December 19/20, 2020

A Christmas Full of Love

Hope-Filled Christmas Series

Philippians 2:1-11

Pastor Jeff Petersen

It's Christmas week, and according to the Andy Williams' song, "*It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,"…"with the kids jingle belling and everyone telling you, 'Be of good cheer'. It's the most wonderful time of the year*." I love Christmas, but I want to risk asking you a hard question this morning. Do you ever feel like Christmas over-promises and under-delivers? Do you ever get to the 26th or maybe even the evening of the 25th and feel just a little bit disappointed? Well, I would contend that if you are looking for Christmas to make you happy, you very likely will be feeling disappointed one week from now. But, if instead, we go into this week, looking to dwell in the love of Christ and to share the love of Christ, well, we might just experience a Christmas full of love.

Throughout our Advent series this year, we have been challenging you to think a little bit differently about Christmas, to, in essence, be countercultural. Bryan began by calling us to a Christmas full of *worship*, encouraging us to turn off the noise and look for the wonder this month. Then Ryan challenged us to a Christmas full of *generosity*, not selfish consumerism. Last week, Josh reminded us of the importance of having a Christmas full of *presence*, not the "e-n-t-s" presents that we give to one another, but the "e-n-c-e" presence of ourselves in relationship with one another. And this morning, we wrap up our Advent series by talking about a Christmas full of *love*.

If you have a Bible with you, would you turn with me to Philippians, Chapter 2? Now, I don't know that any would say that Philippians 2 is the consummate Christmas text, partly because it was written by Paul from a Roman jail, but the theme of the book is actually joy, and I believe that what we are going to hear from God in these verses this morning, is exactly what we need for this Christmas week. Philippians 2, beginning in verse 1:

> **Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.**
>
> (*NASB, Philippians 2:1-4)

In Philippians 2, Paul picks up the discussion that he has been having in chapter 1, and he has some things that he wants us to consider regarding our perspective, regarding our actions, and regarding our character in the first four verses of the chapter—important things that we're going to actually come back to—but Paul so wants us to understand what he's getting at and what he's calling us to, he decides to use an example. It is the ultimate example, and that's what I want to focus on this morning. Verse 5:

> **Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men.** (Vs. 5-7)

Christmas is the day that the world has decided to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, but it is critically important for us to realize and remember that Christmas is not the beginning of Jesus Christ. Our passage tells us that He existed, before the incarnation, as God. In fact, the second person of the Godhead was eternally preexistence with the Father and the Spirit. Colossians goes so far as to tell us of Jesus, that He was *before all things and that all things were created by Him and for Him, and He holds all things together.* He is, in fact, *the exact representation, the visible manifestation of the invisible God.* Jesus was born on Christmas, but Jesus did not begin at Christmas. What that means is that from eternity past, Jesus Christ, as the second person of the Godhead, was enjoying the glory, the splendor, and the majesty of heaven for all of eternity. Jesus, as a part of the Trinity, has been enjoying His place in heaven, and yet He chose then, on that first Christmas, to come down and, as the text said, *to empty himself, to take the form of a bond-servant and become made in the likeness of men*. Why in the world would a God who has all of heaven do that? It's for you…it's for me…it's for us!

You know, I told you earlier about Andy Williams' song, "*It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year."* It's pretty popular right now, but it's not actually the most popular Christmas song right now. What do you think it is? Don't say it out loud, but I actually want you to get a guess in your head. Of all the songs that are being listened to this Christmas, what do you think is the most popular one right now? Got a guess in your mind? All right, it's Mariah Carey's, "*All I want for Christmas is You*." Who got it? I heard a few people saying yes. Raise your hand up. Wow! We've got some people listening to the Christmas songs, I tell you. You know what I find to be a little bit ironic about that? That song, according to Spotify, is the song that is most popular and most listened to this Christmas, but it's not really even a Christmas song. It's a love song. I mean, what is she singing about? She basically is saying, "All I want for Christmas is a man. I want him under the tree. All I want for Christmas is you, baby." *(laughter)* Wow! That's the most popular Christmas song? I wonder why. I think it's because of the same reason that, when you turn on secular radio, almost all of the songs are love songs, because one of the deepest core longings in the human soul is for love…for love! Every one of us longs to be loved, to be wanted, to be pursued, to be thought of as being worthy of the love, the time, the attention of another, perhaps even to be treasured, to be seen as of such great worth by another, that they would treasure and want us. I think what's tragic about Mariah Carey's song being at the top of the list, is it reveals just how much we don't get it. Because, what is the very point of Christmas?

