

Good evening and Merry Christmas! I want to welcome all of you here and those of you joining us from home, particularly our guests, as we gather to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. I don't know about you but, after the year we've just lived through, I've had this day circled on my calendar since about mid-March. I have been looking forward to it in a way I haven't looked forward to Christmas since I was nine years old and have soaked up this season in an incredible way. Tonight we celebrate that God has moved and Jesus has been born.

Here's how the evening is going to go. We are going to tell the Christmas story in word and song. Our worship team is going to lead us in a number of Christmas carols that we get to sing, even as we all wear masks. We'll read the Christmas story out of Luke and I'll come up here to speak a few more times. And my prayer for tonight is that, while it's a time of celebration, we see that Christmas is also a time of invitation, an annual opportunity to hear what God has done on our behalf so that we can end one year and enter into the next with a renewed hope, ignited joy, and a sense of peace. That's what the Christmas story invites us into.

We will have no formal offering tonight. If you'd like to give, there are three ways: offering boxes as you leave, online, or on our app. Thank you for your generosity.

So are you ready to celebrate Christmas? Well, in order to get the Christmas spirit flowing, we engaged the help of some of Fellowship's finest. Watch this.

The invitation to hope in God's promises

As I said, I want us to see the invitation God makes to us at Christmas, and it begins with an invitation to hope in his promises. I am always moved by Mary's maturity here, given that she's very likely a young teenager (I guess Luke decided to leave out the eye-rolling and dismissive sighs). But there's something about the way she receives this angelic announcement that speaks to the invitation Christmas makes. She's fearful in the moment, and she's likely surprised about her involvement in God's plans, but what she's not surprised at is God sending the promised Messiah, the anointed one who would sit on the throne of David forever. He promised he would do it centuries before this moment, and here he is fulfilling that promise. Mary has lived with hope and now sees it fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

Hope is in short supply these days but is desperately needed. Hopelessness says we are powerless against our circumstances. But hope says, in spite of circumstances, there is one who is more powerful, and we can count on him to see his plan through to the end. I had a conversation with a woman whose business has been in upheaval this year, and a lot of people are freaking out, but she's not. It's been noticed. When asked how she can be so calm, she gets to talk about her hope in the one who is above the circumstances we find ourselves in. **Christmas reminds us we can all live that same way.**

But a promise is only as good as the promise-giver's character and ability to fulfill it. Just think about how you evaluated all the promises made during this last election season. God fulfilled his promise by coming to us himself, through Jesus, who stepped off his throne heaven and was born of a virgin. **That makes God a promise keeper.** This book is full of promises, some of which he's already fulfilled, others he will one day fulfill.

If someone made any bold predictions about exactly how 2021 will go, we'd be a fool to believe them. But if someone boldly declared God is good and will be faithful to us in 2021, we'd be a fool not to believe. **He kept one promise through a baby in a manger 2,000 years ago. Christmas invites us, in these uncertain times, to go forward with the hope and certainty that he will keep the rest.**

The invitation to trust in God's salvation and experience joy and peace through it

This is my favorite part of the Christmas story. I still tear up every time I hear Linus recite it in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It is an invitation to trust in God's salvation and experience the joy and peace that follows. The angel brings good news. Could you use some good news? This is good news that leads to great joy because a Savior has been born, a deliverer. God has initiated a rescue mission...but from what?

This pandemic has been a stark reminder of our condition without God. It has persisted, marched on, in spite of our best efforts. Masks, quarantine, lockdowns; anything we've tried to do hasn't worked. That's why it's a picture of our condition. **The news of Christmas is good because of the bad news we all face.** We all are born with a persistent, terminal condition called sin that separates us from God, and there's nothing we can do about it. We can't be good enough, can't work our way to health. But Christmas is an invitation because it declares you don't have to.

While most every religion asks what we will do for God, Christmas declares what God has done for us. The name Jesus means "God saves". The good news of great joy isn't a list of things we do to save ourselves, it's a person who's come to do it for us. He has come, and through his life, death, and resurrection, he provides the cure to our condition, makes us right with God, and gives us eternal life. That's a cause for rejoicing.

Joy is the reflex of your heart when it remembers what God has made possible for you, even when the circumstances of life are horrific. In fact, joy may be most important when things are at their worst. And when we choose to focus on and delight in God's presence and promises, joy follows. Christmas invites us to do that.

And if Jesus's saving work also makes us right with God, we have peace with God. Just saying the word "peace" makes me feel better. Things have been so unpeaceful, everyone is on edge and at each other's throat. Even playing the game Apples to Apples is risky these days. I was with a group a few nights ago and played a card with the name of a major political party. It was not well received. You want to know what was on the card, don't you? Well, I'm not going to tell you.

The lack of peace between man is a consequence of man's lack of peace with God because of sin. But Jesus came as a peace offering, and the peace he makes possible is more than an absence of conflict. This peace is the shalom of the Old Testament, the intimate and harmonious relationship between God and man, just as it was always meant to be. Christmas is an invitation to enter into that peace.

The invitation to rest in God's loving presence

The shepherds hear this message of hope, joy, and peace and go with haste. They move with urgency and wind up in the presence of a babe in a manger, just as the angels said they would. They believed God, moved with faith, and have now drawn near to the infant Messiah, who is called Immanuel, which means God with us.

We have all learned to appreciate the value of being in someone's presence this year. Isolation, separation, virtual engagements... I mean, the only good thing about all that is being able to wear your official Zoom uniform daily. I spent some time on Zoom Tuesday and wore a button-down collared shirt...and flannel pajama pants. So, if you had a Zoom call with me on Tuesday, here is my public confession! But that's about all that's good about being apart.

That separation we've all experienced this year is a picture of the distance sin puts between us and God. But God doesn't want that distance, and he certainly doesn't want a virtual relationship. He wants us to be in his presence, and Jesus came to make that possible. This is ultimately the best news of Christmas. **Jesus was sent to us, in order to save us, so he could be with us, forever.** The invitation of Christmas is God himself.

If you are here tonight and not a regular church goer or a follower of Jesus, I want you to know the invitation of Christmas is offered to you. It's a gift. There's nothing to do to earn it. But a gift is only good news if it's accepted. That's your part. Jesus came so that you could be with God forever. If you'd like to talk to someone about that, let us know.

It's also an invitation to all of us to be like the shepherds and go with haste, rest in the loving presence of God and, through our joy, tell everyone about this good news. **If you are a follower of Jesus, you are the carrier of this invitation.** That unto us is born a Savior. From God to angels, angels to shepherds, and from generation to generation. Now it's your turn.

I don't have to tell you that this has been one of the most difficult years we've lived through. But God is faithful and has not left us. You may have heard about the Christmas Star that appeared in the night sky on the 21st, a super conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that occurs once every several hundred years. Some believe it's the star the Magi/Wise Men followed to see Jesus after he was born. It's one of many theories, so we won't settle that tonight. **But I take it as a reminder of God's goodness and love, that in the midst of this dark year, he reminds us of the light that shined in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, given for you and me.** The Gospel of John says in Jesus was life, and his life was the light of men. And so we close tonight by singing an old hymn, lighting the Advent candle, receiving that light and passing it on to others.

I love you. I pray you accept God's Christmas invitation, and that you experience his love and presence not only in the days to come, but in the year to come, all because the Savior has come.