

Christmas Eve sermon

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Christ Church by the Sea (United Methodist), Newport Beach

It's that time again, that time of year, Christmas Eve. But what time is that exactly? Do we really know what time it is? Or are we just following a calendar that tells us it's December 24th again? Are we here tonight because there is something missing in our lives that we can find only in church? Or are we simply following an annual routine, just as we set a clock to wake us up at the same time each morning? We know it's Christmastime, but what time is this really?

Charles Dickens opened his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with these memorable words: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair." But how can both be true at the same time?

For some of you tonight, it is the best of times. Your lives are going well and you are happy. For others of you, it is the worst of times. Your lives are not going well and you are unhappy. For some, it is the spring of hope; for others, it is the winter of despair. One thing is sure: time changes all things. Nothing remains the same. A year from now, those of you for whom it is the best of times may be experiencing the worst of times; your spring of hope might turn into a winter of despair. A year from now, those of you for whom it is the worst of times may be experiencing the best of times; your winter of despair might turn into a spring of hope.

The New Testament says that, "When the time was right, God sent his Son" (Gal. 4:4). It doesn't say God sent Jesus at the best time or that God sent Jesus at the worst time. It says God sent Jesus at the right time. When Jesus was born, it was the best of times for some people and the worst of times for other people. Nonetheless, it was the right time for God to break into the

world in a new and decisive way. Yet most of the inhabitants of Bethlehem, whether they were happy or sad, were too busy to notice that God was breaking into their world to transform their lives. And this is just as true tonight as it was that first Christmas when Jesus was born. This little church is no more significant in the eyes of the world than that little stable where Jesus lay sleeping in a manger. Every day thousands of people drive by this church, oblivious to the reality of God who is breaking into the world right now so as to transform their lives.

Most of us most of the time go about our daily lives consumed by the affairs of the world: doing what is required of us at work, spending time with our families, paying the bills and trying to keep our heads above water, looking for some fun and excitement now and then to break the monotony of boredom, just hoping to be happy. And yet, as I've said, time changes everything. And it can change everything in an instant, without warning. Those who are rich today may be poor tomorrow; those who are healthy today can become sick tomorrow; those who are alive today may die tomorrow. Our lives are terribly insecure, and we are driven by anxiety about our lives. Moreover, we will go to any lengths to secure our lives against insecurity and to hide from ourselves everything that reminds us of how insecure we are. But try as we might, we can never be completely successful in securing our lives in the world. Each of us sitting here in this church tonight will someday have to die. We find ourselves thrown us into this world by the accident of birth, and then each of us faces the necessity of death and thus our inevitable departure from the world. If we are reflective at all, we have to ask ourselves: What's the point? Is there any real meaning and purpose to our lives? Or is this just an absurd world ruled by fate and chance?

All of us have some idea of God in our heads, although we might not actually believe in the reality of God; yet even if we do believe that God exists, very few people really let their lives be determined by faith in God. So, what or who is God? God is the ultimate power determining

the destiny of each and every one of us. Yet, just last week, a little girl at our pre-school said to me: "Some people don't like God." I was completely caught off-guard that a small child would say something so profound as what she said. I can only wonder what she has heard adults say that led her to make this astute observation. Yes, it's true: some people don't like God. But, of course, they don't. God is the power that limits us, that brought us into existence without our consent and that is going to bring an end to our lives without our consent as well; God is the power behind that unsettling anxiety from which we cannot escape, reminding us on all sides that we can never permanently secure our lives in the world; God is the root of our bad conscience, judging us and calling us to give account of our lives. We don't get to live in the world on our own terms. Of course, some people don't like God. Yet few of us are honest enough to admit it.

Martin Luther, however, was one of those very few honest people who dared to admit it. Before he became a Protestant and broke with the Catholic Church, Luther was honest enough to realize that he hated God. He resented having to live in a world so filled with insecurity and anxiety, subject to so many temptations, only to be judged by God and found wanting. It all seemed to him like a cruel joke. Then, at last, he had a new insight that led him to a completely new understanding of the meaning of Christmas. At Christmas, God breaks into our world in a new and decisive way. At Christmas, God becomes more than a mere idea in the back of our minds; God becomes a living reality in our lives. Moreover, the ultimate power determining our destiny takes on a new appearance, so to speak. No longer an impersonal, uncaring fate, God now becomes "our God," "my God" and "your God." Something happens that shakes us out of our complacency, something happens that breaks through our denials, something happens that shatters our resistance, something happens that melts our hearts. At Christmas, the ultimate power that brought us into being, that sustains us yet limits us, and that calls us to account for

our lives, breaks into our world to say, “I love you.” The ultimate power, in whose hands are the sun and the moon and the stars and all things, breaks into our world to say, “I care about you,” “You are precious to me,” “Your life matters to me.” Once Luther understood that this is what Christmas is all about, he stopped hating God; he stopped resenting God and began to love God. He began to love the power that created him, that brought him into existence, and that called him to account for his life; he began to trust this ultimate power, assured that nothing in the world could ever come between him and his God, assured that nothing in the world, not even death itself, could ever really harm him, because he knew that the ultimate power in whose hands are all things loved him and cared about him. Luther could now let go of his anxiety about life, and live courageously and joyfully in the world, confident that God was his personal God.

In every moment of our lives, God is asking us a question: Are we willing to trust that the ultimate power governing all things loves and cares about us? We cannot be indifferent to this question because this question is about us. In the final analysis, all our questions about God are always questions about ourselves as well. What is our relationship to reality, to the world? What is our relationship to the ultimate reality, to God? Do we delude ourselves into thinking that the question about God does not really concern us and that we can be indifferent to it? Or are we at least honest enough to admit that we don’t like God very much? Could we perhaps be willing to let this be the right time for God to break into our world in a new and decisive way?

Christmas wasn’t just an event that happened 2000 years ago. Christmas is an event waiting to happen tonight, here and now. God already has a personal relationship with you; do you have a personal relationship with God? God already loves you; do you love God? God cares about you; do you care about God? You matter to God; but does God matter to you? Can you say complete conviction, “God is my God”? Can you say with complete assurance, “The

ultimate power determining my destiny is my God who loves me”? Do you know that your life is filled with meaning and purpose because you are precious and dear to God?

Whether it is the best of times or the worst of times in your life, tonight is the right time for God to break into your life in a new and decisive way and thus to transform your relationship to the world, so that, whether this is a season of hope or a season of despair, you can say with complete confidence, “God is my God” and “This world is God’s world, and because I belong to God, nothing in this world, not even death itself, can separate me from God’s love for me.”

You cannot find the true meaning of your life as long as you keep striving to secure your life against anxiety. Your true and authentic life is not something you can achieve; it can only be received as a gift from God who gave you your life. That’s why the church is so important, because the church has been entrusted with the message of the gospel, that is, the good news from God that God wants to give you the greatest Christmas gift of all: an abundant life that conquers fear and death. The gospel is like a Christmas card that God has sent to each one of you. The church is like the post office that delivers the mail and the envelope containing the Christmas card is like the Bible. When you open the envelope and read the message inside, it is exceedingly good news and makes your heart glad. On the card is written, “I love you,” and it has been signed by “God.” Whether it is the best of times or the worst of times, now is the right time for you to receive this message from God because if you open your hearts and really believe it, your life will be transformed and the world will take on an entirely new appearance for you. Whatever your name is, I want you to imagine this Christmas card addressed to you: “Dear ..., I love you, God.” May this Christmas be the right time for you to receive this message from God that has your name on it and is addressed personally to you. “Dear..., I love you, God.” Amen.