

# Simply Christmas

Christmas Eve, EVE!

Date: December 23, 2023

Transition: Paul prays & seats people

While everyone here is saying “Hi” I want to welcome everyone joining us on our app or social channels. On behalf of our church family—and my family—I hope you have a very Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year!

Got a quick question to get us rolling tonight. How many of you are Christmas lights on the outside of your house kind of people, raise your hands if you’ve been up on a ladder and have some questionable extension cord use going on at your home right now. My wife Cheryl and I have lived in this area since 2005 and in that amount of time I have been persuaded only three times to put lights up outside. AND this year, with the help of my two girls, was one of those years I was persuaded. So, instead of a nice relaxing Friday after Thanksgiving I spent it at Lowes, on a ladder, and climbing our Oak Tree in all sorts of uncomfortable positions while my oldest thought I was going to fall and die. AND that’s why I don’t put lights out, it just complicates things! Amen!

Speaking of complicating things, my kids also persuaded me to get a puppy this year. Meet Maisy Grace:

**[DOG PIC]**

You can “oh” and “awe” all you want, but because of this fur ball this is what our Christmas Tree looks like this year!

**[TREE PIC]**

The tree is literally in jail! Get a puppy they say... But no one talks about how complicated Christmas with a puppy can be.

AND the older I get the more complicated Christmas seems to get. You get married and that complicates things. Once you have kids, that complicates things. If there is a divorce somewhere that complicates things. Now it is not just her family it is her dad and his new girlfriend and her mom and her new husband and his kid who still lives with them and then there is your parents who still are together but they just don’t like each other... People bring people you don’t like into your home, and that complicates things! Finding out why that one bulb won’t light up after you have already hung the lights is complicated. Buying gifts is complicated.

I think for men it is the most complicated because ladies you lie to us at Christmas. In fact, the longer you are married or date someone the more consistent this lie becomes. You say to her, “Well what do you want for Christmas baby?” And they say what... “Oh, I don’t need anything... I don’t want anything this year... Don’t worry about it...” Right? But woe to the man that believes that lie. Woe to the man whose wife or girlfriend wakes up on Christmas morning and doesn’t have anything to open! “But babe you said you didn’t want anything...”

Christmas can be complicated, amen?

AND tonight, I don’t have a magic wand or any angel dust that I can sprinkle on you to make any of that less complicated for you. I wish I could, but I can’t make any of those dynamics less complicated for you. BUT in the middle of all this Christmas complexity there is one thing that should not be complex, and that is the message of Christmas!

SO, in honor of that, the title of my message tonight is:

## Simply Christmas

Turn to two people and say, *"Simply Christmas."*

Unfortunately, sometimes the message of Christmas becomes as complicated as the gifts and scheduling and family stuff. And the reason the message of Christmas gets complicated is not your fault, it's my fault. It's the preacher's fault, it's the churches fault.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. How many of you like to go to those self-serve frozen yogurt places? Well, the first time I went to one of these places we walked in and there was a teenage girl behind the counter with her phone texting her boyfriend or something and no lie, she never even looked up to acknowledge someone came in the store. So, here we are, they had no signs, no instructions, so I just stood there looking at her. Nothing! So, we saw the machines and figured we must serve ourselves so I grab a cup—they only had one size—and fill it as high as I can fill it since I am thinking it is all one price. Then I stand there next to the toppings waiting for her to ask me what I want since that is how you do it in 95% of the ice cream stores I have ever been in. Nothing! So, I pile them on as high as I can since I now think I am pulling one over on them. We finally take the cups to the register, and she finally looks up, doesn't say anything, puts mine on a scale and then says, \$13.58. Excuse me! Mine is \$13.58! How the heck was I supposed to know this was by weight? You have no signs, no service, no nothing for \$13.58! They had taken something so simple, ice cream, and made it really complicated.

AND I think that is how we feel when we walk into church sometimes. You know, you show up and you haven't been in a while, you know what ice cream is, you know what Christmas is, but no one does anything to help you. The Christmas sermon ends, and you leave, and it was like, "What? I don't get it... Why do people show up every week for this?"

So, tonight even though I can't uncomplicate your schedule and shopping and family I want to do my best to simplify Christmas. Because the last thing I want is for anyone to make the effort to be here tonight and then leave without understanding the simple message of Christmas.

