

Christmas Eve Cantata and Carols

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[0 : 00] Let us pray while we're standing. Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts be pleasing! and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Maker and our great Redeemer. Amen. You may be seated.

I Welcome. My name is Jordan. I'm one of the ministers here, and it's such a joy to share this moment with you. There was a novelist who once said that the greatest danger of Christmas is domesticating it, reducing it to a message of hope for a weary world, or a message of peace for our anxious hearts, or a message of meaning for our difficult lives. Those are all good things, all things that the Savior gives us, but the message of Christmas is so much more. It's so much bigger than us, and it contextualizes all the difficulties and problems and troubles of our lives and a much greater purpose and power and plan of Almighty God.

Christmas is nothing less than the beginning of the remaking of the world, the realignment of the principalities and the powers of the world. And I love the way that one poet put it. He said, Christmas sets the center of the world on its edge. On the edge of the empire where Jesus is born far from power and privilege. Sets the world on the edge of town where there's no room in the inn, and so Jesus is born in a trough. On the edge of society where shepherds are the first ones to hear about the great Savior and King. And so what happens at Christmas is a great reversal.

It turns the power coordinates of the world upside down because we discover that very God of very God is laying in a feeding trough. Eternal glory is wearing nappies. He who holds the stars in space is being held in human arms. And he who owns the cattle on a thousand hills is asking his mother for milk.

And when we get this, when this earth-shattering and this mind-bending reality starts to open our hearts and minds to the plans and purposes and power of God, then our lives, man, our lives, they're put in a whole new perspective. Our hope, our dreams, our anxieties, our fears, a whole new perspective. It's a bit like if you lived in Vancouver your whole entire life and you thought it was the biggest, brightest, and best city in the world. You never knew anything outside of it. And then you got on one of those float planes or took a helicopter ride over it for the first time. And you realized, oh, Vancouver is grand and as big as I thought it was, it's just one little piece of a vast creation. Or it's like viewing Earth from an astronaut's camera for the first time from outer space. And realizing that as big as our planet is and as grand as the problems are that trouble our hearts, it's just one small piece of God's vast cosmos. This is what the message of Christmas does. It puts our lives in the whole new perspective on reality. And we come to see our lives in God's great, powerful purposes for the world. And the way that Luke tells the story in Luke chapter 2, the story of Jesus' birth, gives us this perspective shift in two ways.

[3 : 35] We're shown the power of Jesus' birth, and then we're shown the purpose of Jesus' birth. So let's look at the power of his birth. Luke contrasts two types of power that are always at work in the world.

There's the power that grabs, and there's the power that gives. You see in the characters of Caesar and Quirinius, the power that grabs. And you see in the character Jesus, the power that gives. You see in the sign of the census, the power that grabs. And you see in the sign of the manger, the power that gives.

Caesar Augustus, who was the Roman emperor of the time, called for a worldwide census. And Quirinius, the Syrian governor of the time, decided he would play along because he's a small fry in town and he should listen to the holy Roman emperor.

And so the purpose of the census in that time was not simply to count people, it was to collect taxes, and if needed, to conscript people from military service. So a census was about building the empire's economic power and resources and building the empire's military power and resources, and in the process reminding everybody that all the power that they have, however big and small it is, belongs to the emperor.

Just this month, I heard an advertisement for an online university. I've done 10 years of university in my life, and I'm still getting advertisements for more university. And my wife keeps telling me, no way you're going back.

[5 : 06] But it had this catchy phrase, this online course. It began with the statement, if you don't understand the rules of power, then you will certainly lose to someone who does. Isn't that fascinating?

It's a course taught by a Stanford professor entitled The Power Playbook, How to Win at Work. The idea is that at work, you're never going to get a promotion unless you learn how to gain more power, and if you don't learn how to gain more power, somebody else will, and get the promotion over you, and you're going to lose out.

Interestingly, there's another online course that is being offered recently taught by none other than Jordan Peterson, one of Canada's most interesting intellectuals of late. And he is offering a course on 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

How many of you are signing up for that tonight? It's entitled How to Philosophize with a Hammer. Power Strength. Any of you that know about Nietzsche's thought, he thought that all the questions that we ask about what's good in life and what's true and what's beautiful in life are really mirrors or masks for the questions of power.

Everything boils down to power. Nietzsche said in one of his books, what is good? Anything that increases the feeling of power. What is bad? Anything that proceeds from weakness and lack of power.

[6 : 29] What is happiness? The feeling that comes when power increases. So for Nietzsche, the world we live in is a world where all human activity is animated by grabbing for power.

And unless you think this whole power discussion is just a nice little ivory tower conversation that I should take online, I would say, think again. Just this last year, I was rummaging through one of those library boxes in the neighborhood. You know those neighborhood library boxes that are around Vancouver all over the place?

I love them. And I collect a lot of books I don't read. But I did discover one book I did read, and it was called The 48 Laws of Power. My neighbors are reading about the rules of power.

And interestingly, one of those laws stated, I think it was Law 38, that even the desire for everyone to have equality is itself a power move. People may not realize it, but for everyone to have equality, we have to eradicate all differences between us.

Natural ability, economic capital, access to resources and opportunities. And in order to do this, this chapter argues, someone has to decide for everybody else what the standard of equality is.

