

*“All I Want For Christmas”*  
*“The Gift of Good News”*

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Key Text: Matthew 1:18-25

## **I. Introduction: What is Christmas All About?**

If Christmas is about anything it is about giving. We give more time to think about and be with family. We give consideration to what gifts we might buy to give to people we love and care about. We consider ways in which we might give to those in need. Many who attended the community Thanksgiving service saw the Salvation Army Red Kettle at the entrance and gave their first Christmas gift there. Many of you have selected an angel or two from the tree in the Narthex and are actively thinking about what gift to purchase to give to a boy or girl in our community.

And then we consider at Christmas what we think to be the greatest gift of all, to which all other gifts pale in comparison. God’s gift of Jesus. Signs and symbols in the sanctuary begin to point towards this important event that we prepare to celebrate on December 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. The coming of the Christ child.

## **II. Let Advent Begin**

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It’s not the start of Christmas. Advent is a season of preparation. It’s not the start of Christmas. It is a season to be considering the “coming” of Jesus. Advent is 4 weeks where we, as the church, prepare to celebrate once again the coming, the birthday, of Jesus, who by the way, comes to us over and over again in Word and through the Holy Spirit and in our times of Holy Communion.

And whose return in final victory we anticipate.

To this end we light candles on the Advent wreath each week as a build-up to Christmas Eve when we light the large white candle in the middle known as the Christ-candle. This is the candle we take our flame from and pass to each other on Christmas Eve to signify as prophesied by Isaiah in chapter 9, vs 1, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.” We don’t want to miss the significance of lighting our candles each week as mere tradition. They point to a holy moment in time. A moment of great joy and good news “for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders.” (Is 9:6)

## **III. Other Signs Pointing to Christmas**

There are other signs such as the Christmas tree we put up each year. The tree is filled with white lights and many hand-made symbols that each represent an aspect of our Christian faith. Here we see stars and angels, crosses, and doves that are signs of God’s gift to us and bring good news.

As we light candles, watch. Watch and pray. Watch and see banners change with Christmas words like faith, hope, joy, and peace.

Listen for stories of faith. Jesus was not the only baby born around that time. Listen for the story of Mary’s older cousin, Elizabeth, who conceives. By the way, that announcement was great news for Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah. The expecting announcement, not such good news at first for Mary and Joseph who though betrothed in marriage had not gotten married yet or share in union with each other. If I were Joseph I think I’d be a little caught off guard with that news, too.

When John the Baptist comes he speaks of one coming who will be greater than him whose sandals he is not even worthy to untie. John comes, just as we do over these 4 weeks of Advent saying, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him...all humanity will see God’s salvation.” (Luke 3:4-6) Prepare means to get ready.

#### IV. Preparing For Christmas Can Get Fuzzy

Through Advent we are to prepare ourselves through worship, study, prayer, and in our giving and preparing to give towards our Best Gift to Jesus.

I'll admit preparing for the coming of Jesus at Christmas can get a little fuzzy. I think because in our culture Christmas stuff starts going up in stores the 1<sup>st</sup> of October. Lights and decorations start going up before Thanksgiving. And today is actually the first Sunday in Advent. When are we supposed to start to feel or get into the "Christmas" spirit?

You may have already started shopping or not. That's not the point. It's about preparing yourself, your Spirit, your mind, and heart for the best at what Christmas has to offer.

You may be coming to Christmas this year struggling because of some circumstance or situation you've gone through this past year. We're aware there has been a lot of loss this year of loved ones and friends. Empty seats around a table remind us of loved ones gone from our sight that leave empty spaces in our hearts, even though we have faith that one day we'll see them again. There have been relationship breakdowns, mental challenges for some, issues at work, health challenges, and yet here we are as the Body of Christ searching for answers, finding support, looking for hope and healing. And it is God among us who comes to us over and over in the person of Jesus who desires us to find peace, hope, comfort, assurance, and love in this season.

#### V. Good News May Be Bad News at First

I heard Dr. Sondra Wheeler, who wrote the book [The Minister as Moral Theologian](#), professor at Wesley Theological Seminary in a clergy ethics training session this week say, "The Gospel may be bad news before it's good news!"

Friends, we all face tough, challenging, life changing, life shaping situations year in and year out. Does anything stay the same?