In fact, part of the Christmas story that I am sure you all know, is the Shepherds who were out keeping watch over their flocks by night and "low the Angel of the Lord shown round about them, and they were so afraid..." Some of you are having flashbacks to Charlie Brown now aren't you? But there is a little piece of their story that I think sums up the entire story. Here, I will show you what I mean. This is from Luke chapter 2:

<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. [Which would have to be weird right... why would we be a afraid this, it happens all the time, in fact just last Tuesday the sky light up and voices talked to me... don't be afraid the angel says] I bring you **GOOD NEWS** [I bring you good news... this little phrase is where we get the term "Gospel." Gospel literally means good story... the angel said we are about to start a good story; this is good news] **of great joy that will be for all the people.** [All people, not just a select few, all people for...] <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the **Messiah, the Lord.**

So, if we just stop here, if there is any part of the message of Christmas that does not strike you as good news, then maybe someone has distorted the message of Christmas. If there is anything about the church that doesn't strike you as good news then, maybe some have distorted or complicated the church.

If someone walks up to you and says, "Hey I have some good news!" If someone walks up to you and says they have good news the first thing you *DON'T* think is, "Well what am I gonna have to do?" Or "What is this

going to cost me?" You don't think those things, right? When someone tells you they have good news it means they have some information that is so awesome that it is going to bring you joy when you hear it. It's not going to cost you something! That would not be good news.

Good news means there is something you are not going to have to do that you thought you were going to have to do. Good news means the teacher cancelled the final exam. Good news means gas drops below \$3.00 a gallon. Good news means everybody gets a bonus! Maybe good news means your mother-in-law called and can't make it for Christmas! But when someone tells you they have good news for you, you don't immediately start making a list in the back of your mind of all the things you are going to have to do.

When the story of Jesus began, when the angels find the shepherds in the field, they tell them we have some good news! In other words, the message and story of Christmas is 100% good news! The message of the Gospel of Jesus is 100% good news! The message of Christianity is 100% good news! AND if your feelings about any of those things are not 100% good news then someone has distorted or complicated what the angels said! Maybe someone has so complicated things that you are standing inside the front door of the frozen yogurt place just staring and wondering what this is all about.

See if it is good news then this is what it is NOT: *{BUILD LIST}*

## **THE GOOD NEWS IS NOT**

### **Behave!**

I bring you good news! What is it? Behave! Straighten up! It is hard to tell someone, "Stop sinning, cut that out, thou shall not, thou shall not, hey hey hey..." with good news. It's hard to reconcile those two, right? That is not good news, that is not even new news. Every religious system says that. Don't do this, don't do this, don't do this because if you do then you will be judged for it. That is not good news. It is not even new news. It also is not:

### **Get back to church!**

The story of Jesus began before there was even a church! That was several decades later after Jesus death and resurrection. Good news is not, you better get your butt back in church. Good news is not, you better get those kids in church. And good news is certainly not:

### **Give your life to God!**

Give your life to God is not good news, give your life to God is request! Hey, "I have good news for you." What is it? "Give your life to God." What? That is like telling me there are two exams.

AND please hear me. I am not saying there is anything wrong with behaving, going to church, or being devoted to God, but those things are not what we would call Good News. None of those things are the Good News the angels spoke about.

So, what I want to do with the time we have left tonight is explain to you—in a way that you hopefully will never forget—why the angels would say this was good news. Because the story of Jesus, the story of Christmas is all good news!

Here is context for how I want us to look at this. Most of us are at least somewhat familiar with the name John, or John's Gospel, or the Apostle John, or St. John... how many of you know at least kind of who I am talking about, you have heard this guy's name?

Well, John was a follower of Jesus, one of His disciples, you might have heard that before, but John was not just any follower of Jesus. John was like Jesus ride or die. John was so close to Jesus that when Jesus knew He was about to be crucified He told John I want you to be the one I leave my mother to. I want you to be the one who looks after her and cares for her. You don't just leave your momma to anyone right? In fact, to this day in modern day Turkey you can visit the place where John took care of Mary in her later years. That is how close John was to Jesus.

But John was there for everything. He saw Jesus perform miracles. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus die on a cross. And he even saw Jesus resurrected much to his shock as you can imagine. John was there for all of this AND John was the only one of the disciples who lived to be an old man. The rest were killed for their faith in Jesus, but John lived to be an old man and as he approached the end of his life he felt the need to write down his amazing view of the life of Jesus. John had been there for it all with Jesus *and* he had the time to reflect on those things and what they meant.

