

2024 Christmas Eve 8 PM Service

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Date: 24 December 2024

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Now it is possible to come to a Christmas service like this and go out completely unchanged. You may have been invited by someone or you may be hoping for a bit of inspiration that you could have a slightly nicer life by being here tonight.

But that's not really what the manger means. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see. That gets a bit closer to it. If I could change images, Christmas should give us spiritual whiplash.

It begins with unimaginable, it brings together unimaginable extremes as the cosmic choirs of angels declare the birth of the desire of nations and the baby born in the cattle shed with all its smells and degradation.

That the baby in the arms is one in whom all the fullness of God dwells bodily, no part of God outside the defenceless baby. It's not there to make our lives nicer, but to bring the greatest change, not just in our lives, but in the world.

And the passage that Hannah just read to us from Colossians 1 is like a roller coaster set on the top of Mount Everest. And it's a brilliant meditation for us for just a few minutes of the mind-bending, heart-expanding, life-changing news of what Christmas is.

[1 : 41] The Apostle Paul who writes this makes two points. The first is the what of Christmas, and the second is the so what of Christmas. So if you're someone who struggles to remember points, what and so what.

Point one, the what of Christmas. In the middle section, verses 15 to 20, it shows us in an unrivaled and unparalleled way that the baby Jesus is God.

Just listen to a couple of the phrases from that passage. Verse 15, he's the image of the invisible God. He's the perfect, final and full revelation of God.

You want to see God whom no human has ever seen? There he is in the arms of Mary. There he is helping a leper. There he is dying on the cross.

Our full and perfect human identity is there in Jesus Christ. He is the image of the invisible God.

And then Paul says in verse 15, he's the firstborn of all creation, which doesn't mean he was born first, but he's the one over whom, who rules over all creation.

[2 : 58] All things, Paul says, were created by him. All things were created through him. All things were created for him. He was there in the beginning.

He is there at the end. He created all things. God created all things for him. Everything that has a beginning had its beginning in him.

And in him, all things hold together. The unifying reality of the heart of everything is the supreme Lord and ruler of creation, ruler of the church, the baby Jesus.

Or take this, verse 19. All the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him. Not a single part of God outside that baby.

It's not just that the baby is fully God, but that God is fully in Jesus. All the fullness of life and meaning and purpose. All the fullness of the love of God.

[3 : 58] It's all in Jesus, born in the manger. And then in the passage, the roller coaster hits the lip and dies. And though the fullness of God dwelt in the baby, he was dead.

The one who had no beginning, who became flesh in the manger, the real and only God, he dies. And I know this is primarily what Easter is about.

But it wouldn't be possible apart from Christmas. There is no one who's left a higher place than Jesus Christ. There's no one who's left greater security and honour and glory to become a vulnerable baby, to face the wrath of God for our sin.

This is almost the opposite of the way we put Christmas together. Famous Vancouver media outlet today tells us their understanding of Christmas, and I quote, it's the gathering with family and

friends, it's enjoying wide-eyed children, it's savouring the lights and music, and it's going further to be kind.

We love all those things. But we're aiming at nostalgia. We're aiming at cosiness. But the manger means rejection.

[5 : 19] Jesus coming to save by dying. And the Apostle Paul gathers up all these things about Jesus, the what of Christmas, and he concludes by saying, that in all things, Jesus Christ might be preeminent, above all others, the highest and first place, the effective governor, controller of all things, Jesus Christ sufficient and supreme over all, the baby in the manger, that is the what.

What's the so what? Well, we could do quite a few of them. Let me just mention two so what's. If that is true, the first so what is this.

It's all or nothing with Jesus. You know, if he was just a great spiritual teacher or a guru or a guide or an expert, there are limits to the rights that he can have over you and me.

And I can cherry pick the things that he teaches that I like and reject some of the others. And I still have a right to hold opinions and behaviours that he doesn't like.

But if Jesus is the beginning and the middle and the goal of creation, if he is at the centre and the heart of all God's purposes, and if he is to be preeminent in everything, then he has to be preeminent in me and he has to be preeminent in you.

[6 : 50] It's all or nothing for him. And if he's preeminent, you can't come to him and say, look, I like a lot of what you have to say, but I have a couple of non-negotiables.

I've got some fixed opinions and behaviours and you're not going to agree to these, so we just should disagree and get along. It's like saying to Jesus, I know more than you do and it's my life and I will be preeminent, not you.

