

# Christmas Eve 2004

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I wonder if you would turn in your service leaflet back to page 2, to the reading of Zechariah chapter 2 at the top of the page.

It's great to welcome you here for this Christmas Eve service. It's a great way to welcome in Christmas 2004, be together singing the praises of Jesus Christ. This little passage from the prophet Zechariah has two truths that go right to the heart of what Christmas is about, the heart of the Christian faith itself.

And the first is God's coming. Just look at the first line there. Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord.

That promise is a window, a shaft of light into the heart of God, what his purposes and his intentions are. He says, I am going to come, and I am going to dwell in the midst of you.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the God who is coming towards us, who wishes to dwell with us, and live with us, and be with us. And I think it's very important as we start to recognize this is not something that we can manage.

[ 1 : 2 5 ] It's not something that we can organize or manipulate. It happens because of God's free choice. We can't influence it or arrange it or control it, and happily we can't mess it up either.

But God's declaration here, his determination and his promise is that I will come to you and I will dwell with you, and if it's going to happen, it's going to be God who does it.

And it's a promise of incredible richness. It's spoken into a situation of devastation beyond human repair. When Zechariah spoke this prophecy some 500 years before Jesus was born, the city of Jerusalem was in ruins, the houses and the walls were demolished, and the temple had been razed to the ground.

And it is in this gloom that the word of the Lord comes to Zechariah, and it is in this gloom that the hope comes to the people of God, I will come and dwell with you.

But ever since the Garden of Eden, this has been a terrible problem for us. When God created us, he made us for friendship, for fellowship, for communion with one another and with him.

[ 2 : 4 6 ] We have been created to know one another and to know him and to be joined together. And when in the garden, the man and the woman declared independence from God and said, we're not going to obey you, we'll obey the voice of the servant, the serpent, and played God, the immediate result was a separation and a rupture, both in their relationship with God and in their relationship and our relationship with one another.

So you remember when God comes walking in the cool of the day, and he says, where are you? Adam and Eve are hiding. And he says, what have you done?

And they point the finger straight at each other, and they blame one another. They do what all of us do when we're found out. They blame the other person. Because of sin, everything now changes.

Instead of harmony, instead of mutual kindness and love, there is guilt and blame and damage. And that means that the presence of God is no longer just the source of life and joy and hope.

It now becomes the source of guilt, of hiding, and of fear. It's like light. When light shines on us, we love it or hate it depending upon what we're doing.

[ 4 : 02 ] And since the Garden of Eden, God's coming to us and dwelling with us poses a terrible problem. God hasn't changed, but we have.

We can no longer look God in the face and say, I'm an innocent person, I have no sin. And you know, every time in the Bible when God appears in a vision to someone, the instant reaction of a human is terror.

Do you remember when Isaiah went to church and he saw a vision of the Lord? It rattled him. He said, I am, literally, I'm unraveled. I'm ruined. But the remarkable thing is that God doesn't give up.

And the story of the Bible is basically the story of how God is going to come to us and dwell with us to give us what we cannot achieve. Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for lo, I come, and I'll dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord.

Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day and shall be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of you. It's a wonderful promise. It's out of his sheer promise, out of his sheer mercy and sheer grace.

[ 5 : 14 ] Yes. See, God is committed to us in a way that we just cannot understand. He loves us not because we deserve it, not because he looks at us and he says they would make magnificent prospects and promising candidates.

He doesn't love us because what if he gets out of it? He loves us because of who he is. I heard an ad on the radio this week for a new cell phone deal.

Let's just call the company Smellers. And it finished the commercial with these enticing words, more minutes, more coverage, more love.

I signed up immediately. But you see, it's not that kind of love that the Bible talks about. It's not we pay a little bit to God and we get something in return.

He has made us for himself. And you are more precious to God and I am more precious to God than we can imagine. Not because of something in us, but because of who he is.

[ 6 : 23 ] Again and again, when God reveals his love in the Bible, he gives analogies. He gives an analogy of a parent with a child or a husband with his wife.