So, John begins to write down some of the things that were most meaningful to him as a follower of Jesus and as you can imagine other people wanted a copy of this. Here was one of the last guys living who walked with Jesus and he has written this account so you can imagine how badly people wanted a copy of his writings. So, copy after copy was made and they were sent all over the known world at that time. Then a couple hundred years later, John's writings, along with some of the other people who walked with Jesus, were put together in what we call the New Testament of the Bible.

And, if you read this document that John wrote, what we now call the Gospel of John; if you read it, kind of early on in his writing, he tells the story about a time when Jesus interacted with a guy named Nicodemus. And right in the middle of this story about Jesus and Nicodemus, it's as if John gets so excited as he writes this down that he pulls out of the story and he kind of blurts out the punch line. It's as if he can't wait until the end so he has to just call a time out in the story and gives us the punch line right now!

So, right in the middle of "Jesus said this" and "Nick said this" and "Jesus said this" John just blurts out this extraordinary statement that most of you probably know. And the reason it is so famous is because in just a few words the Apostle John, looking back, in a moment of clarity grabs the essence of the Good News that the angels proclaimed.

So, if you decide to never become a Christian, a follower of Jesus, that is your prerogative obviously. If you decide to never become a Christian I just want you to know that THIS is what you are NOT deciding to be a part of. You may have made your mind up because of a bad church experience, or maybe you know some Christians, maybe you work with some Christians, maybe you were once married to a Christian so you just made your mind up you never wanted to be like them, and I can understand that! If I had your experience I would feel that same way. But, tonight, here in this moment, if you choose not to become a Christian then this is what you are rejecting, not all that other stuff. This is what makes this Good News.

John is writing, and he gets so jacked up that he blurts this out right in the middle of the story, look at this: (John 3)

**16 For God so LOVED the world that he GAVE...**

For God so *loved* the world that he did what in love people do, He gave! For God so loved the world that He did what you do when you love someone, He gave. That is good news!

Let me tell you how this hit someone in the first century when they read these words. In the mind of Greek or Roman thinking person of this time the gods did not love people. In fact, if you were going to write a Greek or Roman version of this it would be:

**For the gods played and the people paid.**

That was the philosophy of the time. The gods didn't love people! Jupiter, Zeus... these guys didn't love people. They had their own world and they played with humans, they toyed with us for fun. Whatever evil happened in the world it was, "Just the gods, the gods are angry." Every country had their own set of gods and the country that dominated the world at any one time it was because their gods were in control. There was no love, no relationship going on here.

BUT John looking back on his encounters with Jesus says, "Nope that is not what I experienced. What I experienced was God so loved this world that He gave: *{BUILD ON PREVIOUS PART OF VERSE}*

**his one and only Son,**

John tells us that God loved us so much that He gave what was most valuable to Him, His one and only Son, who John believed was Jesus Christ. That is what He believed after spending all this time with Jesus. God sent His Son Jesus, and Jesus kept the trend going by giving His life for us, the ones God loved.

AND if we just put a period there that is remarkable news to think that the Creator of this world loved us enough that He gave His one and only Son to pay for our sins, period. That is good news.

But John is looking back, and he knows the whole story, and he just can't leave it at that. His experiences with Jesus compelled him to write a second part to this... For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, and now we are invited into the story: *{BUILD ON PREVIOUS PART OF VERSE}*

**that *whoever* BELIEVES in him**

Whoever meaning no distinction for behavior, church attendance, or level of devotion to God, whoever. Whoever meaning it doesn't matter what you have done or who you are. Men, women, children, red and yellow, black, and white, innocent and murderers... whoever. That is good news! Whoever believes in Him.

AND this is where the message gets deep. Not confusing, but deep. Because I want you to understand this extraordinary statement you might have memorized as a child or even have seen at a football game. So, John is writing this and gets to this part. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son that whoever... that whoever... whoever what? How do I say this? So, John chooses the most common Greek word for believe which is:

**πιστεύω (pisteuó) = Believe**

{Peas to whoa} means believe, it is the direct English translation. So, John uses the word believe but then he gets stuck because this is just like our word believe. I believe today is December 23rd. I believe it is 2023. I believe the Dolphins will beat the Cowboys tomorrow. It is a common word and usually it would be followed by the Greek word for in, like "I" "N" I believe in love. I believe in my kids. I believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But as John writes this he is thinking, "But that doesn't capture it, that doesn't paint a picture of the richness and depth of this idea." I believe in Jesus like I believe in Abraham Lincoln. I believed they lived. That isn't it. So, John takes a preposition, that by most accounts had never before been used with the word believe, he takes the preposition for "into" or "toward" and puts that right next to the word believe like this and creates a brand-new idea in the Greek language:

**πιστεύω (pisteuó) εις (eis) = Believes Toward = Trusts**

{Peas to whoa} {eece}

Whoever believes toward or whoever "Trusts." Well, why didn't he just say trusts, seems like that would have been a whole lot simpler. It would have been, but the word trust doesn't exist in the Greek language, so he had to make it up by saying whoever believes *toward*, whoever *leans into*, whoever *trusts in*. I know you didn't come for a Greek lesson, but does that makes sense?

