

Christmas 2017

The Christmas Trial and Triumph

Good morning, and Merry Christmas.

It is so wonderful to be with you all this morning.

And having you children in here just makes my heart swell with joy.

My little ones rarely get to see daddy work, so I am happy to share this moment with them.

I want to share the Christmas story this morning.

I have been praying all week on what to share with you all knowing we would have babies to grandparents in one room.

So I believe the Lord wants me to relate the simple truth of His story to you all.

There is so much deception and illusion that comes with this season.

Christmas seems to be presented as mystical and magical.

And I understand that the events behind our story were supernatural.

But this story if looked at honestly and truthfully, much of it is far from magical.

The hour of trial our Savior was born into this world was harsh and his arrival was surrounded with much uncertainty.

We romanticize and traditionalize this story into almost a fairy tale of some sort.

With songs like Silent Night, whose lyrics pronounce

Silent night, holy night!

All is calm, all is bright

Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child

Holy infant so tender and mild

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace

Whoever wrote this song, perhaps never experienced the events of childbirth.

Now, evidence would point to the complete opposite of the lyrics of this song.

Now I have watched my wife give birth to 3 children, and there is nothing silent, or calm, or even bright about the process.

3 out of 3 of our babies that first night on earth, did not sleep in heavenly peace, in fact they screamed dreadfully until their bellies were full of mommas milk.

Then a moment of sleep would come until they awoke again for the same thing.

And I imagine that first Christmas night was not as calm and pleasant as our traditions try to show.

Now perhaps for you here this morning, Christmas is not magical, perhaps there is nothing calm about your Christmas nights...

Maybe Christmas is a lonely time for you; maybe it is associated with regretful memories.

Maybe your family situation is awkward or perhaps you have to share Christmas between a divorced mom and dad.

Maybe your family's finances have left you with very little presents under the tree.

And you are saddened because your Christmas is not as wonderful as all your friends are portraying on their Pinterest or Instagram.

Perhaps you like Jess and I this year, have loved ones who have gone to be with the Lord, and there is a chair empty this year, and your heart is saddened.

And the magic has all but gone away because the realities of this life have hit you hard this year.

Well, understand the realities of that first Christmas day were not far from your reality.

In fact, the Bible explains of Jesus and our relationship with Him in this way...

Heb. 4:14-16 Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

I hope you understand this morning, that our God came from the glory and perfection of heaven, to this precarious earth in such a way that any person could relate to Him and come to Him.

Jesus was born into a horrible time in history; perhaps one of the darkest and tumultuous periods the earth has seen.

He came at a time when the world was oppressed by the iron fist of the Roman Empire.

He came in such a way that He could touch your pain.

He knows poverty, His family was awkward and perhaps even treated as an enigma in the religious culture around them.

Jesus' family knew loneliness and great trial that first Christmas season.

Let us look at part of the story in scripture and look honestly at the trials of the Messiah's first Christmas.

When scripture is looked at truthfully, we see the supernatural, the miracles, and the spectacular come from very plain and simple ways.

We will see our Messiah came through great adversity and trial.

Please turn in your Bible to Luke Chapter 2...

Luke 2:1-7

Christ Born of Mary (Matt 1:18-25)

2:1 And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. 3 So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. 6 So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now prior to this moment Luke writes that Mary the mother of Jesus was met by an angel named Gabriel.

In a supernatural way, God gave this young lady, perhaps 13-16 years old a special, holy calling.

Mary would bring the Messiah into the world.

And after some soul searching, and wondering how this could be possible, for she was so young, and was not even married yet.

The angel assured her, that this would be miraculous, and of God.

Mary accepted this calling, and said the infamous words “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”

Mary knew this would mean social isolation and she would be despised being with child without being married.

She could even be killed.

When she was noticeably pregnant Joseph her fiancé, who she was supposed to marry, was heartbroken over his future wife being pregnant.

And an angel came to him, and quieted his troubled soul.

Joseph loved Mary, and did not want her to be punished by the community.

After the angel assured him that this was of God, the scriptures tell us he obeyed God, and took Mary to be his wife.

What an amazing calling, so much hope and wonder for this newlywed couple.

Maybe they were hoping the baby's entrance to this world would be heralded with a great celebration and perhaps even a feast of thanksgiving by the people.

But as the days went on the people must have rejected their story, for here in our text this morning, there is no family, no friends, and this couple is all alone, in the midst of great trials.

You see the ruler of the day Caesar Augustus, the first emperor in Rome; was the first man to have sole power over this huge empire and kingdom.

The government before him was a democracy, and this man Caius Octavius manipulated and schemed his way into a powerful position.

The newly formed senate that supported his efforts helped him with his new name.

He chose this name Caesar after his great-uncle Julius Caesar, and the new senate came up with Augustus, which in Latin means “of the gods.”

And from this time on the emperors of Rome were looked at and worshipped as gods.