Why in the world would a God who existed in splendor and majesty leave all of the wonders of heaven to come as a little, utterly helpless baby, born in almost total obscurity, on one of those hills in that little town of Bethlehem? Well, the motive of Christmas is clear in Scripture. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him, would not perish, but have everlasting life*."

In Philippians 2 we read of this preexisting Jesus who is in heaven existing with the Father and existing with the Spirit throughout all of eternity. In Genesis one, the language implies the Trinity

and then we see, as we said, in Colossians, the explicit expression of who Jesus was and all of this time, as all of these things are happening, Jesus is seeing *us* in the world. He's seeing the people of the world. From His place in heaven, He is looking down and seeing hearts that are empty, broken, lonely, angry, divided hearts because of sin, that are separated from the love of God. And so what does our text tell us? It says that **He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped.** In other words, He did not think the most important thing was to hold on to His lofty position with a tight fist. Instead**, He emptied Himself and He took the very form of a bond-servant, being made in the likeness of a man.** Jesus could not stay in His place in heaven because of His love for you, for me. He could not stand for us to be separated from the greatest longing of our soul, which is perfect love, found only in relationship with our great God. And so He came at Christmas. But we need to remember, Christmas would be essentially meaningless if it weren't for Easter. Verse 8:

> **Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**

You see, friends, the wonder of Christmas was always intending to head to the horror of the cross. And thus Jesus' decision to become man in the incarnation was the beginning of the greatest act of selfless love in the history of the universe. God coming near, humbling Himself, giving up His high and lofty position to become a man, but not only was it the greatest act of selfless love, it was also an act of complete humility. **He humbled Himself…even to the point of death.** And it was also an act of total obedience to the plan of the Godhead, death on a cross. That was the plan from the beginning. Christmas is meaningless without Easter. The incarnation was the beginning of a plan, culminating at the crucifixion and the resurrection. Jesus came as a baby to walk among us, to head to a cross where He would die for us, where He would provide the only way for sinful man to be brought back into a right relationship with a loving God, to pay the penalty for our sin and then, on Easter, the resurrection to conquer sin and death, to give you and me the opportunity to experience the deepest thing our soul longs for—perfect love—found in relationship with our great God. And so we have the incarnation, which was to lead to the crucifixion and the resurrection, and then we head toward the exaltation, verse 9:

> **For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.** (Vs. 9-11)

That is where we are headed: *toward Jesus Christ being exalted and every knee bowing, every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.* That's a song of celebration. It's a song of exaltation, recognizing that the God that we have, who so loved us, who so cared for us that he would leave all of the glory to become a little babe at Christmas, but even more, to head all the way to the horror of the cross, so that you and I might be able to have relationship with Him!

When I read verses 9 through 11, another Christmas song comes to mind. It's one that I think is really worthy of being sung this time of year. We actually just sang it a little bit ago. It says, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come; let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare Him room, and

heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing." And that reminds you of the verses of exaltation right here in Philippians, chapter two. If we are to have a Christmas full of love, it will be because we choose to dwell in the love of Christ, and to share the love of Christ.

