

Christmas 2012
Beyond “Baby Jesus”
December 24, 2012

PRELUDE – Jingle Bell Rock

Video - O COME ALL YE FAITHLESS

Congregational Songs – O Come All Ye Faithful / Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Drama – “Prepared”

Congregational Song – Silent Night

Video – “Happy Birthday Jesus”

Hey, can I ask you all to humor me and do something a little bit unusual for a Christmas Eve service? In fact, I’ve never been at a Christmas Eve service where they’ve done this: would you

mind ... and I know this is really unorthodox ... would you all sing *Happy Birthday* to Jesus with me?

Let me know if you'll do that by clapping. "This is such a great idea, Rick. Let's sing happy birthday to Jesus."

Alright, good. Let's do this, OK?

Oh, wait a minute ... before we sing ... has anyone here ever been in a Christmas Eve service where this has been done? Raise your hand. I don't want to assume. <invite people to come help>

Ok, then, here we go. Sing along with me/us, "Happy Birthday" to Jesus.

<sing happy birthday>

I was thinking about this the other day. For all the concern there seems to be every year about the “War on Christmas” – you know, the effort to change Christmas from the celebration of Jesus’ birth to an observance of some generic “holiday” – it’s a bit odd to me that most Christians never do the one thing that’s done at every birthday party we’ve ever been to.

I mean, when it’s *my* birthday, if they can’t make it to my party, my daughters will always call me up and sing “happy birthday” to me. If I’m not able to answer the phone, they’ll leave me a voicemail.

Even my parents, who – God love them – can't sing worth a lick will call me up and sing because it's my birthday.

And if we go out for dinner on my birthday and Jetta tells the waiter it's my birthday, a group of people *I don't even know* will come up and sing happy birthday to me. It's an amazing thing.

So thank you for singing with me. I think Jesus probably liked it, too. 😊

And I hope it helps you to remember that the most important thing about Christmas is that it is Jesus' birthday.

And I *know* that you know that *no one really knows* the exact date of his birth

and that many years ago, for various reasons, the ancient Church Fathers picked December 25th as the day to remember and celebrate it ... so, it's likely *not* the actual date on which Mary and Joseph became parents of Jesus.

But, every person was born on some day, so it makes as much sense to pick that date as any other. And the most important thing about that date, December 25th – Christmas – is that it's Jesus' birthday.

However, as important as it is to understand that, I think it's even *more* important to understand that ...

**... the most important thing about
Jesus IS NOT HIS BIRTHDAY.**

The most important thing about Christmas is that it's Jesus' birthday, but the most important thing about Jesus IS NOT HIS BIRTHDAY.

And I think that's worth noting because of the fact that about 60% of the population only goes to *church twice a year* – on Christmas and on Easter ... which means, unfortunately, that the only Jesus that most people ever hear about from the church is the one who is either dying on a cross or lying in a manger. Jesus is either a helpless victim of Jewish and Roman authority run amuck or a sweet little adorable "super baby" – because unlike normal babies "the little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes," right?

Now, I've been thinking about this for quite a while and, a few months ago, I remembered a scene from a movie that illustrates how this kind of narrow vision might affect not only our *perception* of Jesus but also the way we *relate* to Him. You've probably seen this movie – it came out in 2005 – and was fairly popular. If not, I'm sure you've heard of it or, at least, you've heard of the main character – NASCAR driver Ricky Bobby.

Check out this clip from *Talladega Nights*.

Video – “Ricky Bobby Prayer” (2)

“8lb 6oz newborn infant Jesus with

golden-fleeced diapers” – obviously, that’s an illustration in the extreme. But it does make the point that a lot of people somehow get the impression that what’s most important about Jesus is his birth ... or maybe his death and resurrection.

And I certainly don’t mean to minimize the birth of Jesus or even his death and resurrection. The “Incarnation” (as theologians call it) is amazing. Eternal God entered into mortal history. Creator God joined his creation. God who *made* man *became* a man, lived a perfect life, died in our place for our sin, and rose from the grave to conquer death.

But the problem with that “bookend

focus" that looks exclusively at beginning of Jesus' time on this earth and at its ending is that we miss out on who Jesus was *as a person*. We miss out on the fact that, as "Chip" said in the movie: "he was man! He had a beard!" And if you read the stories of his life in the books of the Bible we call the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you see that like any man he did the things that men do.

