

Untangling Christmas

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[0 : 00] What I want to do is, as the PowerPoint slide tells you there, I'd like to take a moment, if I may, and untangle the Christmas story for you.

Let me explain what I mean by that. Sandy and I love Christmas. That's my wife, and there's a picture of her as an angel later on. Next slide, I think it is. But don't worry about that yet.

We'll do that later. Sandy and I love Christmas. We love Christmas decorations. We love to go and buy a Christmas tree. Sandy once allowed me to go on my own. We were a little later than normal, and whereas we'd normally have perhaps a seven-foot tree that fit perfectly in the room, the only one I could come back with bigger than a three-foot or four-foot was a ten-foot.

I thought it was a great plan. I couldn't get it in the car. It had to be on the top, and I came back. I was so proud. I'm a fisherman. It was like I caught the best fish in my life. But it was a Christmas tree on this occasion.

And I held it out to Sandy, who's five-foot tall, and I got a picture of her stood next to it. She was literally half the size of what the tree would be. When we put up our Christmas trees, we want to tell our community at Castleton, where we live, that this is a special time for us.

[1 : 18] This is about Christ Jesus, and when He came to this world. And because we're Christians, I became a Christian at 21 years old. I didn't know anything about God. Never read the Bible. Never been to church, really, of any consequence.

But I met some Christians, very much like the people that are in this church. And they would tell you that they believed in Christ as much as they believed in me.

In the sense of, I was as real to them as Jesus was as real to them. And you know, that got me thinking, that's a big deal.

But when we put up our Christmas tree, and all the other decorations, the one box I always have a pensive thought about, very similar to my wife's Tupperware cupboard, where I open that to get something out, and it all falls out, and I can never get it back in.

But the one that I'm always pensive about is the lights that go on the Christmas tree. You know, one year we bought something like 500 white lights, all in one complete cable.

[2 : 27] LED, so thankfully you're not going around checking the bulbs anymore. But when we get them out, invariably, they're tangled. They're in this big mismatch of mess.

Although, believe me, I put them away properly when they went in the box. How they came out that way, I can't imagine. But there we go, we start to get the end. I quite enjoy it, actually, because we always have the Grinch on, so it gives me a chance to sit and watch the Grinch, as I'm pretending to undo this as fast as I can.

Ultimately, we get it undone, and we wrap it around the tree, and all is well, and we have a great time. But you know, after Christmas, what happens to our tree is, it gets chopped, well, it doesn't.

I take all the branches off, and then I make a washing line prop. Out of the Christmas tree. Especially the 10-footer. That worked really well. If ever I got a 6-foot, it wouldn't reach the rope, so we'd have to drop the rope a bit, I suppose.

But we cut the branches off. Sandy hoovers all the needles. We walk in the needles. She hasn't hoovered for days on end afterwards. And we just take this tree, and we chop it up, and we put everything back in the boxes.

[3 : 41] At least Sandy does. She has a very specific plan about every box, and what will go in it. And then we put them all away in the cupboard. Well, it is actually our loft. It's very hard to get in, so it's an awkward place to put them in.

And in one sense, we breathe a sigh of relief, because we're not going to have to get them out for another 11 months. If like our daughter, 10 months, because she puts her tree and everything up at the beginning of October.

But what I want to ask you is this. I mean this in all sincerity, by no means as a judgment or criticism.

When we celebrate Christmas this December, will your celebration finish maybe on Christmas Day? May your celebration of what occurred at Christmas be all packed away in your mind and not thought of again until October or November, maybe December.

Actually, October mainly, because all the supermarkets play Christmas songs, don't they? Not necessarily carols. But sometimes I think we focus on Jesus in December at Christmas, but then maybe we just not forget about Him, but compartmentalize Him or put Him in a box and forget about Him.

[5 : 09] Christmas is often like that box that's put in the dusty cupboard for 11 months of the year. But you know, thousands of people are celebrating Christmas.

Always surprises me in particular, and again, I don't mean this as a judgment, I just think it's interesting, that those who tell me constantly they don't believe in God celebrate Christmas.

And I think the reason for that is because they are hoping that in the Christmas story, there is hope for them, but they don't necessarily come to hear what the Christmas story is.

And you know, there's all these thousands of people we know in this area that celebrate Christmas, put trees up and so on. There's so much preparation involved, not just the decorations.

Presents ordered on Amazon. Go on, put your hand up if you really do order presents. Oh, there's only five of you, who are honest. The shop assistants, and there may be some in the congregation today who's stressed to the gills with all the work they're having to do with the extra work of Christmas.

