you are broken as on the day of the Midian. It's an image of, there's actually two images here. The first image is of the Exodus of God delivering his people from bondage in a mighty empire of Egypt to the Red Sea. And the other is the story of Gideon and how Gideon takes 300 soldiers and God does a mighty miracle. And the story of Gideon takes place in Zebulun and

Naphtali. In other words, the beginning of this profound act of liberation from God is going to begin in the very place where Israel began to be humbled in the north. And then in verse five, it goes on and says, for every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. We just want to pause here for a second. This is a very interesting image. Andrew, could you put up the next point, please? Biblical prophecy speaks of God acting for people in such a way that there is no room for human boasting or pride. The world is filled with proud Christians. The world is filled with Christians who are consumed with vanity and arrogance. But the more proud and arrogant we are, the less we are as God desires. Biblical prophecy speaks of God acting for people in such a way that there is no room for human boasting or pride. Remember, I just, those of you might not know the story of Gideon. One of the things about the story of Gideon is that God, they're being oppressed by Midian and Gideon calls out thousands of people and God says, no, no, I'm going to beat the

Midianites in such a way that no human being can boast. So get rid of most of them. He gets rid of most of them. He says, there's still way too many. You still might boast. So all that was left is huge thousands and thousands, tens of thousands of Midianites and God said, we're going to take 300 people and I'm going to win a victory so that no one can boast. And what's seen here in verse 5, the image in verse 5, is not that human beings had been used to defeat evil, but that God has done this mighty victory and after the mighty victory is over, human beings come and they take the wood of the weapons and the clothing and they burn it in the fire. That's how they heat their houses.

[21 : 59] It's how they just have bonfires out in pastures because it's fun and that there's no boasting possible. See, this is one of the interesting things about biblical prophecy. People who claim to be very good at channeling and connecting with spirits and knowing what the present is and what the future is, they all like lots of money. I think the person who does the Celeste, Ramtha, I think, you know, she lives in a 12,000 square foot house, has piles and piles and piles and piles of money. And the fact of the matter is, is that when you think of these collective things that go on like progressive politics and progressive cultural movements and Marxism and communism and any other type of collective that claims to know the future, it all in fact feeds on human pride.

Part of the reason that people want to know the future is so they can have power. But in the Bible, because it's God who speaks, God acts in such a way that there is no room for human boasting or pride. In fact, this can be seen right here in a moment when the prophecy continues. So here we see that God is going to do this thing in the future that's going to be a profound act of liberation. So obviously he's talking, he's going to be talking about superheroes.

He's going to be talking about the Avengers. He's going to be talking about some unbelievably powerful weapon. He's going to be talking about some powerful force like the force that allows you to defeat powerful things. But what comes out of his breath, what comes next? Verse six, for to us a child is born. A little tiny baby. After the service, I don't know who the youngest baby is in the room. Maybe it's Elena. Go look at Elena. She's really cute. But go look at Elena.

That's a little baby younger than that's what's going to defeat all of these things. Only God can do something like that. Could you imagine Stalin saying, to us a child is born? Stalin is famous for saying, when it was said that the Pope was opposed to him, Stalin famously said, how many battalions of tanks does that man have? He's just a crazy old celibate locked up in an old city.

I have tanks. For to us a child is born. To us a son is given. And the government shall be upon his shoulder. And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Notice this connection, that this child is God. Andrew, could you play the next video?

[24 : 57] Isn't that what Christmas is all about? God, a loving Father, giving himself to his children so we can live.

Amen. For to us a child is born. To us a son is given. And the government shall be upon his shoulder. And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. And then the prophecy pauses in a sense. And Isaiah comes back to his own time. And he says, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. 730 years before the birth of Jesus. And what better gift can God give us than himself?

What better gift can God give us than himself? And so he promises in a world that's filled with darkness and gloom and violence and evil is part of life and darkness and violence is part of life. And we human beings know as well that there is something of hope. And I think it's only in the Christian story that there can be this profound promise that the way that God will fix the twisted and bentness of the world is with him giving himself for us so that we might have life.

Real hope requires the eternal creator God to make an unbreakable promise to ordinary people like you and me.

[27 : 13] Real hope requires the eternal creator God to make unbreakable promises to ordinary people like you and me.

Who would fly on a plane if we knew that 85% of the time while the plane is in the air it was going to work?

Who would fly on a plane if they were told that 99% of the time it would work and the other 1% it wouldn't? And the fact of the matter is that human hope is completely and utterly always broken because we can't make unbreakable promises.

If there is to be real hope, it has to be offered by the eternal God, the creator God, who makes an unbreakable promise to ordinary people like you and me in such a way that it actually enters into our 24-7 lives.

Now, I think one of the reasons why Isaiah was hailed as a prophet by the Jewish people is that obviously he not only spoke wisdom into their day and he spoke about things that were going to take 700 years or longer to fulfill, but he also told of things like the coming Assyrian invasion and so they believed he was a prophet.

[28 : 46] At the end of the day, I believe that these are true prophecies in a world which is filled with people who claim to know the future. I would say that almost all of that is counterfeit, but that this was a true prophecy which actually got fulfilled.

And I believe it because Jesus was vindicated in an historical manner. It's an Easter sermon, not a Christmas sermon. But the fact is that there is surprisingly a large amount of evidence that Jesus not only lived, but that he actually died and that on the third day he rose from the dead in history.

And the Christian faith is rooted in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. And Jesus' resurrection vindicates him and vindicates what he said about himself and vindicates prophecies like this, that God would come and dwell among us, that Jesus would be the Prince of Peace, that he would be the one who brings peace between human beings and not only the created order but our Creator.

And this is available to any human being who calls out with an honest heart that they no longer want to be like God, but they want to have God take them to himself and rescue them.

Just the other day, I was in a Starbucks and I heard a woman, two women talking beside me. They were both about my age.

[30 : 25] And they were casually dismissive of people like myself. And they were very smug. And there's only one thing which is required to know God.

And that is to actually hunger and seek for him. And if you call out for him, because you are not smug, but know that you need a hope to face the future, and that there is a darkness and a gloom within you that cannot be defeated by yourself, and you don't want to just have stories that might come and go, but actually be able to have a type of security rooted in the security of the eternal God.

Well, then, well, it's time for you to call out to the one who proved that he can speak into the future, and who came and dwelt among us as a baby.

Because what better gift can God give for us than himself? And with that, a new and eternal life. Andrew, if you could play the final video, and then after it's over, I'll ask you to stand and we'll pray.

Amen. I invite you to stand.

[31 : 51] Father, we confess before you that self-justification and self-righteousness is the very last idol that will ever die in our lives. That we are deeply addicted to self-justification and self-righteousness.

And we give you thanks and praise, Father, that you do not weigh our merits, but pardon our offenses. That you see our great vanity, and our great delusions, and our great illusions, and our great self-preoccupation, and our intermittent desire and hunger for you.

And still you loved us, and sent your Son to die upon the cross, to make us right with you. Father, we ask that you fan into flame within us a deep desire to put to death, to put to death all self-righteousness and self-justification in our own lives.

To put to death within us our great addiction to human boasting and pride. And create within us a deep humility before the babe in Bethlehem who died upon the cross.

And rose again to make us right with you. Father, grant us a humility and a longing before him. That he might be our Savior.

[33 : 07] And that we might walk with him. With him as our Lord. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.