He ate, he slept, he worked, he traveled, he had friends, and he had enemies. He laughed, he cried, and he got angry. He told jokes, he was silent, and he got in people's faces.

Ricky Bobby's friend, Cal Naughton, Jr. would be happy to know that Jesus even

liked to party. His first recorded miracle was making wine. And he drank wine. He hung out with people who sometimes drank *too much* wine (which got him in trouble with the religious authorities who labeled him “the friend of sinners”).

And the reason why that’s important to know is that, even though Jesus is not present physically, when we interact with Him spiritually, *we’re interacting with the same character of person that He was in the flesh.*

And I know that seems obvious, but I think a lot of people – even people who go to church every Sunday – either don’t realize that or they forget it. A lot of people get stuck in reducing Jesus

down to what he accomplished as "God incarnate" or "savior of the world."

But Jesus today, as he was in His time on earth, is more than that. When Jesus returned to Heaven following his resurrection, He told his disciples that He would send his Spirit to be with them and everyone else throughout history who chose to be his disciple. And through that Spirit, Jesus is as much a friend and a brother to us as he is God-in-the-flesh. He's as much a leader and an advisor or counselor as he is a savior from sin and death.

And I know some of you are probably thinking, "That sounds cool. I like the idea of Jesus as a regular guy, who you

can know. But how does that work? What does that look like? How do you experience that?"

Well, I'll tell you how that's worked for me personally, in my own life. There have been three "components" for lack of a better term that have enabled me to relate to Jesus:

The first is the Bible, the second is the church and the third is the inner voice of my own conscience shaped by those first two components.

And just to be clear, when I say "the church" I don't mean the building or even the institution. I mean other people who are part of my life who also know Jesus through the Bible, the church and whose conscience is being

shaped by those first two.

When I was in elementary school, I had a friend who invited me to church with him. My family wasn't a church-going family so I learned many things about Jesus from the Bible and that church. It didn't all make sense to me at the time – I picked up some of the basics about who Jesus was and what he did (you know, the Christmas/Easter kinds of things) but I didn't have any kind of relational interaction with him.

And then we moved away and I didn't go to church for several years, until the ninth grade when another friend invited me to go to church with him. And, I'll spare you the details but I was very aware at the time that I was a sinner.

So, when it was explained to me that God became a man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and lived the life that all of us should live (but don't live) and died the death that we should die as our substitute for sin, I prayed and asked Jesus to be not just the generic "savior of the world" but to be *my* savior, savior of *me* from sin. And, even though I had been baptized as good Catholic boy (because of a good catholic father who never went to church), I was baptized again, which is what the Bible says we should do when we accept and follow Christ.

But that wasn't the end of the journey. It was just the beginning. I became part of that church. And one day I heard

someone – probably the pastor or my Sunday School teacher – read the story where Jesus said:

“Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse because it is built on bedrock.” Matthew 7:24-25 (NLT)

And I liked that a lot. I liked the idea that Jesus not only would be my savior, but he would be my advisor and counselor through his teaching. And I began to read the Bible – not a lot, but

enough that I could allow Jesus' wisdom and insight to increase my own.

Now, I haven't always been successful at or even interested in following His advice (I *am* still a sinner) but to this day, Jesus still does that for me. And my life is different – and better by far – because He's way smarter than I ever will be.

Not many years after that, I heard someone read verses like ...

Whatsoever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.
Colossians 3:23 (KJV)

And the place where Jesus called his disciples by saying ...

"Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" Matthew 4:19 (NLT)

He was talking to his disciples who were fishermen, and they were wasting their lives trying to catch fish and there was no end to it. And Jesus said, I'm going to show you something that might be better; I'm going to teach you how to fish for people and help people find their way to God. And I began to realize that as much as Jesus could be my savior and my advisor, he could also be my leader ... which meant that I didn't

have to waste the gifts and talents and resources he had given me on my own limited vision and my own limited agenda in this world. Instead, I could put them into service in his hands in a way that would have eternal value.

And just to be clear, I'm not talking about "oh, so that's when you became a pastor, Rick. That's when you decided to go into the ministry." No, no, this was long before I ever dreamed about what I'm doing now. Back when I was flipping burgers at McDonalds, back before I became a software engineer. It became clear to me that in whatever I did, Jesus was calling me to make my life about more than just me.