[7 : 44] And then they have to enforce their idea on everyone else, so even the attempt to establish equality amongst all is itself a power game. So argues this book. And you can see this playing out in our local politics and school curriculums.

So we live in a world that's caught in this confluence of tensions around the power dynamics we experience. And if you think that's just somebody else's problem, I would ask you to think twice.

Like, how many of us wish we had just a little bit more power and control over the circumstances of our lives? I mean, think about the difficult things you're going through. Think about the financial stresses that you're experiencing.

Think about the relationships that you feel like are spiraling out of control. Think about the work situation that you thought was better. How many of us, if we had just a little bit more control and influence, would think, oh, I'd feel so much more peaceful and happy about my life?

And this is the sort of world that Jesus was born into, Luke wants us to know. He was born into a world defined by power grabbing. If I don't have it, I won't be happy. If I don't get it, someone else will.

[8 : 46] And if someone else has it, then I lose. And it's into this world that Jesus brings a totally different type of power than the world has ever seen before.

The power that gives. Jesus is born, and he's laying in a manger. And the sign of his power is this animal feeding trough full of muck and mold and spit and leftover scraps of food.

He doesn't overwhelm humanity with his majesty. He gives himself to us in humility in a way that we can receive. He places himself literally directly into our arms.

In his great humility, Jesus shifts the power coordinates of the world. While the world grabs for power and glory, Jesus lays down glory and gives himself.

He gives himself to the world in a manger. That's what we call the incarnation. And when the world doesn't receive him after giving himself for the first time and the world actually rejects him, he gives himself again.

[9 : 49] He gives himself for the world on the cross. We call it the crucifixion, where Jesus gives himself fully to the power of God's wrath so that all who believe in him can enjoy eternity under the power of God's love.

See, that's the great power of Jesus' birth. He gives us what we cannot grab, the very presence and person of God. And there is no power that we can grab that is greater than what he gives himself.

And so that leads us to the question, why does he do this? What is the purpose of Jesus' birth? And just a few minutes to highlight two purposes. There are so many things we could choose from.

But just two. Praise and peace. He was born to call forth praise from our lips and to place peace in our hearts.

See, praise is the first purpose of Christmas. That's why I loved when the choir stood up for the Gloria and said, Glory to God in the highest. It wasn't just one person singing, it was the whole choir.

[10 : 58] It was this sense that all of us are intended to stand up and sing glory to God in the highest for what he has done. It's why more songs have been sung about the birth of this child than any other event in human history.

Because what God has done is a marvelous thing and he deserves the glory and the praise for it. You see, the wonderful thing is that Christmas isn't first and foremost about what we need or what we want or what we hope for.

God cares about those things. But Christmas is first about the glory that God deserves for what he's done. You see, sin has this way of turning us in on ourselves so that all we see is our problems.

And God's grace has this way of opening us up and giving us a spiritual awakening so that as great as our problems may be, they're always much smaller than the greatness of God's glory and power in our lives.

And so, God invites us to sing a hymn of praise and he teaches us the language of adoration. And as we praise him, our lives take place in proper perspective.

[12:10] The world no longer revolves around us, but it revolves around God and his goodness and his glory and his gentleness and his grandeur. And our little lives have such great meaning as they serve his greater purposes of God's supreme glory.

And so, the first purpose of Christmas is to praise. And the second is that God would place peace in our hearts. Peace is that rich Bible word.

It's with the angels saying glory to God in the highest and peace on earth. It means total well-being and complete flourishing. It's not just the absence of all that's bad and false and ugly.

It's the presence of all that's good and true and beautiful. people. And peace is peace with our neighbors, the dividing wall of hostility broken down, no more hedges in Vancouver.

It means peace with creation, no more groaning and frustration in our work. It means peace with ourselves, no more shame and guilt over the things that we've done or have been done to us.

[13:18] But above all, it means peace with God. And that's why the angels said peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased. Because our deepest peace comes from knowing that God is deeply pleased in us.

Not because of what we have done or what we have achieved or what we have secured or what we have hoped for and tried in our life, but because of what the Lord Jesus has done for us.

Isn't that an amazing thing? If we receive the Lord Jesus into our lives, if we embrace him in our arms and with faith and hope and love, then God takes pleasure in us in the way that he takes pleasure in his son, the Lord Jesus.

We become his children. So if we receive the gift that God gives us, then God takes pleasure in us. And the knowledge that God takes pleasure in us produces peace.

It's deep and abiding peace. You see, if our peace depends on our circumstances, then we'll find ourselves in an endlessly frustrating and futile quest to control our circumstances.

[14:29] And if for a single moment we think we have control of our circumstances, that's not going to bring us peace because we're going to endlessly exert a lot of effort trying to protect it, scared that we'll one day lose it. And so we won't even enjoy the thing that we think we have.

And if our peace depends on what we achieve in this life, we'll always have this nagging sense that what we've done is not enough and who we are doesn't measure up. And we won't know true peace. And what God offers us is a child who will put a song of praise on our lips and will put a hymn of peace in our hearts because we will know the one we have embraced has all power and authority.

He's the king of kings and the lord of lords, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, and he rules the world with truth and grace. the one that is all powerful, the one that reigns over our lives, is the one who gives himself for us and to us.

And that's the only thing that will bring us true peace, is if we embrace that as the bedrock of our lives. Brothers and sisters, I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.