[6 : 24] And we particularly like to say thank you to people who deliver, or our post folk who have become very good friends of ours up in Casselton. There's so much more work for people.

I'm always grateful that the garages are stocked for last minute presents that our wives would really appreciate. I think certain ones, like the ice scrapers with a mitt on, just in case they've done their nails, it's not going to damage them.

You can buy your wife, guys, a thermal hat, and if you buy 10 litres of fuel, it's half price. Great deal. How about solar paneled, solar powered, sorry, garden lights?

So useful, but sadly there's not a lot of light in the winter, so it can be a bit of a problem. But one day they will shine. And of course lottery tickets or scratch cards if you really want to be generous.

Now one of our readings was about the shepherds. I love the story of the shepherds. I'm always grateful every year the same story of the shepherds is in the Christmas story because it means I can refer back to them again.

[7 : 38] I love shepherds. We live where a lot of sheep are upon the moor and I'm sure you've seen shepherds regularly up there. But Sandy and I were recently in Israel and we were looking around and on one occasion we went to a hill where the King David actually shepherded sheep.

This was about four or five weeks before the war began. What a difference that country's going through now. But the Bible says that God is our shepherd and we are the lost sheep.

Basically because we haven't focused on God or we felt better than God and we've gone our own way. But Jesus when he grew up and he was in his three years of ministry after he became 30 years old he said something very significant.

He said my sheep hear my voice and they come to me. They obey me. They follow me. And when we were in Israel listening well I was stood on top of this mountain with Sandy and others and eventually I just wanted to get closer to this scenery and I went down the mountain.

Sandy thought I was going to fall off the end. I didn't. I didn't. Don't worry. But when I went down there I suddenly realized that there were some black dots moving over the mountain and as we looked more carefully we realized they were sheep.

[9 : 01] And wonderfully at the beginning of the front of the line of sheep was a shepherd. And it was so still that day and if you listen very carefully you could hear the shepherd calling the sheep.

Now I've seen people do that on the moor where we live. Little old lady used to live up our way near Westerdale and she would gently walk ahead of the sheep and she would simply say come on. And all these sheep heard her voice and followed her.

But the guy upon the mountain was leading his sheep to water. A place for their benefit. A blessing. A place that they didn't necessarily know they were going to but they obeyed and followed.

And as we saw albeit a distance across this great gorge where they were we suddenly realized that a tree had started to catch fire.

At first it was smoke nothing too much to worry about but then all of a sudden it burst into flames. And the shepherd went to his sheep and said follow me.

[10 : 05] And walked them away because they obeyed from this fire. You know people often say why did Jesus come?

Or did Jesus come at all? Next slide please. The shepherds on this day hadn't made many many plans. It was just another day in their lives.

That really looks like Sandy I'm sure it does. Hang on she's blonde Sandy's not. Let's just move on. This you know sorry this was like any other day in the shepherd's life.

They hadn't planned for what was going to happen because they hadn't given it any thought. They didn't know it was going to happen. But heaven the God who loves them and you and I had planned this since the time of the world began.

God knew that we would need a saviour who could save us. Jesus came to save sinners.

[11 : 13] Notice it didn't say that he came to save good people. Because the Bible says we've all fallen short of the glory of God.

We've all been lower than the standard of perfection which is God. And if that was up to us we wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. But God sent his son to take the penalty and punishment for us on the cross of Calvary.

By the way you can never separate the story of Christmas from the story of Easter. The death and resurrection of Christ as he took our sin upon himself. And the shepherds ultimately came to realize when they'd heard this announcement that Jesus was born and they should go to Bethlehem and see him from themselves they ultimately came to realize that the message that they first heard and were frightened of actually they were probably more frightened about the fact an angel spoke to them and then suddenly the whole heavenly host appeared that's probably the best part of three billion angels in the sky go on you would be as scared as they were but there was no need to be fearful and wasn't it wonderful the first thing the angel said was don't be afraid don't be afraid I want to say at this stage if ever you sense that God is calling you touching your life touching your emotions with his love don't be afraid far from it don't be afraid