And to this day, Jesus is my leader. I

don't always follow Him well because I am a sinner. But I rarely play golf or wallyball or go to the grocery store or hang out with my family (or do this job) without a sense that somehow, someway, God is using my little life to accomplish a small piece of His agenda in this world. And I'm glad to know that He is.

Now, I don't have a brother and, like most men, I've not had a lot of close friends. So, over the past few years, another little statement of Jesus has become more and more important to me:

He once said to his disciples:

"I don't call you servants anymore, because a servant doesn't know what his master is doing. But I've called you friends because I've made known to you everything that I've heard from my Father."
(I'm sharing it all with you, like a bud.) *John 15:15*
(GW)

And then there's this statement from the writer of the Book of Hebrews:

Jesus and the ones he makes holy (people who have asked Jesus to be their savior) have the same Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters. *Hebrews 2:11 (NIV)*

As I've gotten older I've seen a lot more evil and pain and death in this world, like what we saw last week in Connecticut and even here in Kansas City, and I've suffered losses of various kinds in my own life. And there have been times when I just wanted to say, "this is nuts; I just want to give up."

And, in those times, I have discovered Jesus often coming to me as a friend and as a brother ... encouraging me, and sometimes kicking me in the butt (not physically, but in my mind and in my spirit, like a brother and a friend would do). And that matters because He's been in those situations, too. He's seen it all and experienced it all and he stayed the course anyway. And He

challenges and encourages me, like a brother, to do the same thing.

Closing

Now, I don't tell you all this to make it sound like I am perfect or have arrived. And I don't want to give the impression that because Jesus is my friend, brother, counselor and leader, life has always been easy and life has always made sense. It hasn't been, and it doesn't.

I just want you to understand something of how it works to actually *know* Jesus as a person. And I want other people to have what I have. And I don't want anyone to ever get the wrong

impression of what Christianity offers to this world. I don't anyone ever thinking that what we have is a hollowed-out Jesus who simply goes from baby in a manger to savior on the cross performing a function for all of us that none of us can do on our own.

Jesus was a *real person*. And even though we now know Him in spirit, He *is still* a real person.

And, the day *is coming*, the Bible says, when we will actually see him as a real, flesh and blood person.

I say that because Paul writes ...

*The Lord himself will
come down from heaven*

with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God.

First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. 1

*Thessalonians 4:13-17
[NLT]*

And by the way, where Jesus and his friends will be forever is NOT up in the clouds floating around with harp and a halo going to eternal church services. The imagery in Paul's writing is that of a

conquering king coming NOT to take people away somewhere else, but being met outside the city gates by the people and ushered in to set up his Kingdom in *that* place.

And that's what Jesus is going to do when he returns. He's going to set up His Kingdom here on this earth. All things will be made new, including our diseased and dying bodies. And on that day, we who have invited Jesus to be not just our friend, brother, counselor and leader but also our savior will begin a new life under his reign as our King of Kings and Lord of Lords that lasts forever and ever.

I don't about you but, when I turn on the tv sometimes and I see all the crap

that's going on in this world, *that* sounds like a glorious, glorious day. I can't wait for it.

Now, I'm going to ask the band to get in place as we close with that thought. And as they do, I want to invite you to get to know Jesus better, whether this is the first time in a long time that you've shown up in church or you show up every Sunday somewhere. And if you are not part of a church and you live in this area, I want you to know that you are welcome here at NHCC. You are the reason why we started this church almost 20 years ago – you are the reason why we expanded our facility so we could have more room. We want people who don't know Jesus (or have that bookend/hollowed-out vision of

Jesus) to get to know Him.

So, wherever you are tonight, let me pray for you.

Father, there are people in this room tonight who desperately need to know your Son as their brother, their friend, their counselor, their advisor and leader, and you want to offer that to them. I pray that they will avail themselves of the ways that you have made possible for that to happen through the church, the Bible and through our own conscience when it's informed by the church and the Bible.

But, God, as much as we need to know Jesus in that way, those roles

only matter because Jesus was obedient to your will to the point of dying an unjust death in our place on the cross. And because of that, you raised Him up and He will one day be Lord over everything that is.

I pray that tonight we would open our hearts to Him in whatever way. In His name, Amen.

Feature – “Glorious Day”

Congregational Song – “Joy to the World”

Closing Comments

Upcoming at NHCC ... Grand Opening to the community ... January 13th ... “Remodel Your Life” ... thanks for being our guinea pigs as we work out the

bugs in this place.