



BelPres Church

The Christmas Eve Message

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So good to see all of you here. Those of you who are in the sanctuary, those of you joining us online, those of you here in modern worship, just thank you so much for being here.

You know, if you go to this church, this is my favorite night of the year, and I look forward to it all year, and I love celebrating it with four or five thousand of my favorite people. So just thank you so much for being here.

I want to start with a question. Have you ever tried so hard to make something perfect that you end up wrecking it? Like, yep, anyone?

Yeah. Maybe even tonight, trying to get here. Maybe you did that.

So one of the times I did that was on a family trip to Italy, and the thing I wanted my kids to see more than anything else was the Sistine Chapel with Michelangelo's famous frescoes on the ceiling of the chapel.

And I love it, and I wanted my kids to love it, so I tried to make everything perfect.

And at the time, my older daughter was going through a break up with her boyfriend, and she's fine, she's over it, and she says, it's okay if I tell this story, she can laugh about it. And mostly on that trip, she was great.

But about once a day on that trip, she would just suddenly get sad for a little while. And it didn't last very long, but you never knew when the sad was going to happen. So you kind of couldn't plan around it.

So we went to the Sistine Chapel, and we're looking up and admiring the ceiling. And it was in that moment that the sad happened. And I glanced over at my daughter, and she was sitting on a bench looking at the ground.

And I was like, the whole point of this room is the ceiling. Why is she looking down? She's missing it.

And so then I said to my wife, do you think she could reschedule the sad for later? Because she's missing it. And then I realized, wait, I'm missing it, because I'm looking at my daughter looking at the ground.

And I just said something to my wife. So now she's missing it, looking at me, looking at our daughter, looking at the ground. So basically none of us saw it.

It's a little bit of an exaggeration, because actually my daughter did eventually look up and my wife just ignored me. So really, it happens, right? So really, I was the one that missed seeing the Sistine Chapel.

I wanted it to be so perfect that I ended up focusing on what I felt wasn't perfect and I missed it. And afterwards, I thought, well, at least it will preach, because that's always the pastor's consolation for everything, right?

Because I don't know about you, but there are times in my life when I miss something amazing, because I'm staring at the ground in some kind of a way. I am focused on what I want or what's not going my way or focused on my agenda, focused on other things. So God could be doing amazing things in my life, but I miss it because I'm focused, I'm staring at the ground, metaphorically speaking.

Had you been there that first Christmas, you easily could have missed that God was doing something amazing.

Coming himself in human form, in the person of Jesus, to suffer everything that we suffer so that we know God understands how hard it is sometimes to be human.

Then, dying on a cross to pay the price for our sins, we know needs to be paid, or there's no justice in the universe. And then, rising from the dead to reconcile us to God.

Raising from the dead so that after we die, we will be raised to new lives as well if we know him. He did all of that because he loves you that much. And he wants a relationship with you that badly.

Don't nobody love you the way Jesus does. Not your parents, not your spouse, not your friends, not your job, not your school, not your boss, not your pleasure, not your money. Don't nobody love you the way Jesus does.

But had you been there, that first Christmas, you could have missed all of that, and all you probably would have seen is a teenage peasant giving birth in a stable.

And you might have said a lot of things that night, but oh, look, God is rescuing the world, would not have been one of them. It wasn't what anyone was expecting. It wasn't what anyone was looking for.

It wasn't what anyone wanted. The Israelites wanted God to show up in power as a military leader and kick out the Roman Empire, not show up as a baby. And we sometimes miss what God is doing because we're focused on something else.

We're focused on what...

He's not doing what we want him to do, or he's not doing it in the way we want him to do it, or we're focused on some other issue in our life, or we're just in some way, like me and the Sistine Chapel, focused on something else when he's doing

something amazing and we just don't see it. So if you take nothing home tonight from this sermon, at least take this home. Jesus is with you, working for your good, whether you see it yet or not.

And Jesus being with us and working for our good does not depend on us seeing it at first. He doesn't need us to see it to be working for our good. And the Bible passages our kids and students read in those videos kind of show some of the reasons why we sometimes miss what God is doing around us and in our lives.