But all the analogies fail to express the wonder of his love. In the very sentence before this in Zechariah, God says this, Whoever touches you touches the apple of my eye.

Now, eyes are very sensitive things. And God says, I feel so tenderly about you that when you are hurt, it's like someone's poking me in the eye.

That is why this coming that is promised in Zechariah is going to be different. Look at the last line for a moment. Be silent all flesh before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

God has got up from where he dwells and he is going to move to a different place. He is going to come in a completely different way. It is, of course, the promise of the birth of Jesus.

[ 7 : 31 ] Because in the manger, 2,000 years ago when Jesus was born, God became flesh and dwelt among us. It was the most human of events, but at the same time, God was fulfilling the promise he made to Zechariah 500 years before.

The man Jesus Christ, the baby Jesus Christ, is the one in whom all the fullness of God dwelt bodily.

The man Jesus Christ has all the perfection and majesty and beauty and humility and love of God the Father. In Jesus, God the Lord has come to dwell among us.

That is why if you read the Gospels, you will hear Jesus saying, he is one with the Father, that he is our maker and our judge, that he stands before our life and after our life, that no one can honour God and worship God unless they honour him and worship him, that he has the keys of death and hell, and that if we trust him, he will give us the gift of eternal life.

And if you watch Jesus, you can see him walking on water and healing the sick. You can see him calming the storm and raising the dead.

[ 8 : 48 ] And if you listen to him, he says, I am the water of life. I am the bread of life. I'm the light of the world. I'm the word of God. I'm the very marrow and source of life itself, he is saying, because he is God come to dwell among us.

This is the first truth the passage teaches, God's coming. But there is a second, and it is our response. And there are two urgent responses that God commands of us in this passage.

And the first is in the first line, sing and rejoice, God says. It's a command. Sing and rejoice, for lo, I come. It's very important for you and me to sing and to enter into the joy of God's coming in Jesus Christ.

It's no use really being a spectator. Far be it from me to say that you look like you need to sing and rejoice a little bit more, but clearly God thinks that you and I do.

Steve Ballmer is the CEO of a company called Microsoft. And a few years ago, he was at a developers conference and he was introduced to the waiting audience.

[ 10 : 11 ] And as he came out on stage, he ran across the stage, screaming with excitement. And then he ran to the microphone, screaming with excitement.

And he screamed for about a minute, again and again and again, pumping the air with his fists. And he would yell at people, come on! And then he would scream as hard as he could.

And it went on for a very long time. It feels like a long time. It was probably only a minute. And then he finished it by saying, four words. He said, I love this company.

And he looked as though he was very much going to have a heart attack, which would have spoiled it entirely, I think. And the consensus on the internet is that if you had as much money as Steve Ballmer, then you'd forget yourself like that and scream for joy as well.

But I'm guessing that if Steve Ballmer were here tonight and we asked him, what's really important in your life? He would not say, my net worth.

[ 11 : 21 ] He would talk about his family and he would talk about his close friends. And if you asked him in 10 years or in 20 years or in 200 years, his answer would be even clearer.

I mean, if you want to see someone's eyes light up, ask them about their children. If you want to see what really weighs heavily on people, on their burdens, it's not job satisfaction.

It's not money worries or entertainment or lack of things. It's family. It's close friends. Because God has made us for friendship and for fellowship, not just with those around us, but with him.

And in the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, God offers us the one thing we need above anything else and it is friendship with him.

It is the forgiveness of our sins. It is the promise of life to come. And I don't know if you've ever thought about this or not, but God entering our world as a human baby is a stunning act of condescension, of humility.