No one dared come against the ruthless emperors of Rome; they were too powerful, they controlled mighty armies and the citizens of their vast empire were slaves to their rule.

Because the emperors were so feared, they were able to tax the people, and take their money with little or no accountability.

So in our story, this first emperor Caesar Augustus, not sure what to do with his great power over the lives of his subjects, he decided to perform a census and that all the people should be taxed.

Every citizen of the Roman Empire had to go to their home city, no matter how far it was to register their families.

Now, Mary was carrying a Child in her womb, the hope of Israel, and possibly Israel's way out from the Iron Fist and oppression of Rome.

Israel, and all the world however, were servants to Rome, and Rome maintained this dominance by force, and smashing all resistance quickly and brutally.

This left the very pregnant Mary, and the humble man Joseph in a quandary, they had to obey their oppressors.

I wonder if Mary and Joseph wondered if God had abandoned them.

Imagine having all these supernatural encounters with angels, experiencing the miraculous conception of the

Messiah, and then here this miserable and potentially life-threatening edict is given.

Maybe at the start of all of this, Mary and Joseph perhaps thought such a high calling would come with the divine protection of God, and they would be free from trial and hardship until this promised Child arrived.

You know they just had to name it and claim it, and all would be well.

But that is not the reality of this story.

They had to take this miserable up to 4 days journey, and Mary in her final term of pregnancy rode a beastly donkey on this treacherous ride through the hostile wilderness of Israel.

That would have been a difficult hardship, and perhaps they are wondering what this is all about.

Why could not the Messiah be born there in Nazareth?

Well, perhaps unbeknownst to them, and even the most powerful man in the world Caesar, God was using this great hardship to maneuver His will.

As mighty and suppressing as Caesar seems to be in this moment, God is using him as a pawn to fulfill His Word through the prophet Micah.

Who said many hundreds of years earlier...

Mic 5:2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me
The One to be Ruler in Israel,
Whose goings forth are from of old,
From everlasting."

You see the Messiah could not be born in Nazareth, but had to be born where God said He would be.

And the miserable journey was made by the newlywed couple.

Now if this agonizing journey was not enough, when Mary and Joseph finally got through this great hardship, and made it to Bethlehem, they were met with another debilitating reality, there was no room for them in any place.

The multitude of pilgrims that are traveling to obey Caesars command, have caused overcrowding.

There was no room for them in the inn, so they were forced to have this Child in a manger full of these traveler's animals and with no help from family, or a midwife.

Now think of the vulnerability of Mary before Joseph, they have never been intimate before this.

The bloody ordeal of childbearing, and the painful screams of childbirth would have been humbling for Mary and Joseph to endure through.

Perhaps wondering if this was God's Child why is there so much misery in this moment.

Such unwavering stress has been put on this new family.

And believe it or not, understand God uses the hard times and trials that families go through to strengthen the family unit.

This young married couple is learning to work together and depend on one another to work through this.

Now, my marriage counseling has a little different format than most traditionalist in the church.

You can ask the young couples I have walked through premarital counseling with.

They might be being told, “hold off, to wait until you are more stable in life, wait until you are financially set in your ways.”

Wait until they have a better hold on life.

And when they sit down with me, and we look at scripture honestly, I usually present the counter argument.

Yes, you are young, you are not financially set, you can only afford a one-bedroom apartment, yes, many trials await you, and poverty might even visit you.

And that is good. That is how God will bring strength to your family.

I don't understand why Christians want their children to avoid the mistakes they made when they were young, to avoid the trials and hardships.

Those trials and hardships are the reason many of your families are rock solid in the Lord.

Chuck Smith says, “Godly Character is developed in the heat of tribulations.”

I tell the young couples to embrace those trials; they are the best teachers in this life.

For Jess and I, in our early marriage, we were in another state, far from our family, we lived in poverty, we lived through what seemed at the time impossible situations, what seemed to be insurmountable trials.

We had many nights of tears, and desperate prayers, and much heartbreak and loneliness.

And I would not change one minute of it, it created a dependency on each other like we would not have had otherwise.

Jess couldn't run to her mom at every trial, I could not ask my dad for help.

We learned to depend on the Lord in every situation, and we learned the power of our God.

Mary and Joseph here in our story are going through some severe times here early on in their relationship. Even after these great trials, they will have a couple mountain top experiences as they celebrate the birth of God's Son with the shepherds, later on these mysterious Magi will bring gifts to their young Child, their baby will be prophesied over, and there will be amazing moments.

But the reality is, their faith was tested here on this first Christmas day, their family was pushed to its limit. And as hard as these trials were, soon a wicked King Herod will try to destroy the Child's life.

And Joseph and his young family will find, that this Christmas journey was only preparation for an even greater trial and journey to Egypt.

You know through it all Mary and Joseph clung to God's Word and promises.

God promised He would bring His Son into the world through this young couple.

