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The Night Everything Changed **Christmas Eve / Christmas Service**

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Years ago, when my oldest daughter Ashley was in elementary school, she loved her teacher. I remember one evening, she spent the entire evening, creating and coloring this picture that was going to be her gift of love back to her teacher. I remember that morning her getting into the car I drove her to school, she was so excited to present her gift of love. But that evening, it was a different story. She was brokenhearted. Part way through the day, she found her picture in the trashcan. She couldn't figure out why would her teacher take her gift of love and discard it in the trashcan. There're a lot of tears that night. We found out the next day that actually that was just a mistake. Somebody had knocked it off the desk and it had just fallen into the trashcan.

But you know when I think about Ashley's feelings that night, and wondering why would somebody take this gift of love and throw it in a trashcan, I wonder is that how God feels this Christmas Eve. All around the world, the world is reminded that God sent a beautiful gift of His love. And millions will take God's gift of love and discard it in the trashcan. God looks at this world and agonizes over what it has become. This wasn't God's vision for the world. This isn't what God wanted. All the pain, all the suffering, all the struggles, all the disappointment, all the abuse, all the selfishness, all the greed, this wasn't God's vision for the world. This isn't what He wanted. But God created us, His people in His image with the ability and responsibility to choose. And we as our own gods, decided our way is better than God's way. And we would be our own gods and we would live our lives our own way. The world as it is today is the result of our choice to rebel against God and do it our way. God would have every right to turn and walk away. But He didn't. Actually I would say that not only He didn't, He couldn't. God compelled by His love rather than walking away, chose to enter into the mess in order to make the world right, in order to provide a way where people once again could experience His vision for the world, knowing that that decision would cost Him the life of His very own Son.

That of course, is the story of Christmas. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior..." The long promised Savior, God in the flesh. We know that the Jesus of the manger became the Christ of the cross, where he would suffer and die, be executed and tortured, to make payment for sin to pay a debt that we owed so that he could offer us life freely as a gift. Jesus hanging on the cross was not a picture of a good plan gone badly. It was the plan. Literally hours after the first rebellion and sin entered into God's perfect creation, God made a promise that He would do what is necessary to once again bring life out of death. Christmas reminds us God kept His promise.

Often times, people think of Christmas Eve as something that's kind of warm and fuzzy. But if the truth being known tonight, this room is filled with people in pain. This world is hard. People struggling with pain, struggling with disappointment, struggling just to find some meaning and purpose in this world; people who have done things, people who have had things done to them, people struggling with addiction wondering if they can get through one more day; people with a marriage that's falling apart, people living with a disappointment of what life has become. How many of you sitting here tonight deep in your heart wonder how do I get here? This is never what I thought life would be for me. The world is filled with pain and suffering and struggle and brokenness, which is why God offers His gift. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done,

no matter what's been done to you, no matter what's your story, because Jesus did it all He offers you His life, His forgiveness, simply as a gift.

Two thousands of years ago, because Jesus came everything changed. But the sobering reality is if you haven't received His gift for you, nothing's changed. Over the past four weeks, the four weeks of Advent, we as a church family each week have opened a gift. Each of those gifts was a painting, painted by one of the members of the church family here, representing the four themes of Advent: that Jesus is the Light; Jesus is the Savior; Jesus is God; Jesus is King. In a sense, we would say that this is our gift to the congregation to remind us this is what Christmas is all about. Each week, we've tried to unwrap that gift for you.

But the ultimate gift is the gift that is freely offered this Christmas Eve. It is the gift of life. It is the gift of the forgiveness of sin. It is the promise that God has made a way to return to the world that He always intended for people made in His image. But this one gift we can't open for you. The gifts we've opened were reminder of the ultimate gift. But the ultimate gift no one can open it for you. It's up to each individual to choose to receive God's gift of love, to open it, to enter into it, and to experience it. Our prayer for all of us tonight is that we would each receive our gift that we would open it, that we would enter into it. Because Jesus changes everything. Merry Christmas.