## [STOOL]

Here's what this looks like. What John is saying here is to put all of your weight, all of you, all your trust in what Jesus has done on the cross on your behalf. Over here I am putting my trust in my legs, in myself, but over here I am putting my trust completely in this stool. Over here I can believe in the stool, but I am not trusting in it. But now I am believing towards, believing into, trusting in the stool and what it can do for me.

When John wrote these words it wasn't believe in, believe about, it was trust in, not in myself, but to trust in Jesus and what He did for me once He grew up and died on the cross for our sins. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in, trusts in... and then this last part: *{BUILD ON VERSE AGAIN}*

shall not perish but *have* ETERNAL LIFE.

And there are two ways to read that phrase "have eternal life." One way on the surface is you won't stop going. You will live on. This life is not all there is. The hope in every human heart is confirmed. Whoever believes in, trusts in Jesus will live on forever. The promise of Heaven. That is some more good news, right?

BUT the reason John uses this phrase eternal life isn't because of any of that. The reason John uses this phrase is because this is a phrase that Jesus used and not only used, but He also defined it. God loved; God gave. We believe and then we *have* something. An exchange is made for that belief and Jesus defined it like this as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: (John 17:1-3)

"Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. <sup>2</sup>For you granted him authority over all people that he might give [here it is again] ETERNAL LIFE to all those you have given him. <sup>3</sup>Now this is eternal life:

Jesus defines for us what He means by eternal life, this is why John used this phrase, look at this:

that they KNOW you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

What is eternal life? It is a relationship with the only true God. This is purely relational! Jesus says I want to give this world a knowledge of, an introduction to, a relationship with their Creator who loved them enough to send Me, His one and only Son! This is why Jesus taught us to relate to God not as a far-off deity, but as a Heavenly Father!

Now, I am not asking you to raise your hand or respond, but what part of that is bad news? How is that bad news? How is that anything other than Good News? Even if you don't believe it, fine, even if you don't buy into it, fine, but how is that bad news?

AND just in case we missed it, John adds John 3:17 right after John 3:16, last verse for tonight:

<sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but to SAVE the world through him.

Have you ever felt condemned by the church? Have you ever felt condemned by a Christian? Probably! Well, guess what? They are the ones that sent you the wrong message because the message of Jesus, God's Son, is *not* that God is upstairs shaking His finger at what an awful sinner you are. That's not good news. The good news is God loved and God gave, not so that He could condemn the world, but to save the world through Jesus. And, if we believe, then we receive!

Period! End of the Christmas message. God loved. And because He was in love He gave. And when we trust in what Jesus has done to save us. When we believe. Then we receive eternal life. A restored relationship with our Heavenly Father.

So, the angel on that first Christmas, to those shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, the angel could say without any qualifiers, *"I bring you good news of great joy for all the people."*

So, the question I guess is has there ever been a time that you can recall in your life where you made this exchange? That you decided to stop trusting in yourself and any hope you have of being good enough to please God, and all the fear and insecurity and unknown that goes with that, and instead put your trust in the gift God has given.

AND to receive the gift of Jesus all you do is put your weight, your faith, your trust in Him and what He did to save you on the cross. In a minute before we close with "Silent Night" I want to give you a chance to do just that if you have never done that before. It's a simple, uncomplicated prayer that just reveals the desire of your heart.

But I want to say this first. If you are just not into this and still kind of sitting there politely because it is what you do and maybe you will be back at Easter, if that is you and you are just not there yet, I get that. And I promise no one is here to talk you into anything. No one can make you believe. If you don't believe, you don't believe. Look, we are a church where you can unbelieve all you want, we will even let you serve. But if the day should ever come that you begin to doubt your doubts. Maybe you even find yourself in a moment of desperation. If you find yourself there one day remember this:

God loved. God gave. We believe. We receive. AND that can be true for you after you have ruined everything, it can be when you are old and wrinkled, it can be on your last breath, doesn't matter. He still loves you and He still sent His Son for you and there are no restrictions.

That is the simple, Good News of Christmas. Let's pray.