- [ 12 : 36 ] This week I read about, you may have read too, the most expensive yacht that has ever been built has just been unveiled. It's costing \$300 million or so.
- It's bigger than the Royal Britannia. It's owned by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, who's the Crown Prince of Dubai. It has its own submarine, for those of you who may be interested, along with other luxuries.
- But the chairman of the company who builds these yachts said something very interesting. He said, entertaining guests on a yacht is much more special than just bringing them to your villa.
- Rich people can go to a beautiful hotel and pay \$3,000 a night for a suite. The trouble is that when you go down the lift, you're in the lobby with people who paid 20 times less.
- And my clients don't like that. There's a lovely honesty, I think, in that quote, isn't there? Who is it that's speaking here in Zechariah?
- [ 13 : 43 ] It's not the Crown Prince of Dubai. It's God himself. He is the creator and the owner of all things. And he's not inviting us for a weekend to his villa.
- He's not dropping down in the elevator and holding his nose for a brief visit. In Jesus Christ, he comes to dwell among us. He doesn't stand at a distance.
- He became one of us to seek us out, to save us. Jesus said, I have come to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many.
- That's why our hymns and carols are full of joy. The carol that we sang before the second reading in that first verse says, joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies with the angelic hosts proclaim.
- Christ is born in Bethlehem. And when we finish the service, we're going to sing, O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant. Sing choirs of angels, sing in exultation.
- [ 14 : 49 ] Come on you citizens of heaven, come let us adore him, Christ the Lord. I don't know what you've experienced in the last 12 months.
- It may be prosperity, it may be loss, grief or suffering. I don't know what the next 12 months holds for you, but this I can say, that in Jesus Christ, God has come for you.
- And in his life and in his death and in his resurrection, he has opened the gate of heaven and he's offered us a living hope and the prospect of face-to-face friendship and fellowship with him and with his people forever.
- So our first response is urgent, that we sing and rejoice. And the second response is in the last line where he says, be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself.
- And the obvious question is, how can we be silent if we're supposed to sing and rejoice? Well, the answer, of course, is that they're both actions and they're both attitudes. And when God says here, be silent, he's speaking about obedience and submission because the baby boy born in Bethlehem is also God, the Lord, who made the sea and the sky, the one to whom we will one day give an account.
- [ 16 : 17 ] Be silent, all flesh, probably because we are flesh, one of the most powerful photographs that was taken on September 11th in 2001 is a photograph of Tiger Woods.
- Some of you might have seen this. He was playing a round of golf when the planes hit the towers and there's a photograph of him and he's looking at a television screen as the towers fall and all the horror is on his face.
- His eyes are wide open and he has placed his hand across his mouth like this and he is silent. And here in the passage it is exactly the opposite.
- Instead of horror, there is something happening that is so good and so gracious, so full of beauty and so full of wonder beyond our imagination that we must put our hands over our mouths.

Just think of what it cost Jesus Christ to come for us, to leave the eternal security of heaven, to be born a baby, to live a life of rejection and suffering, to be rejected by those whom he came for, to be flogged and to be crucified.

[ 17 : 40 ] It was for us he came. It was for us he died and it was for us he rose again and we ought to be silent before him to stop our mouths long enough so that we can hear his words, to stop our own arrogant, swelling, foolish mouths and receive what he says and surrender to him.

I heard a commentator this week on the radio commenting on Christmas and he said in a moment of great condescension, well Jesus is alright by me, he said.

Well I'm sure Jesus is absolutely thrilled to pieces to hear it. It would have been much better for him to have been silent for Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, God with us.

So bow before him and sing and rejoice. And I want to finish with this. I want to read to you the last two verses in all the Bible where Jesus says, Surely I am coming soon.

And the writer says, Amen, come Lord Jesus. And it is speaking not of his first coming but of his second coming. And when he comes again he will not come in weakness as a baby boy but in power and majesty with all his holy angels.

[ 19 : 07 ] And his coming won't be confined to one place. It will be worldwide, universal, instantaneous, glorious and inescapable. And we are very fortunate to live between the two comings of Jesus Christ.

We can look back and we can see the Son of God entering the world, dying for our sins, rising from the dead. We look back and we can hear his words that he has gone into heaven and he said he is going to return to heaven as judge of the living and the dead.

And he has told us that when he comes he will make a new heavens and a new earth and he will take all those who belong to him to be with him forever. And if Zechariah's hearers had reason to be silent we have more.

And if Zechariah's hearers had reason to sing and rejoice we have much, much, much more. So let's sing. Would you stand and join me as we sing our next hymn Joy to the World the Lord is come.

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