

Christmas Day

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Preacher: Sam Low

[0:00] we actually become too familiar with Christmas. It's like when you have the relative or the friend visiting you from overseas and you take them in to see the city.

And they're marvelling at the architecture and the engineering brilliance that is the Harbour Bridge. And all you can think about is the traffic that you get stuck in each day on the way to work. You've totally stopped noticing anything impressive about that bridge. It's become completely functional. And you take for granted that it is one of the most impressive and beautiful bridges in the world.

Or when that same guest comes to stay with you from overseas and you serve them Vegemite. And their body knows to respond to the disgusting substance that has entered their mouth by expelling it as quickly as possible.

But you have conditioned yourself into thinking that it might be some sort of food and so you don't notice just how vulgar Vegemite is. When you become familiar with something, you can start to miss the details.

[1:02] You can start to miss the significance. I've been married for just over seven and a half years now. And it's interesting to think back to what it was like in my relationship with my now wife when we first met.

So when we just started dating, I remember meeting her for the first time or beginning to spend time with her and being absolutely infatuated with this woman. I thought she was the most amazing thing that God had ever created.

And I would annoy her with text messages and I would follow her around and I would just appear where she was spending time. And the way that I would communicate with her is nowadays, you know, it's just a quick text, the one word yes, no.

But back then, I would want to make sure that she had to reply to my text. Because this person was the only person whose attention I needed in the world. And so for me, there was no sweeter sound than my phone going beep, beep.

Because that was, you know, her letting me know that she was thinking about me as well, letting me know that I was important to her as well. But it's interesting seven and a half years on, how when I get a text from my wife, if I reply, it tends to be a little bit shorter, perhaps a little bit more functional, a little bit less affectionate or caring.

[2:18] It's not that she's less valuable now, but it's just that I'm going to see her at some point today. We live together. You know, I know her so well now. And so the problem is that when you get familiar with something or someone, you start interacting with some sort of vague memory of what they're like, rather than the reality that's right in front of you.

And so you start missing the detail. You start missing the value. You start missing the significance that's there. And I have to confess that coming up to this Christmas, preparing to speak on this passage, I felt a little bit familiar.

I mean, I know how this story goes. How am I going to write a sermon about this? There's no suspense. You know what's going to happen. Jesus is going to be born. There's no way to keep you interested with sort of a plot twist.

But I confess that not to say that that's a good pattern, but to challenge you like I had to challenge myself. When we come to any story in the Bible, and especially one as familiar as the Christmas story, we need to come with fresh eyes and fresh ears.

So we need to look at this story and we need to hear this story as if we're hearing it for the very first time. You've got to try and put yourself into the story as if you're one of the characters, as if you're the one experiencing this for the very first time.

[3 : 41] Because you have to imagine, without 2,000 years of Christmas tradition and history, what would it have been like that first Christmas Eve?

Did they have any idea what was about to happen? I mean, everybody that we've just read about, did they understand how significant Christmas would become? Even Mary and Joseph, they had an angel visit them and say, the child you're going to have is going to be the saviour.

But did they understand what that meant? When, you know, after pondering that for nine months and then holding this little naked crying mess of a baby, were they looking at that baby thinking, this baby has the power to save us?

Or the shepherds minding their own business in the fields, angels appear, sing and announce the arrival of the king and the saviour. The shepherds at least understood enough to go and check out who this baby was.

But when they arrived and they saw Jesus, did they know what they were looking at? Did they know what was right in front of them? Even the wise men who travelled for years following the star to find the king of the Jews, when they arrived, did they know what that meant?

[4 : 56] Did they know just how important this king would be? Did they understand that this was not a king like other kings, that this was the king of all creation? Did they really comprehend what was going on?

Or did they think this is going to be a significant 80 years to see what this baby does? Could they have understood that that night the world changed?

Reality changed. Human experience changed. I mean, the birth of Jesus was not a one-off. It was a history-defining event. Christmas is not the sort of thing that we remember or reminisce or that we know well or hear lots.

Christmas is more than angels singing in the sky, which is impressive. It's more than a star that is able to lead men on a journey from one side of the earth to the other to find a king, as impressive as that is.

It's more than a virgin birth, as impressive as that is. Christmas is a reality-defining event because at Christmas, when you look at Jesus laying in the manger, it's God showing up.

[6 : 11] It's God putting skin on. God, the God, the one who created everything just by speaking. The God who is all-powerful, the God who is all-knowing, the God that is infinite.

He has no beginning. He has no end. The God who rules over all creation shows up in our experience as a baby, as a human, as one of us.

It is a reality-defining event. When you look at Jesus, it's not just a baby. It's not just a birth. It's not just a nice story. It's Emmanuel.

It's God with us. This baby is not like anything else. It's not even a special baby. This is a divine baby.

This is God with skin on. The message of Christmas is so much more than a cute narrative. It's so much more than a great well-made nativity scene, which we have on display here in church or that you may see acted out in a drama.

[7 : 17] The story of Christmas is actually a proclamation. It's God communicating with you, delivering a message. His message is, I am Emmanuel. That is, I am a God who wants to be in your life.

