

Victory of the Lamb – December 23, 2018

Isaiah 12:2 What if . . . there were more. – Pastor Bill Limmer

It was 14 weeks ago that I posted an Elf meme on FB saying it was 100 days till Christmas. We are almost there. Just a few just a few hours to celebrate Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. So much has happened not only in 14 weeks but just in the last three weeks. Blood Drive, Drop N Shop, Toy Drive, Operation Jesus Cares, Linked Campaign and more.. There have been Christmas concerts, movies, tree decorating, lights, parties, cookies, internet purchases, deliveries, gift wrapping and stress. And there is still so much to do yet: family, travel, worship services, dressing up, eating, last minute shopping, wrapping, gift opening and stress. But what if there were more . . . what if there were more than the headlines of December 2018: the announcement that high schooler are vaping at an alarming rate, the stock market dropping, what if there were more than the Russian scandal, what if there were good news instead of bad news. What if there were good news that would be for all people, not just good news for the democrats or republicans, or Americans, but good news for all people of all time. something that would last, the would be for all people of all time. What if there was good news that was forever!

Today we are going to look at a verse from Isaiah. Isaiah lived about 700 years before Jesus and he and his contemporaries needed good news politically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. They were about to have their land conquered by enemy forces. They had found themselves in such a state that they were calling good things bad, and evil things good. Moved ahead 700 years to two days before Jesus is born and **Herod the Great** and **Herod I**, was a Roman client king of Judea. The history of his legacy has two dimensions. He is known for his colossal building projects throughout Judea, including the fortress at Masada, and Herodium and his expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (Herod's Temple). This is the temple that some 30 years later Jesus would say, Destroy this temple, I will raise it again in three days. Of course, he was talking about his body and his resurrection but he was standing by this temple that Herod built that took 46 years to build. Herod is also a very jealous, insecure and diabolical guy. He is fearful that his wife loves his sons more than him, so he puts them to death. When the Magi come and tell of the birth of the King of the Jews, Herod is like I am the King of the Jews. And he ends up killing all of the little boys in Bethlehem two years old and younger to exterminate the Savior of the world before he gets going. So despite his successes his legacy is tarnished as philanderer, person full of jealousy and a murderer.

Fast forward to today. Shelters are full, prisons are full, hunger is real, families are separated by more than distance. Many are suffering from the D's: darkness, defeatism, depression, discouragement, disillusion and disease. There are fears real and imagined. We are held captive by our fears about terrorism, sicknesses, misunderstandings, marital malfunctions, the safety of our children. Our past haunts us as if we were Ebenezer in the Christmas Carol. We want the bad to go away and to never touch us again.

Into the messiness of life, in a manger, we find the infinite becoming an infant. And he changes everything because he brings good news. For Jesus provides for us, what we can't provide for ourselves peace. The angels announced, "**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.**" The Hebrew word for peace is so much greater in meaning than many today realize. Here is what it means – completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, the absence of agitation or discord. This peace rests on the shoulder of Jesus on the cross. Christmas is more than Jesus' birth. It pushes us forward in his story

beyond the lowliness of the manger to the ultimate lowliness – a public execution condemned, unjustly as a criminal in our place, as our substitute so that we might have Shalom with God. The light and the joy of this time of year is hollow at best if we do not link Bethlehem's manger, with Calvary's cross and with the empty tomb. There is more to Christmas than just the baby Jesus. It is also the defeat of the cross and the victory of the tomb. God doesn't grade on the curve, he grades on the cross. And that he did all this not just for the world but for me! Because there is more.

As I began the preparation for this message, I was looking outside my office window and I noticed the stark contrast between the dead grass and the evergreen pine tree. I thought of my sin as the dead grass and the evergreen of God's love on the tree of the cross. Christ came under the curse that belongs to us so that we might receive the blessing that belongs to him. Jesus came into the world because of the justice of God. Our sin separates us from God because in his holiness he is angry over sin. Our sin calls for punishment, justice and retribution. We want justice for the guy who cuts us off on the way to the mall, for the people responsible for mass shootings, but we don't want so much justice for ourselves.

But God knows our hearts, our words, action and attitudes as clearly as if we were living inside of the snow globe that starts off Frosty the snowman. Our sin globes us off from God. And we are trapped and with no ability to satisfy the judge. But on the cross of Jesus, God's justice is satisfied. God did what we did not dare dream of. In our lives we will serve others but then there comes a point right, where we are like, I can't, I won't go any farther. But God said, there is no limit to how far I will go. I will go all the way even if you don't like me, love me, respect me, believe in me. And so Jesus suffered all of God's righteous anger. And so the little guy in the manger grew up to pay the biggest debt to set you and me free forever. So today we go back to Bethlehem in anticipation of a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes who would be stripped and whipped and would have a funeral shroud placed around him and then walk out of a tomb. We no longer need to fear God's anger because God's anger is turned away through Jesus. In place of anger, there is mercy. Mercy, forgiveness, salvation and joy. Which leads us from panicking to praising.

Communicating with a friend last week he told me about church members who found a real, newborn baby in the manger of their nativity scene near the altar. The mother was located but said that she couldn't care for the baby. She left him there, hoping that someone else could.

God sent his newborn Son into the world not with the hope that people would care for him, but with the promise that he'd care for us. Yes, save us. **"Surely God is my salvation. I will trust in him and not be afraid."** (Isaiah 12:2).

Look into the manger with faith and you'll see that Christmas is not what you make it to be. Christmas is what makes you God's own redeemed, forgiven, and loved child. Christmas is a gift. *To us* a child is born. *To us* a Son is given (Isaiah 9:6). God's final target in sending his Son, Jesus, isn't the manger. It is people. God enters the world and enters our lives.

You may miss your family this Christmas. You may have missed saying good-bye to a loved one who died and now lives with Jesus in heaven. You may have missed an application deadline or purchasing just the right gift for a friend. But you can't miss the grace of God that appeared in a manger.

Because the grace of God has not missed anyone.

You still have time to shoot a text, make a call, snap, tweet, FB post, meet the person in the store and invite them to worship tomorrow because there is more to Christmas than a baby confined to a manger, there is a kingdom that is open to all because of the good news of Jesus. Surely God is my salvation. I will trust in him and not be afraid. As we receive this Christ into our 21st century complicated lives, we receive him who once had tiny little hands that grew up to be nail pierced hands, and with those little bitty arms that grew up to be arms of our salvation, arms that picks us up and carry us close to his heart bringing good news, peace, and salvation because our God reigns. The wonders of his love. There is so much more to the season.