For starters, part of the reason we miss sometimes is that God doesn't always show up in a grand way. Sometimes he does, but other times he does grand things in the ordinary.

You know, if God came to earth, everyone would have expected him to come in a grand way, right? Lots of trumpets and all that stuff, be born in a palace, not in a stable, to royalty, not to poor peasants.

And the way Jesus came in the world, it's just so every day, it's just so ordinary. But it's the biggest event in history, God coming himself in human form. It's a big thing in a very ordinary looking kind of scenario.

And to me, that is good news, because what it tells me is that God can step into my ordinary life, and my ordinary days, and your ordinary days, and do something extraordinary within them.

Another reason I think we sometimes miss what God is doing is that we often want God to make everything perfect for us. But in a broken world, we don't always get perfect things, but God always gives us something beautiful. I want everything to be perfect. I want perfect family vacations. I want to preach perfect sermons.

I want the perfect Christmas, where everybody gets along perfectly, and the dinner is perfect, and the conversation is perfect, because my family is perfect, just like your family is perfect. Well, not so perfect, maybe. Nervous laughter.

We don't always get perfect in this life. But the Bible says God makes all things beautiful. All things.

All things beautiful in their time. And beautiful and perfect are not the same thing. Beautiful and perfect are different.

In fact, sometimes, something is beautiful because of the ways it's not perfect. That first Christmas was anything but perfect.

Mary and Joseph have to travel 90 miles from their home to Bethlehem, to register for a census so that a colonial power could impose yet more taxes on an already overtaxed people. No room in the inn, so they have their baby in the stable.

No couple has ever read these passages and said, oh, let's have our baby this way, ever, in 2000 years. Not perfect, but it's beautiful. And artists have painted it, musicians have sung about it, it's the stuff of art.

And it's beautiful in part because of the ways it's not perfect. Because it shows that Jesus steps into our messy, imperfect lives and the situations we face, and he brings something beautiful out of it.

One of the things I have recognized over the last five or ten years, as I've lost people I love, and grieve those losses, as some of you, no doubt, are grieving a loss here tonight.

But one of the things I've discovered is that grief and gratitude are almost the same thing. Grief is just gratitude with nowhere to go. It hurts because it was good.

So when I'm grieving, I'm kind of also saying, thank you for that good thing. It's not perfect at all, but there's beauty in it. One of my friends and his wife have been on a 10-year journey with one of their sons who struggled with drug addiction.

And he's doing a lot better now. He's been sober for a long time now, but he created so much hurt and pain within the family that they can't be together. So my friend and his wife will spend part of Christmas with this one son, and then the other half of Christmas with their other two kids. Not perfect yet. Maybe in the future.

But even now, when it's still not perfect, there's something beautiful in the way my friend and his wife have loved their son, showing what Jesus' strong, stubborn, never giving up on you or me love actually looks like in real life. Something beautiful in the times when they didn't think they could go on one more day, but Jesus gave them supernatural courage and hope and joy that did not come from themselves, but that came from him. Something beautiful in the ways that this ordeal, which could wreck a marriage has only brought them closer together.

Something beautiful in the ways their other two kids have grown through all of this, one of them studying psychology because she wants to help people like her brother and families like her family.

It is not perfect yet, but God is bringing beautiful things out of it. And I think like me in the Sistine Chapel, sometimes we miss the beauty in our marriages or in our friendships or in our ordinary daily lives.

We miss the beautiful things about that because we're so focused on having things perfect that we miss the beautiful that God is doing.

And then finally, we miss what God is doing because I think often we want God to make our lives easy and make us comfortable, but God doesn't always make us comfortable. Sometimes he calls us to a big adventure. So it doesn't always make us comfortable, but he always gives us purpose and meaning and joy. There was nothing comfortable about that first Christmas at all, but it was filled with purpose.

God coming himself to rescue you and me and this entire world. Not comfortable, but there was purpose in it.

