

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben on Matthew 1.18-25 on December 7, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb.

**Series: A Long Time Coming
Today's Focus: The Priest**

"Enjoy God's Christmas Presence"

How many of you already have your Christmas tree up? Any of you still go get a real tree and cut it down? That's become our family tradition. We go get a real tree and I cut it down. It makes me feel like I'm a real man, like a lumberjack ;). So we went to go do that last Sunday. And while we were there we ran into some people who said that they were there to find the perfect tree. They explained, "We're picky people and if we don't find the perfect tree here we might just have to go somewhere else." And I thought, Ok, good luck friends...because once again this year, amazingly, we did not find even a single perfect tree!

Especially if you start with the Scotch pines like we do (because they're the cheapest) what you find is that they're all crooked. They're all lumpy. Many of them have discolored needles. Many of them have bare spots. They're trees that only Charlie Brown could love. Sometimes it's so bad the tree doesn't even balance in your tree stand. Last year we had to tie our tree to a railing at one point to keep it from falling. Every tree is like every other—less than perfect.

But people are like that too, aren't they? Imperfect. Flawed. On the outside some of us are a little lumpy. Or at least we look in the mirror and there are things we see that we don't like! Or we feel the aches and pains more than we used to. Or we don't remember things anymore with quite the clarity we used to. Or else we act a little grumpy. The way we treat other people tends to push them away whether with our sharp tone of voice or a spiteful look. And that's just the half of it. On the inside are those things we think... things that we would never want anyone else to know. Our judgmental opinions. Our condescending attitudes. Our suspicions and our lust and our greed.

Like a field full of potential Christmas trees we all have our flaws. The more closely you might look the more you would find... that there is not a perfect one among us. Just like there is not a perfect church anywhere either. What then do we really need? Well what we really need probably isn't what first comes to our minds. Like if I were to ask you to make a list right now of the things you need or want the most, a Christmas list so to speak, would any of you put at the top of that list... a priest? *Survey says...* I need a priest for Christmas!

Well believe it or not, God's people long ago were looking for a priest—a great high priest who was to come—at least those who caught on to what God was trying to teach them were. You see in the Old Testament, God prescribed in great detail the job description of the priesthood—what the priests would do, how they were to do it, and where it was to be done. And God designed all this so that the people would come to learn why they needed the priests.

Basically... the reason for the priesthood? Because none of us on our own could enter into God's presence. None of us on our own could enjoy being in God's presence. Because sin is serious business. Sin separates us from the holy God. The wages of sin is death. So you know what you needed? A priest. Someone to represent you before God by offering the required sacrifices for your flaws, your imperfections, for your sins. That's what God was teaching his people. That's what he wanted them to know. You needed a mediator, a go-between, to represent you before God. Even the priests needed a priest. You needed a sacrifice to take away the guilt of your sins. You couldn't dare think you could just waltz into God's presence and say, "Hey, here I am pal. Here am I buddy God."

So God appointed the priesthood, with a high priest who was specially anointed or chosen to represent the people. And here's what God was up to. He was preparing the people to look into the future for someone—a great High Priest who was to come. Someone who would be uniquely qualified to make a *once for all* sacrifice as payment for the sins of the world. Someone who would make it possible for all of us to have direct access into the presence of God no matter how great your flaws or your sins. Someone to make it possible for you and me to enjoy God's presence—to know that God is for us and God is with us all the year long wherever we go.

We sure need to know that just as the guy we meet today in the Bible did too. Today we meet this poor guy Joseph. He was just an honest, hardworking carpenter trying to do what's right in life like a lot of you. Then one day he found out his fiancé was expecting a baby. He hadn't read the book *What To Expect When You're Unexpectedly Expecting*. So you can imagine how this news sent him into a tailspin. He was forced to suspect the worst about his beloved bride to be. Especially in his day, in their culture, virginity was viewed as a precious gift, something special to be given only in marriage.

And so Joseph's world gets rocked. He starts playing out all these different scenarios in his mind. Some of you know what that feels like where you get some kind of unexpected and unpleasant news and it rocks your world, right? And you don't know how it's going to play out or what decisions you should make for the future. You don't want to do something rash in the heat of the moment. You want to think things through and do what's best. But you're hurting. And that's how Joseph was feeling, all alone, until the angel from God comes to him and says, "Have no fear, Joseph. You're going to be a foster dad to the Son of God your Savior!"