I'm not a God who enjoys being distant. I'm not some vague concept of God. I'm not the God that you just kind of think is off in the ether or up in the clouds that you turn to on the odd occasion when life's getting difficult.

Christmas is God's way of saying, I want to be in your life. I love you and I'll do what it takes for you and I to have a relationship. We have to be so careful not to get familiar with a story like that.

Not to take Christmas for granted because taking Christmas for granted, taking God for granted is what caused the problem in the first place. If I was to continue taking my wife for granted unchecked, if I was to keep presuming that she should do certain things for me, that she should care for me, and in no way see that I had a responsibility in the relationship, if I was to expect her to cook and clean and say nice things and look after me and clean the house and do whatever else and see no value in it, but see it as her responsibility and my entitlement, it would not take long for our relationship to break.

Because relationships by definition need two people investing. If you've only got one person investing, then at best you've got a servant, at worst you've got a stalker.

[8 : 51] A relationship requires two people that are investing in one another and as soon as one of those people stops investing and starts taking the other one for granted, relationships break.

And that's what happens with God. When we take God for granted, the way it becomes obvious is we start thinking that God should do things for me, God should do good things, should look after me, but we start treating Him like He has no claim on us.

He has no authority over us. He has no place to make decisions or dictate our lives. And when we do that with God, when we take Him for granted, the Bible calls it sin. It's essentially rejection of Him as King.

It's saying, I know that you think you're in charge, but I want to do it my way. And the result of a broken relationship with God is that you actually separate yourself, you cut yourself off from the one who gives life, from the one who creates you, the one who sustains you.

And when you cut yourself off from life, the only other option is death. When we actually take God for granted, which we all have, and which we all do, we cut ourselves off from life and death results.

[10 : 04] Death becomes the immovable object in our life. It becomes the inevitable. It becomes the shadow that dictates our greatest fears and our highest hopes. All that's left when you cut yourself off from the God who creates life is the best case scenario, is minimizing the pain you have and trying to hold off death for as long as possible.

That is your highest aspiration when you separate yourself off from the one who is life. Emmanuel is more than a name or a title for Jesus.

He is God showing up with skin on, but it's his job description. Emmanuel is what Jesus has come to achieve. It is why God enters the earth as a baby, because he wants you and I to be able to be with him.

He wants to deal with the problem of death. He wants to take that barrier away and give us a chance to know God again. Give us a chance to do what we were designed to do and enjoy forever with God.

Enjoy heaven. When Jesus shows up, hope shows up. You've got to understand that before Jesus, there is no hope.

[11 : 19] Before Jesus, all you can do is try and hold death off for as long as you possibly can. But when Jesus is born, death is defeated. When Jesus shows up, God deals with the problem.

When Jesus is born, hope arrives for more than just 60 or 70 or 80 or 100 years. Hope arrives because God offers heaven to people that don't deserve it.

Before Jesus, there was no hope, and now, without Jesus, there is still no hope. Christmas is so much more than a story. Christmas is God saying to you, even though you don't deserve it, I love you and I want you in heaven.

Christmas is God saying, you don't deserve it, you've caused the problem, you're the one who ran away from me, but I still love you and I can make a way for us to be together. I can make a way for you to be forgiven.

And Jesus is that way. That little baby lying in a manger turns up so that we might see God with skin on, so that we might have a chance to know him, but more than that, that baby has to be born so that in a few years' time, he might die in your place.

[12 : 42] The birth of Jesus is essential for us to be able to have a death that can substitute for the one that we deserve. We must never get too familiar with Christmas.

Imagine what it was like that very first Christmas night after centuries and generations of people with no hope for anything more than a limited pain and a longest life possible.

Imagine after waiting and waiting and waiting, finally, hope is born. Finally, a second chance is on offer. Finally, God says, I can give you another way.

And you just have to wonder when you read that passage that's so familiar in Matthew, did they know what was laying in front of them in the hay? Did they have any idea that this baby changed everything?

That this baby shone light into darkness, offered life where there was only death, and you have to wonder if a couple of thousand years later as we gather to honour that baby that was born, whether or not we grasp the significance of Jesus, not as a story, not as something that we've heard before, but as a message from God to us which says, even though you don't deserve it, I love you, I want you in heaven, and I've made a way.

[14 : 17] Jesus is Emmanuel. Jesus is God with us. Christmas is the undeniable proof that God loves you and he will do whatever it takes to give you a chance to be in heaven.

It is never just a story. It is never something you've heard before. Christmas is God's offer of hope.

Let's pray. Father God, we want to thank you for this story, but that is so much more than a story.

We want to thank you that you were willing to come as a baby so that we might know you.

We want to thank you that even though we don't deserve it, even though we have done so much to reject you, that you are a God who forgives. You are a God who loves.

And we ask that you would help us to see in this manger, to see in this baby, the hope for forgiveness, to see the one who would grow to die in our place so that we could be forgiven, that we might see in him an invitation to know you and to be in heaven with you.

[15 : 32] Amen.