Earlier this year, I was in Florida visiting some friends, and I've never been to the Everglades before, which are extensive wetlands in Florida.

So we decided to go, and when we got there, we got out of the car and instantly we were just surrounded by clouds of insects biting you, like too many to swat away.

And at that point, I was like, oh, I see, Everglades is just a pretty word for stinky swamp, right? This is awful. So, but we started out on our hike, right?

Anyway, so we started out our hike, we're walking, and we saw a sign that said, Caution, Alligators. I'm like, okay, I can deal with, you know, alligators, don't bother them, they don't bother you.

I'm like, I'm all right, I'll just not poke them or anything, right? And then we hiked some more, and then there was another sign that said, Caution, Poisonous Snakes. I hate snakes.

But I also grew up in Eastern Washington, and sometimes there would be rattlesnakes in our front yard and stuff like that. So we kept going, went a little further, and then we saw another sign that said, Caution, snakes sometimes fall from trees.

I'm out, right? Like, I draw the line at flying snakes. No, no, no, no.

So instead of that adventure, we went and got ice cream, which really is kind of the same thing, if you think about it. It was uncomfortable and pointless. Never so with Jesus.

The difficult things, the uncomfortable things we go through, he always makes them have meaning and purpose. He always brings meaning and purpose and joy out of the uncomfortable things of our lives. I have a friend who I'll call Matt.

And years ago, he worked as a bouncer at a bar in Seattle, which tells you a little bit about him, right? Big, just like a big guy, really big guy.

And one night, working as a bouncer, he was shot and lost so much blood that the doctors thought that he was going to die. And when I went to the hospital to pray for him, he was in a coma and the doctor said there's almost no hope.

But he had an army of people praying for him and he recovered miraculously. I mean, literally. And after that, he just wanted to grab as much of life as he possibly could.

So he traveled a lot, lots of adventure stuff, good things. But after a couple of years, even those things started to feel a little bit routine. And he didn't feel like he had a lot of meaning or purpose.

He had a lot of fun, but kind of no meaning, no purpose in his life. And he'd gone to church growing up, but he had Jesus on the back burner for a long time. But out of this, he began to return to a relationship with Jesus.

He started reading the Bible and going to church, and he began to see the real Jesus. Not Jesus, the great rule giver, not Jesus, the great forbiddener, who's always saying to us, you're not good enough, try harder, try harder, try harder.

But Jesus, who loves us and forgives us and has grace for when we sin and mess up. And he began to experience Jesus' real presence, like right there with them, and would start to have conversations, prayers that were conversations.

He experienced Jesus' power that changes us to be more like Jesus, and Jesus called to us to join him in his rescue mission to this world.

Well, after a couple of years of this, one day he was praying, and he got a thought that he knew came from Jesus, because it wasn't the kind of thing that he would have thought.

And the thought told him to start praying every day for the guy who had shot him, and was now in jail.

It had been 17 years at this point since he had been shot, but he felt Jesus nudge him to pray that good things would happen, that God would give this guy in jail good things, this guy who shot him. That's a hard thing to pray. But he started to do it every day. Three weeks after he started praying for the guy who shot him, that guy's girlfriend contacted my friend, Matt, after 17 years. Like, what are the...

It just doesn't seem like that's a coincidence. It's just like God was doing something. And after talking to her, he got another thought from Jesus that told him to call this guy in jail, and forgive him.

This guy who almost killed him. That's hard to do.

So Matt wrestled with that for a while in prayer, but out of that, began to realize, well, Jesus had forgiven him his sins, and the ways he'd hurt other people, and that helped him forgive this guy who had shot him.

So he called him up and forgave him, and began a relationship with this guy who had tried to kill him. And this guy has genuine remorse for what he has done, and he wants to start a brand new life when he gets out of jail.

So now Matt is connecting him with people that can help him get started on a new life when he finally gets out of jail. Matt is actively working for this guy's good.