And it's just not going to work. If we have anything in our lives that's as supreme as Jesus, it's like entering into a monkey trap. You know, the monkey traps where hunters try and trap monkeys by putting peanuts in a hole in a tree, large enough for the monkey to put their arm in, but when they grab a hold of the peanuts, they can't pull their arms out and so it's fatal for them.

The same for us. If we hold on to anything that Christ tells us to let go of, we make it supreme and it puts our lives in danger as well.

We cannot know the supreme one if there's anything else in our life that is supreme. It would be like saying to him, look, I know the Bible says you're the beginning and the end. I know the Bible says you hold everything together, including my thoughts and my body and my abilities.

[8 : 16] I just don't like the idea of someone being supreme over me. I want life on my terms.

Thank you very much. But the Jesus who came in the manger is the same Jesus who goes to the cross.

He doesn't come to add a little bit of spirituality to our lives. He doesn't come to help us cope better with life or to give us a little bit of an increase of inner peace.

He comes to be supreme and preeminent in your life and in mine. It's all or nothing with Jesus. We keep on wanting to make a middle space, but it doesn't exist.

And when God does open our eyes and we begin to see the preeminence of Jesus, we say, I can't believe what Christ has done for me. I want my life now to count.

I want to make a difference to people around me. I'm not here for a comfortable little life. I want to live the one who's supreme. So that's the first so what, all or nothing.

[9 : 21] The second so what is friends or enemies. Because coming to Christ is not gritting your teeth and capitulating to a vastly superior power.

It's not picking up a rule book and trying to read off 10,000 do's or don'ts. It's more like falling in love. Because the one who is supreme is not there to crush people into submission.

But he came to give himself in love for us. And it is this sense of his love for us and his desire for us and the lengths that he's willing to go for us that can begin to melt our hearts to him.

The reason he came, this passage said, was because of his eternal love. Verse 21. And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he's now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.

In other words, before coming to Christ, we were alienated from God. He withdrew himself from us. He chose not to be close to us.

[10 : 39] And the reason for that is because we are hostile in mind. In our hearts, we are antagonistic to God and we break his heart. There's no such thing as being spiritually neutral with

Christ, for example.

It's impossible to be neutral observers of Christ. He is either supreme in our lives or not. He is either the one most worthy of our love or he's not.

And you might measure the antagonism of your heart as I was explaining something of his preeminence a moment ago. But here is the remarkable thing.

That Christmas tells us that God takes the initiative to reconcile us to himself. In Christ, we have the forgiveness of our sins, a new slate, a new life, a new friend, a new God.

Stan Grant is an award-winning journalist and TV presenter and author from Australia. He's an Aboriginal man who's worked all around the world and about seven years ago he left a glittering career in the media, distressed by the ineffectiveness of the media to make any change.

[11 : 56] And he writes this, our age is riven with hostility and our wounds are our weapons. We're proud of our identities and choose our sides.

At the lower end of the scale it may result in unseemly social media spats. At the extreme it sets fire to our world. Toxic identity is the devil's playground and the media often the devil's accomplice.

The media perpetuates conflict. They are unforgiving and judgmental. At worst they widen division and it's unsustainable. We see everywhere what a world of hate, vengeance and hostile identity does.

And then he says this, politics is not the answer. Justice is not the answer. Rights are not the answer. He says you cannot build a world on politics or justice or rights or truth.

He says the only thing that you can build a world on is forgiveness. Interesting, isn't it? And Jesus would say that's exactly why it came.

[13 : 09] It's far more important forgiveness than just wiping the slate clean. It's a new power. It's a new beginning. A new reality. That's why we sing about the manger.

Because the child born came from God bringing forgiveness and healing in his wings. He went to the cross to face the results of our hostility to God so that we would be welcomed into the circle of his love.

And you know before Christ came in the manger in the Bible whenever God came near he came as a whirlwind or a fire or an earthquake or a tornado. But when he comes as a baby he says I'm giving you to myself.

I'm giving you myself. Take me in your arms. And the way we do that is simply by saying to him Lord I've tried to be preeminent.

I've lived as though I'm supreme but I recognize you as preeminent over all things. Thank you for entering our world and dying in our place.

[14 : 20] Thank you for bringing me forgiveness and reconciliation. Please forgive me and enable me to live to please you. cast out our sin and enter in and be born in us today.

And he will. He promises to deliver us from the rule of darkness to transfer us into his kingdom and then in the end to present us holy and blameless before God.

And as Christ enters in he floods our hearts with hope and glory and joy. And I think that's enough to enable us to sing hallelujah.

Amen. Amen. Amen.