Jesus says come to me as little children and you know what a little child is like we have grandchildren and there's nothing better than when we walk into the house that they come running to us and you pick them up and hug them and that's exactly God's father heart for you there's absolutely no reason to be afraid of the Christmas message the angel said to the shepherds it's good news of great joy I want to say at this point that maybe some Christians you've met have not been aware of the good news and they've been kind of grumpy people that's never how God wants us to be it's great news good news amazing news that will be life transforming if we permit it God came through his son Jesus to this earth so that we could see him and know that we'd seen the equivalent of the father because that's what Jesus said he came specifically to save us no one's exempt from that all we need to do is connect with God through faith and trust and when the angel appeared to Joseph and told him about the fact his wife to be who was a virgin had conceived a baby in her womb by the Holy

Spirit and was going to give birth to this baby and the angel said to Joseph it's okay this is my purpose and plan to save the world the angel said a wonderful thing he said his name will be Emmanuel and this word Emmanuel is probably the most important thing I can tell you of tonight three words God with us but can I ask you just to think of it now as God with me you think that for yourself God with me now if that doesn't blow your mind you haven't yet untangled the story of Christmas and I'm doing my best to help you with it God with us God with me always say God is me God with me for yourself because God touches your life personally

[15 : 23] Christ died for your sin personally he took upon your sin when he had committed no sin to be able to forgive us of our sin and when we engage and have trust with Emmanuel God with us you will know how much he loves us how he comforts us in times of great distress how he encourages us to go on and maybe engage with a neighbor and love them in a way that nobody else has ever loved them he directs and guides us he cares for us in ways that we just cannot imagine he knows all our past he knows who we are today he knows of all the sin and mistakes and shame and guilt of our lives yet still loves us enough to want a relationship with him he says we can call him father when we've put our trust in him and we'll be his child he will be our provider our healer he's almighty god the creator of the universe and he's faithful and just in all of his ways you know we all exist don't we and on the whole

I suppose we all exist for so many years of our life whatever I'm not going to try and put a finger on that because somebody may be a year younger and get a bit discontled about it but we all exist but not everybody has life do you know what I mean by that have you ever thought at any time in your life surely there must be more to it than this you know I had that first thought when I was 14 years old and at 16 I had to travel around Europe trying to find this something else that there must be I ultimately found it was Jesus and that Jesus is the one who's given me that peace that comfort that relationship with God that I couldn't possibly have imagined there are many in this church who have gone through troublesome times and can testify that God never left them in that time in fact God was closer to them in that time than at any other time he never left them never abandoned them he stayed so close they could have felt his embrace so let me finish this by saying this

I've personally known that God promises are true and he whispers those promises into my soul particularly at difficult times but maybe it's at difficult times I listen more for what he's trying to say than others but I try every day to hear and it's as if God says to me or Emmanuel says to me I am here you're not forgotten Mike I love you even though at times you may not feel you have time for me because your life's too busy I want to say to you tonight as we untangle Christmas that you if you don't have a personal relationship with God today can leave this place a completely different person from the one you were when you came in doesn't mean say you have to attend this church although I'd highly recommend you did because there's a lot of fun people here that just will love you as they love me

I'm just going to read a short prayer maybe you'd like to bow your head there's no compulsion to do that but this prayer is a simple prayer that you can pray in say to God I may not understand everything about you Lord but I want to begin this relationship with you I want to find this life that I've always been saying to myself there's got to be more than this or the guilt and shame of the past and we all have it nobody exempt from that at all the guilt and the past I want it to be cleaned off changed I want in society today but it simply means a new start so let me pray this prayer and if you want to take these words to heart I'm not going to ask you to say them out loud but if you want to take these to heart this Christmas and begin a new life please do so but if you do please tell somebody after don't be scared of that it's something we rejoice you are the son of

God I believe that on the cross at Calvary you took the punishment I deserve for my sin my guilt my shame and the emptiness of past mistakes and poor decisions that I constantly regret I give them to you on the cross you said your work was finished you died and you rose again that gave evidence that you overcame death so that I can be set free from my past and start a new life trusting you and be assured of heaven when I die one day on this earth I turn from my sin to simply be born all over again by your spirit and have God as my heavenly father in Jesus name Amen my final word is the last word

[21 : 09] Jesus said while he was on this earth before he went back to heaven he said I am with you always even to the end of this age that's Emmanuel now you could leave this place and put Christmas back in a box I suggest a Tupperware box because nothing ever ever gets damaged in a Tupperware box or you could not put it in a dusty loft or attic or cupboard but take hold of the truth of Christmas and say Lord I want Christmas Christ to be in my life every day doesn't that remind you of a Charles Dickens Christmas carol that little kid with a crutch what was it something about that's whole Christmas in our hearts every day amen thank you