

Title: “The Mission of Christmas”

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Introduction:

One day this week as we were driving my kids were watching the movie “Jingle All The Way” with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sinbad. I’m sure it’s in most of your top 5 movies ever, but in the off chance you haven’t memorized every line of dialogue, here is what the movie is about:

Howard (that’s Arnold’s character) is that familiar Christmas movie trope—the Dad who works too much and isn’t there for his family when it counts. This year Howard is trying really hard to be a good Dad, and his son Jamie wants the “Turbo Man” action figure, which is the fictional equivalent of the Furbee or Tickle-Me-Elmo or remote controlled BB-8 from Star Wars: The Force Awakens—the hottest toy of the year. And, you guessed it, Howard waited too long, Turbo Man is impossible to find. Sold out everywhere. So Howard ends up on a quest to find Turbo Man, it becomes an all-consuming mission, to fix his relationship with his family, and to prove that he is one heck of a dad.

I don’t want to oversell it, *but you won’t believe how it ends.*

In all seriousness, I bring this up because of this idea of the Christmas quest, we might even say the mission of Christmas.

Even if we aren’t Howard Langston schlepping around looking for Turbo Man, there is something about the Christmas season that sends us spinning out on various quests, various missions. The mission of finding just the right gift for that special person. The mission of decorating the house or the tree just so, or coordinating all the family members to be in one place at one time and be nice. The mission to help your kids experience the “magic of Christmas,” or maybe the mission to just get through the holidays without that loved one that you miss. We all end up with some kind of mission at Christmas.

Those ideas of the quests, the purposes, the missions of Christmas connect us with what this message is all about:

Christmas is the story of God’s mission to save us and give us a mission, therefore we must see him and serve him.

First,

I. CHRISTMAS IS THE STORY OF GOD’S MISSION

That probably sounds obvious, but just slow down and actually think about that. It’s God’s mission. The story of Christmas is the story of **God** becoming **flesh**.

Last week Larry preached on Revelation chapter 4. Do you remember the splendor with which God is described?

4:1 – the one seated was like radiant jewels (the closest John comes by the way to actually describing this One), surrounded by an emerald rainbow

4:2-4 – around him was this heavenly priesthood of 24 elders, themselves sitting on thrones, wearing crowns.

4:5 – he speaks with lightening and thunder, before him are seven torches of fire representing the seven fold Holy Spirit

4:6 and all of this before a crystal sea

4:7-8 his angelic entourage are terrifying in appearance, and they never cease to say “Holy, holy, holy...” and I don’t imagine they do it meekly.

4:9-11 and whenever the angelic beings sing that song, the elders on the thrones fall down, cast their crowns before him, and echo back the song, “worthy are you, our Lord and God...”

What’s the point of all of that? The point is God is gloriously, mysteriously, radiantly, majestically, insert-your-adverb-here-ly, beyond comprehension. Incomprehensibly incomprehensible.

And Christmas is about this God becoming a man. The Son of God equal in glory and divinity took on flesh.

John says:

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, **glory as of the only Son from the Father**, full of grace and truth.*

Paul says in Philippians 2:6-8:

⁶[Jesus], **though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God** a thing to be grasped,
⁷but emptied himself,
by taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men.
⁸And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

Also from Paul, Colossians 1:19-20:

*¹⁹For **in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell**, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

And from Hebrews 1:3

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high

Martin Luther captured that sort of overwhelming feeling when you grasp what the Scriptures are saying about Jesus's incarnation in his Christmas hymn "This Is The Christ." A few of the verses say:

9. Ah, Lord, who hast created all,
How weak art Thou, how poor and small,
That Thou dost choose Thine infant bed
Where humble cattle lately fed!

10. Were earth a thousand times as fair,
Beset with gold and jewels rare,
It yet were far too poor to be
A narrow cradle, Lord, for Thee.

That's what Christmas is all about, **God's becoming flesh**, and he did that to fulfill his mission:

II. TO SAVE US AND GIVE US A MISSION

A. First, Jesus came to save us, look how Revelation 5:9 describes it:

*"Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood
you ransomed people for God from every tribe
and language and people and nation*

There are two big ideas there:

1. Jesus's death was God's plan to save us.

Notice, the verse begins "worthy are you...FOR you were slain." Jesus's worth is exclaimed because of his death, because he ransomed a people for God. Because Jesus followed God's plan, he is extolled as worthy to open the scrolls of judgment.

But also notice that word "ransom," it means to buy out of debt or slavery. Actually Scripture uses both images for talking about our sin—our rebellion against God piles up a debt of sin, and at the same time enslaves us to sin, death, and the devil. Jesus "ransomed" a people for God which means he bought them out of debt and slavery. We could never get ourselves out, we could never pay the debt we owe, it is far too great. God's plan was for Jesus to pay our debt and free us from slavery.

