



CHRISTMAS PRESENCE

WEEK 1: Love in Midst of Strife

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December 3 & 4, 2016

Christmas Presence! This sermon series discusses God's presence as His greatest present to us. We focus on family dysfunction, busyness, and the commercialization of Christmas. Each weekend we will focus on a significant Biblical character in the birth story. We hope you receive encouragement to let the presence of God fill your lives and be the driving factor in how they experience the Christmas season this year.

NOT ALWAYS WHAT WE THINK...

Christmas gifts are not always received the way they were intended to be received. Maybe there was the "ultimate" gift we gave that we thought would be remembered for ages... only remembered for all the wrong reasons. Or maybe it was that gift from a distant Aunt, something we had to guise with fake enthusiasm or excitement... like the pink bunny pajamas (queue the movie *A Christmas Story* now...). Now, take these perspectives and apply them to the birth of Jesus. Jesus was truly a gift to the world, yet Bethlehem laid sleeping while the savior was born in a stable among animals. While the nativity scene we put up in our houses or see on display in churches seems serene, polished, clean and organized... the birth of Jesus had no resemblance of this.

DISCUSS/JOURNAL:

Think of a time when you gave a gift and expected a greater reaction than what you were given. Then think of a time you had to receive a gift and give an reaction that was opposite of what you were truly feeling. Discuss. When you look back at those instances, how do you feel now? Any regrets, or does it make you laugh? Explain.

Now, think about the birth of Jesus. What would you imagine the reaction should have been to this event? How do you think the world would react today? Would it be the same, better, or worse? Explain.

Why do you think God intended for the birth of Jesus to be so anti-climactic? Discuss.

HONOR IN ACTION

MATTHEW 1.18-24 (HCSB) 18 The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. 19 So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly. 20 But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." 22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name Him Immanuel, which is translated "God is with us." 24 When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her

Based on what we know of the time when Jesus was born – culturally and religiously assumptions can be made. First, it's feasible to say that both Mary and Joseph were teenagers. They grew up in a small town, so the most likely knew each other for years. From these assumptions our imaginations could draw a typical love story. As they both become of age, Joseph asks for Mary's hand, there is a wedding, and then... an engagement. Joseph goes to build a home so that he can go back to Mary's house and bring her home and they can then... honeymoon (a different order than we are accustomed to).

So, in the course of engagement, Mary is found to be with child. As VS19 explains, Joseph was a righteous man, and still intended to honor Mary. Translate this into most men living at that time, or living today. In those times, Mary would have been dragged into the town square, judged by the elders, and then most likely stoned to death. Today, people would assume the worst: harsh accusations centering around adultery and unfaithfulness. Today, most men would leave and focus on humiliation and maybe come as close to stoning as they could, with verbal abuse and destroying the woman's reputation.

DISCUSS/JOURNAL:

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. Prior to an angelic dream, what would you think of the circumstance with Mary? The roles can be reversed, minus the pregnancy, but the emotion remains the same. How apt to believe a dream would you be? What would you truly want to do in Joseph's circumstance?

TRUEST OF LOVE

John 15.13 (HCSB) No one has greater love than this, that someone would lay down his life for his friends.

Joseph had loved Mary so much that he was willing to give his life up for her. You see, God picked Joseph for a reason. Joseph had the opportunity to raise Jesus, to show Him what it was to be a man, to love unconditionally, and to help others. Joseph understood love, and understood compliance to God – Joseph knew how to listen. Joseph's faith as it pertains to what the angel shared was also exemplary.

The love Joseph displayed is the kind of love that is a game changer. We live in an age, in a time, where this kind of love is hard to come by. This kind of love is what changes lives. Being a person of faith today

is not an easy task. Prayer is not a checklist, a poem or a wish list – God speaks and we need to listen. The bible is not a textbook.

The blessing for Joseph was in the midst of hardship. We can't choose how the gift is given or how God will work in our lives. Yet, what can be will set us apart. This Christmas season can be tough. We have family we don't want to be around, there are people who don't value what we value or believe, or people who cannot be kind to us. We are surrounded by people who are experiencing sickness, death, marital issues, issues with work, or issues with our kids.

Still, we have the opportunity to demonstrate radical love through faith. A faith in a God who can change anything – basically through love. The greatest gift we are going to get this year is God Himself. The key to unwrapping God's presence is to come to God in a posture of radical living and radical faith.

DISCUSS/JOURNAL:

What is giving you stress or anxiety this holiday season? What is the thing that you fear the most or is robbing you of joy? Is it your job? Is it problems in your marriage? Is it loneliness, sickness, or the looming threat of death, or simply family? Discuss what the issue is and how it is burdening you.

Now, take the instances from the answer above, and apply God's unconditional love. How does this change the scope of what you feel? Does it add hope? Why? Does it had joy? Why? Does it bring peace? Why? How does God's love transcend all the negative around you? Explain.

PROVIDE US WITH FEEDBACK

We are excited about the potential these studies have to help each of us process the weekend message at a deeper level, and to see God change our lives in significant ways. In order to make these guides as helpful as possible, we would love to hear which elements are most helpful, which are least helpful, as well as any other comments, questions or suggestions. Feel free to send your feedback directly to Jon Holmberg at jonholmberg@gmail.com.

Has God been prompting you to lean out over your skies a bit? Have you had a desire to write, but not sure how to start to scratch that kind of itch? This may be your chance. We are currently looking to expand our team of writers. If you have experience, or no experience, writing studies or devotionals... its not big deal – Let God guide your fingers. If you would like investigate this a bit more please contact me at jonholmberg@gmail.com.

REFERENCES