Wonder how Joseph received that initial news here in Matthew 1?

Joseph finds out Mary is pregnant. He knows it's not him. Doesn't seem like such good news does it?

He is ready to divorce her quietly, which he thinks is the most gracious thing to do. Still does not sound like good news. I think for most families who have gone through divorce it's not good news. Some do navigate this with more grace than others.

Then an angel shows up. That's pretty startling in and of itself. And it's always coupled with "Do not be afraid." Sure thing!

Then what seems like bad news begins to turn into some good news. The angel proceeds to inform Joseph of God's greater plan. Do you ever wish to know God's greater plan? Have you ever been able to get a glimpse of a bigger picture God has?

Has God shown up in any sort of way to bring some clarity to a tough place you've been in to bring some hope and healing to your life? Some good news?

#### VI. Joseph Gets to Name This Child

Here's the news Joseph learned about. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Now, think about this. Do you think Joseph really understood what and how this happened? Likely not. He has to take this information by faith.

Joseph is told Mary "will give birth to a son and Joseph, you will give him the name Jesus". I like that play on words. For anyone who has had the privilege of naming a child, we "give" them that name. Naming is important to most of us.

Am I grateful my mother stopped my father from naming me. Know what he came up with? I'm almost embarrassed to tell you though I can laugh about it with you.

Randolph Rudolph Orndorff. That would be horrible! Though Rudolph has a nice Christmas connection. The James Randall connects back to my father, James Russell, to Joshua Randall to Julian Russell—all 4 generations JRO. Naming is important and though Joseph knew this baby was not his, he accepts the angel's words and has the privilege of naming the Savior of the World—Jesus.

The initial bad news gets a little better as the angel tells Joseph, "he will save his people from their sins".

All this to fulfill a prophecy from centuries earlier. "The virgin shall be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—meaning "God with us" (vs 23) from (Is7:14).

The bad news has turned into some good news and so Joseph does what the angel says. He faithfully obeys "and takes Mary home as his wife." (vs 24)

## **VII. In the Bad Places of Life, God is With Us**

Friends, the good news is, even in the bad spots in life God is with us as well. Maybe we can't feel it or sense it, or maybe we don't even want it at the moment! It's just too painful, too confusing, too surreal. Maybe we feel a little like I imagine Joseph feeling at first—disillusioned.

And here comes Christmas and we are told or tell ourselves we are supposed to feel this or that. We are supposed to do this or that. Maybe we are all hyped up for Christmas, or maybe not. Or maybe what has transpired in life might just take us to a new and different, deeper, maybe more meaningful place.

A place where we come to understand the deeper and better and more sacred gifts of Christmas. Maybe to understand God's people back then, as well as today, had many things to wrestle with both personally, in their families and in their communities. The threat of Roman occupation were real. In fact, after Jesus' birth we may recall Herod giving an edict to kill all male babies in the region under two because he heard of some prophesy of some king being born and he was not about to have his "kingdom" torn from him.

Sometimes we get bad news before good news. Let's wrestle some with this old familiar story of Advent and Christmas. Let's wrestle with what might seem like bad news and how God works things together for good. (Rms 8:28)

## **VIII. The Best News of All**

The best news of all in Matthew's text is that this child named Jesus will save his people from their sin. He will offer us the gift of salvation.

Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua that means "the Lord saves". That would be good news for the Jews in Mary and Joseph's day. Some would get it, others would try to stop it, others would be too busy and miss it.

Our hope is this Advent season, we will prepare ourselves to get it and in getting it, get life, get Jesus, get Salvation, get the good news and then share it and connect and reconnect ourselves and as many who will receive it with the greatest gift of Jesus and the faith, hope, and love that comes in this Christmas gift.

## **VI. Closing Prayer**

Let us Pray:

Gracious, Life Giving, Promise Fulfilling God, signs are all around us. Christ is coming to earth. Christmas begins to draw near. We begin to prepare. We may have faced some challenges, personally or with friends. We recognize everything is not good news. We also recognize good does come out of bad. We are in need of Christ's powerful love, presence and healing grace. As we enter this season of Advent, awaken our hearts, awaken our spirits

and help us prepare ourselves. In these moments, as we prepare to eat this bread and drink from this cup, help us know, realize, understand, and sense that You God, are with us.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.