But it's not just this guy, because God has used all of these life experiences, being shot, discovering the real Jesus, learning to forgive someone who almost killed him, to make Matt, who's now in his 40s, just like this stand-up guy, who is like a

magnet to younger men who are maybe lost, or making bad decisions, or looking for meaning and purpose in their lives. They're just drawn to Matt. He's like a lost young man whisperer or something.

They're just drawn to him, and he has this ability to both love them, but also give them some tough love when they need it, and challenge them sometimes.

He's a former bouncer who can combine love and strength in ways that are making these men better men, better husbands, better fathers, some of them starting relationships with Jesus themselves. And it's not always a comfortable thing for Matt.

God's called them to do a hard thing. You know, he's got to sometimes challenge these guys, get in their faces. That's not easy to do.

It's not always comfortable, but there's purpose in it, and there's meaning and joy in it.

Because when someone says, you have changed my life, without you, I wouldn't be where I am, I mean, that is more satisfying than any adventure you could ever have. God met Matt in the imperfect parts of his life, being shot, not perfect.

But God brought beauty out of it, taught him to forgive, and made him a man who is now changing other people's lives. And right now, Matt is working in a job he doesn't really like very much, but he has to stay in it for a while, also not perfect.

But sometimes he meets these young men through his job.

So Jesus is using him in the ordinariness of his job and his life to meet these guys and transform them and bring healing and challenge and hope into their lives, which gives Matt meaning and purpose and joy. Because that's what Jesus does.

That's just one of the things Jesus does.

So if you don't know Jesus, I would encourage you to get to know him. You know, talk with the people who brought you here.

You know, if we can help talk with one of us, we'd love to help, maybe join us or another church on Sundays, because Jesus will change your life. Changed a lot of people's lives here. And he can change yours for the better.

And if you do know Jesus, well, where is he working in your life right now? And if you can't see it yet, have faith that he is there.

There's a line in the Christmas song, a little town of Bethlehem, that says, yet in this dark street shineth the everlasting light.

Which means no matter what dark streets we find ourselves on, Christmas shows that even if we don't see it yet, because we're staring at the ground in some way, you know, we're focused on our own agenda, focused on our issues, focused on whatever,

Christmas shows that Jesus' presence and working for our good does not depend on us seeing it at first. And we all have some kind of a dark street. That street of failure, frustration, or pain, of disappointed hopes and dashed dreams, the loneliness that won't quit, the career that isn't what you'd hoped for, the marriage that hasn't arrived yet, or the marriage that is hard right now, that bad

habit you swear you'll never do again, but then you just keep doing it, or that street that is so, so dark and so filled with shame, you don't even dare name it to yourself. Or maybe it's just the ordinary street, the job or the school or whatever,

it just seems like it's a routine thing. Or maybe even it's a good street, easy street, a victory or a promotion or something like that, but you're not sure you see God in it, and you're not sure if there's any purpose in it.

That street where the cancer won't heal, the marriage won't mend, the kids won't mind, that's the street I'm talking about, and we all have a that street. And just because you can't see it doesn't mean God is not doing a beautiful thing, a purposeful thing. The moment in history where God seemed most absent was when Jesus was crucified. But even in that street, his light was shining.

You just couldn't see it until three days later when he rose from the dead. Which means that whatever dark street we are in, in your life, in my life, that street has no power.

That street cannot defeat you when that street comes up against the power of the risen Christ. Because in that dark street shineth the everlasting light. And every hope you have and every fear we fear is met in Jesus tonight.

Amen. Jesus, thank you. No one is like you, Jesus.

No one is like you. No one has this much love that you would leave the perfection of heaven to suffer everything we suffer so we could know who you really are and know that you understand us.

So Lord, we bring you those places where we don't yet see you working, and we ask that you help us see it. But also give us faith that even if we can't see it, you are always working for our good, because you love us that much. And we know someday we will see it. So give us faith in the meantime and open our eyes so that we can participate in what you're doing in our lives and in this world, and we will give you all the glory, because only you deserve it, Jesus. Only you.

In your name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or community group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What are some key take aways for you?
- How might you respond this week?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.