And this is why they could push through the hardships that were before them.

Mary believed and trusted the Word of God above her own comforts and concerns.

Joseph risked his upstanding reputation to marry a pregnant young girl.

They endured through the hardships of Rome's oppression because of the Hope in the Child that Mary carried.

It was promised that this Child would save the people from their sins.

Mary could work through the misery of the Rome's demand, because Gabriel assured her **Luke 1:33**

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

Her Son would be the fulfillment of so many promises.

I don't know if Mary knew Jesus was to die first, to bring salvation, it was made clear to her after Jesus was born.

A man named Simeon prophesied over the Child Jesus. He said...

Luke 2:34-35 "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against 35 (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

The truth is Mary will one day watch this world, and her own people reject their King, and sentence Him to death.

The scriptures tell us **John 1:11 He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.**

Jesus was despised and rejected and ultimately crucified.

Now, what would seem like in the natural world as an unfair trial... spiritually became the greatest triumph for mankind.

This little Child who came to this earth very naturally and in the midst of great adversity was the means to the greatest event in human history.

So much so, the birth of this Child, in a manger divided history in two.

All of history prior, led up to this event, and all history after it numbers its years from this event.

The Birth of Jesus Christ, God's Son coming into this world, would be the means of salvation for multitudes of believers.

John 1:12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

Now I do not know what Trials you are facing this morning, what uncertainty lay before you.

Maybe you are going through searching times, and Christmas has lost its magic.

I would encourage you to look at this Christmas story honestly, and find your hope in an unchanging God.

You worship a God who knows firsthand the trials and hardships of this world.

Heb. 4:14-16 Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

This Christmas, find your joy in the fact that no matter your hardships, no matter what you are facing, this Christmas Child was the means and access to a loving God.

God is with you this morning, God loves you this morning, and your God knows your pain this morning. He has not lost your address, He sees your aching, He knows each tear that falls, and He is right there with you.

He is molding and shaping you. He preparing you for the great calling He has on your life.

Trust Him, He knows what He is doing.

My 5-year-old daughter Sofia, 2 days ago, with an inquisitive look on her face, she asked, “Daddy, what is the most important verse in the Bible?”

I closed my eyes, and thought for a minute, I told her...

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Sofia has been thinking about eternity, she said goodbye to many loved ones this year who died and went to be with Jesus.

But she understands... God sent His Son, into this hostile world that we might find everlasting life.

That we might find salvation.

What a wonderful truth to ponder this Christmas.

The reason for this season is Salvation came as a Baby, through very ordinary means, that every man, small and great alike can come to Him and find salvation.

If you do not know Jesus this morning, I would encourage you to open the most wonderful gift ever offered to humanity.

The gift of God's Grace, His eternal pardon, given freely to you, at the cost of this Baby that was born so many years ago.

Please, if this is you during this last song, come up and pray with one of the Pastors or Elders who will be available.

Also, if you are going through trials this Christmas season, come up and get prayer.

Perhaps you have a prodigal son or daughter out there in the world lost and they will absent from your Christmas celebration, come and pray for them.

Maybe you are lonely and feeling isolated this Christmas, please come up and receive prayer and be ministered too this morning.

Perhaps this year has been a year you have had to say goodbye to a loved one, and this is your first Christmas without them, we want to pray for you this morning.

Whatever the trial is you find yourself in this season, come up and receive prayer, we love you all.

And too you children, you are welcome to come up and pray as well.

Maybe you have noticed mom and dad are worried this Christmas, maybe they are sad, maybe you have even seen them cry or angry.

Maybe you are sad this Christmas.

Or you simply just have someone on your heart you want to pray for.

You little ones are invited to come up and pray with one of the pastors too.

My little Sofia has a spiritual gift of praying for people.

And you know she can tell when I am sad, or having a bad dad, and she will just come over and pray for me.

“Jesus, thank you for daddy” she says, “please help him to have a better day.”

And you know what her prayers help me in big ways.

So you little ones understand your prayers are powerful, pray to Jesus often, He is there for your family.

I want to end with a poem, I actually had Pastor Joe read at a Christian school this year.

It is an old one, and perhaps it has been a while since you heard it.

But I find it very timely for where some of us are at this year.

Footprints In The Sand

**One night a man had a dream. He dreamed
he was walking along the beach with the LORD.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
For each scene he noticed two sets of
footprints in the sand: one belonging
to him, and the other to the LORD.
When the last scene of his life flashed before him,
he looked back at the footprints in the sand.
He noticed that many times along the path of
his life there was only one set of footprints.
He also noticed that it happened at the very
lowest and saddest times in his life.
This really bothered him and he
questioned the LORD about it:
"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow
you, you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most
troublesome times in my life,**

there is only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why when

I needed you most you would leave me."

The LORD replied:

"My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you.

During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints,

it was then that I carried you." *Author: Carolyn Joyce Carty*