In the movie ***Man on Fire***, Denzel Washington plays a washed-up former government agent, sort of super soldier, who has taken a "easy" job of protecting a little girl named Lupita (played by Dakota Fanning). Her family lives in Mexico City, and she gets kidnapped! When the ransom demand comes, it turns out her father is in on it, and there will be no money to buy her back. Creesy takes matters into his own hands tracking down the lower level bad guys and finally getting the attention of the head bad guy. At this point the head bad guy is so angry the only way he'll give back Lupita is not money or anything but the life of John Creesy—and he gladly gives himself up to save—to ransom

Lupita. It's not a perfect analogy, but Jesus is something like that, giving himself in our place to ransom us out of slavery.

You may know the Alfred Noyes poem "The Highwayman" about a British highwayman (a robber) who falls in love with an innkeeper's daughter. When the soldiers searching for him find out, they take her captive so they can catch the highwayman the next time he visits her at night. In fact, they tie her up at attention with a musket so she has to watch their plan unfold, but she gets finger free enough to touch the trigger. Just as the highwayman is about to enter the range of the soldiers' muskets, Noyes writes:

*Tlot-tlot, in the frosty silence!
Tlot-tlot, in the echoing night!
Nearer he came and nearer!
Her face was like a light!
Her eyes grew wide for a moment;
she drew one last deep breath,
Then her finger moved in the moonlight,
Her musket shattered the moonlight,
Shattered her breast in the moonlight
and warned him—with her death.*

The innkeeper's daughter, to save her highwayman from judgment and certain death, gave up her innocent life to save the guilty highwayman. In the same way, Jesus—according to God's plan, gives up his life to save us.

But also...

2. Jesus's death was God's plan to save all of us.

Not that "all" shall finally be saved, but that "all" that will be saved through Christ.

The last line of verse 9 says that the people Jesus has ransomed isn't a homogenous people, not confined to one ethnicity or culture—it is out of every tribe and language and people and nation.

That means that sin touches every person in every culture or nation on the planet, and that Jesus is the plan for salvation for them all. Every person needs saving, and any who will be saved can only be saved through Christ's death and resurrection.

The Bible says this is **not a matter of well Christianity works for me** and whatever other beliefs work for someone else, but the claim here is that the God incarnate in Jesus is the only God who created all things and by whose will all things exist (Rev. 4:11).

Maybe you have heard the statement that Christians, Muslims, and Jews worship the same God. I once had a boss who said that. The Pope said it a few weeks ago. A Wheaton College professor who put on a hijab in solidarity with her Muslim neighbors said it this passed week. Her concern for her fellow humans is commendable, but her theology is simply not what the Bible teaches—nor the Quran—nor the Hebrew Scriptures as Jewish persons understand them.

One problem with that view is that Christians worship Jesus, something a devout Muslim or Jew would never do. Notice in 4:11 the worship of heaven says God is worthy to receive glory and honor and power, but here in 5:11, worthy is the Lamb to receive power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor,

glory, and blessing. And verse 14 says the host of heaven worships the Lamb and the One sitting on the throne. Christians worship God the three in one, one in three.

Furthermore, both Islam and Judaism do not say the way to be saved is to trust Jesus's death in your place, they say the way to be saved is to obey. How do you know if you will go to heaven? – follow these rules. The Bible says, NO, you were enslaved, you'd never follow the rules well enough. Jesus came to ransom and rescue you.

All have sinned, Christ is their only hope for ransom. So I ask you, wherever you're from, or whatever your cultural background—have you accepted Christ, accepted his death in your place for your sins? I hope that if you haven't, from now on when you hear the Christmas story told you hear the beckoning of King Jesus to come find forgiveness and freedom in him.

Christmas is the story of God's mission to save us.

But not only to save us, to make us something new, to

B. Give us a mission

Look how verse 10 puts it:

and you have made them a kingdom
and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

In the same act of ransoming a people through his death, Jesus has taken the ransomed people and made them into a kingdom of priests to our God who will reign.

That phrase a kingdom of priests comes from the Old Testament in Exodus 19:5-6 where God says to Israel

⁵Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

In Exodus 19, God is saying, I will have Israel as my treasured possession *because* the whole earth is mine. As OT scholar Terrence Fretheim puts it, “Israel is commissioned to be God's people on behalf of the earth which is God's.”¹

Or, as one of my former OT professors, Dr. Brian Russell put it:

Out of all the nations, God says that Israel will be his “treasured possession” or “precious heirloom” (v. 5). God has a mission for his people to fulfill. God's people must be secure in their standing with God. God's favoring of his own does not mean other nations are unimportant. In fact, verse 5 twice reminds us of the surrounding world: “out of all nations” and “the whole earth is mine.” Living as treasured possession is a status

¹ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2010), 190.

for the sake of the rest of creation. It is not about lording over others; it is for the service of others.²

The idea is that God would be Israel's king, and they his kingdom. They would serve him as priests, and serve the nations as priests. They are redeemed not only for their own sake, but for the sake of God's mission to redeem and restore the whole earth.