¹⁸ *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.* ¹⁹ *Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

²⁰ *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* ²¹ *She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

²² *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).*

²⁴ *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

So what’s his name, everybody? *Jesus*. It means Savior. It’s more than a cliché, friends. Because as the angel said, “He will save his people from their sins.” But how? How would he do that? How could one baby boy save people from their sins? Well basically, although you don’t maybe think of it at first, it was by fulfilling the role of the long awaited great High Priest.

Everyone who’d come before was flawed remember. Sinners, all of them. Some of them big time. But not Jesus. Jesus was special because everything about his birth was special. His was a miraculous birth. A virgin birth. What’s noteworthy about it isn’t so much what this meant for Mary so much as what it meant for Jesus. Because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is in essence fully God. Because he was born of a human woman, he is in essence also fully human.

So Jesus was unique. He is the only one in all of history who is both fully God and at the same time fully human. Why? Let’s let the Scriptures tell us about this: *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin”* (Hebrews 4:15).

Part one is so that Jesus could live his life as the perfect substitute for sinful human beings like us. How many times have you thought you had the willpower to resist temptation, like “I got this, I’m feeling strong” but then you crumbled in a moment of weakness? One drink too many, an angry outburst, a click of the computer mouse, or a tasty morsel of gossip quickly shared. Well Jesus never did any of that. He overcame every temptation and he did it as our flesh and blood human brother. And part two...is that as the Son of God when he died on the cross he could make a fully sufficient sacrifice to pay for all our sins. That’s why he came. As our great high priest, Jesus made the sacrifice for sins once for all when he became the sacrifice himself. *“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world”* (1 John 2:2).

So what, how is this relevant? Well you see, this means Jesus paid for your sins too. Not just in part. But in whole. His death did not come up insufficient funds like a bad check at the bank. Rather on Good Friday when Jesus died, Jesus completely paid your debt. Easter Sunday when Jesus rose from the dead is like when God then handed you the receipt. Paid. In. Full!

If you haven’t sensed it yet, this is why I tend to get a little excited about our church—Victory of the Lamb. I realize that name is kind of a mouthful to say. And it doesn’t really make a lot of sense even at first. In fact when we bought land last year I had someone ask if we were going to be raising sheep on it—like a little victory farm for cute little lambs. Obviously they weren’t putting two and two together that it was the name of a church or that lamb referred to Jesus!

But you know now what it's about I hope. It's all about victory and it's all about Jesus. It's about how Jesus Christ, the sinless Lamb of God, has taken away the sins of the world so that the bottom line is now you and I can enjoy God's Christmas presence. In other words because Jesus came into this world that first Christmas as one of us, we can enjoy life in the presence of God who is with us now as our friend every day for our good.

You ever wonder, Why did God wait so long to fulfill the prophecies of Christ? Well maybe, just maybe, it's because the best things in life can't be experienced in a hurry. Think for a moment. How many of you feel like you're rushing through life? And why? Because we're so busy? Sure. Many of us are. There are gifts to be bought after all, meals to be prepared, cookies to bake, Christmas cards to send, concerts and tournaments to attend, church stuff to get done. And the demands of Christmas occur in the midst of the normal demands of life—everything else going on.

But do we rush through it all just because we're busy? Or do we sometimes also rush because we're hurting? Because we think by rushing we can speed through the pain? You know the happiest time of the year can be one of the most painful times, right? Maybe that's how it is for you. Perhaps it's a time which gathers every potential source of pain and has them all sit down for a meal—the pain of your family of origin, the painful memory of childhood, or loved ones lost, loved ones absent, or loved ones who never loved back.

For so many people, Christmas time is something more to be endured than enjoyed. So we rush. It's like we just want to get to the finish of Christmas and then we can collapse. Yet if we rush through it, we'll miss it. We won't miss the pain. Rushing around doesn't deprive us of the pain. What it deprives us of is the healing. What we need is to slow down and enjoy being in God's presence. Like most of the good things in life, so it is with God's presence. It can't be experienced in a hurry. So this Christmas season, maybe starting right now, let's take our time. Don't hurry the days. Don't rush the moments. Observe. Meditate on God's promises, on prophecy fulfilled. Pray. Wait. In so doing, listen, see, and feel the healing presence of God.

Because Jesus Christ is Immanuel. He is *God with us*. A long time coming, but worth the wait. Jesus makes it possible to enjoy life in God's presence both now and one day in eternity for he promises, "Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." He is with us! And even now in our weakness Jesus intercedes for you and me. As our great high priest he knows what you're going through and he prays for you that you might know his love, that you might trust his forgiveness, that you might enjoy the peace of being in his holy presence this Christmas. Amen.