Now John is saying that is the same mission for the church, for those ransomed by the blood of the Lamb. People from the whole earth are called to be a new people who serve King Jesus in the world for the sake of the world.

To be a priest means to be mediating (or reflecting) the presence of God and the reign of Jesus to creation—not merely by doing “good” and “serving” but bringing *Him* to be present in the world, to reign as king. By **demonstrating** his reign in our lives through service, sacrifice, love for the least and the lost; but also by **declaring** the truth of the Gospel—standing up to anyone who would claim to be savior or king.

Peter picks up the same idea in 1 Peter 2:9:

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Christmas is the story of God's mission to save us and give us a mission,

III. THEREFORE WE MUST SEE HIM AND SERVE HIM

I say it that way, “see him and serve him” because the only way we, whether individually or collectively, will live out this commission is to be absolutely captivated by the glory of God, the love of God, the mercy of God.

And that is really what the book of Revelation is trying to do with all the strangeness and mystery and fanciful depictions. Revelation wants to captivate you, it wants you to **feel** the power and weight of God and the Gospel, and live your life flowing out of that.

Illustration:

At a former church, we used to prepare for our worship time with a Scripture reading and prayer. One morning when it was my turn, I decided to just Revelation 4-5. No comment, not set up, just reading it like I meant it, and letting the power of the picture do its work. It turned out to be a special moment, by the time I got to Revelation 5 I was in tears, and others in the room were too—not because I'm a powerful orator, inflecting my voice to manipulate people's emotions—but because we felt the weight of our God and his love displayed in the Lamb. We were sort of stopped in our tracks, having caught a glimpse of our God, the Gospel, his purposes. Whatever we were called to do in that moment we were ready.

I believe that is what Revelation is supposed to do. Arrest you. Stop you in your tracks so that you reorient your life to God and his mission in the world.

² Brian D. Russell, *Invitation*, (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed, 2014), Kindle Loc. 1850-1855.

Revelation helps you **see God** and the glory of the Gospel. And when you see God you are able to **serve him** in ways beyond what you think are your limits.

In 1727 a German named Count Zinzendorf founded what became the Moravian Church (which later greatly influenced John Wesley). What got him started was a trip to a museum at Dusseldorf where he saw a painting by Domenico Feti entitled "Ecce Homo" ("Behold the Man"). It was a portrait of Christ with the crown of thorns pressed down on his head and blood running down his face.

Beneath the painting were the words, "I have done this for you; what have you done for me?" The rest of his life Zinzendorf looked back to that moment as life-changing. As he stood there, as it were, watching his Savior suffer and bleed, he said to himself, "I have loved him for a long time, but I have never actually done anything for him. From now on I will do whatever he leads me to do." I believe he was able to **SEE GOD that day**.

They started a 24 prayer vigil where each a member of the church committed to pray for each hour of the day. This lasted 100 years.

He started with about 300 like minded individuals and by 1792 they had sent out 300 missionaries to the North America, Turkey, the West Indies, and more. Some of those missionaries were on the boat which brought John Wesley to Georgia as a young man.

20 of the first 29 missionaries sent to the West Indies died or were never heard from again. The Moravians would recruit by holding this mission meetings, where they would speak of the lostness of the world and the love of God in the Gospel.

At one of these meetings, two young men heard of a slave plantation run by an atheist master in St. Thomas. Somewhere between 2000 and 3000 slaves who had never, and likely would never hear the Gospel. They decided they would do whatever it took to go to those slaves and share the Gospel with them—even if it meant selling themselves into slavery. The law forbid whites from being enslaved in St. Thomas, but the men did leave their families and jobs in Copenhagen, much to the dismay of their friends and family. Willing to forsake freedom, family, and most likely their lives for the call of God. Why?

I believe the next seen in their life explains "why?" As the ship put out to sea, they stood at the aft arm in arm, and one of them cried out to those back on the dock:

"May the Lamb who was slain receive the reward of his suffering!"

It's basically a paraphrase of what we read this morning, "May the Lamb who was slain receive the reward of his suffering!" **They had seen Jesus the slain Lamb in all his glory and were ready to serve Him.**

Christmas is the story of God's mission to save us and give us a mission, therefore we must see him and serve him