Jesus came to bring light into darkness. I've been thinking a lot about darkness lately. The world seems pretty dark. I don't have to convince any of you in this room about the darkness that we're seeing in the world in 2020. The anger, the division, the strife, it's all around us. But I've been thinking more this fall about the darkness in here (*points to heart*) because after all, why is it so dark out there? Let's be honest with each other for a moment. Isn't the cumulative darkness in our world simply the byproduct of the cumulative darkness in here, (*points to heart*) coming from what's in our hearts—the anger, the division, even the hatred, the hurt, the pain, the brokenness, the fear; it's darkness in here (*points to heart*). What was the incarnation about? What was Christmas about? It was about this great God coming into the darkness and piercing it with His light. Still, right here in 2020, I believe God wants to pierce the darkness with light. How is he looking to do that this Christmas? Isn't it through you and me?

That's what Paul is talking about at the beginning of the chapter, in verse one, he says, "***Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete.*****"** He's basically asking a series of rhetorical questions, getting us to reflect and dwell on the goodness of God. Have you experienced His salvation? Have you experienced His affection? Have you sensed His tenderness and His compassion with you in your life, in your story? Have you experienced the joy of coming together with others in unity? If you've experienced any of those things, Paul is calling us to *make his joy complete*. He's harkening back all the way to what he said in chapter one. Where is life found? It's found in the love of God. Paul goes so far in chapter one as to say that, "*Christ is life"*. That's where life is found. That's where hope is found. He says, "*For me to live is Christ!*" He even says, "To die is gain," that it would be far better to go and be with Jesus. But he remains for the sake of those who don't know His love. Now he's calling his readers to the same.

If we've experienced the goodness of God, then we make His joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose, by the power of the Spirit of God to bring unity. We're to have one mind, one love, one purpose. And what is that? It is to dwell in the love of our God and to share it with others. It is to bring His life into the darkness. It is by His Spirit, living in us and through us, as it's stirred up within us, to literally manifest the goodness of God in the midst of a dark and fallen world.

And all these next verses, what a great admonition for us as we think of Christmas. He says**, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit. But with humility of mind, regard one another as more important than yourselves. Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."** He's calling us to have a right perspective; he's calling us to have actions consistent with advancing his purpose; he's calling us to have character that reflects the example of Jesus Christ. He set the example for us. All that He had wasn't something to be held on to. He was willing to humble Himself and open His hand, to bring to the world its greatest need, the love of God.

You know, I find Christmas to be kind of a strange holiday. I mean, after all, what is it? The celebration of the birth of Christ, right? So that makes it Jesus' birthday, right? So, Christmas is basically a birthday party. Why is it we're the ones who get all the presents? We don't celebrate anyone else's birthday that way. You know, Cynci and I, our boys are now grown and on their own, living out of the house. But I remember when they were young, she and I were very concerned that we wanted the right focus in Christmas. We didn't want it to be all about us. We didn't want it to be about all of the things that you hear out there. We wanted our kids to learn and understand that it's a celebration of our great God. So we were trying to figure out, "How could we put Jesus first?" and even, "How could we go so far as to give gifts to Jesus first?" So, one problem, "How do you give a gift to a completely self-sufficient, invisible God? A God who has everything and, by the way, is not physically present with us right now?" How do you give Him a gift, in celebration of Christmas?

I'm so thankful for Jesus' words in Matthew 25. You know what he said there? "*I was hungry. You fed Me. I was thirsty. You gave Me drink. I was naked and you clothed Me. I was a stranger; you took Me in. I was sick and in prison. You visited Me. And they said to Him, "Lord, when did we do these things?" And He said to them, "When you did it to the least of these, my brethren, you did it unto Me."*

I realize Jesus gave us a clear and perfect way to give gifts back to Him. It's by sharing His love, even with the world's most needy people. Well, Cynci and I talked about it and prayed about it, and we came up with an idea that has become one of the most favorite family traditions that we celebrate at Christmas. We decided before we do anything else, and go into Christmas Eve, before we have gifts for each other, we're going to give gifts to Jesus by giving to the least of these. And so every year at Thanksgiving, I start to begin to collect all of the letters and the requests that come from different organizations in our city, our country, around the world, and I try to cull those out to the ones that we really trust and think are doing really good work, and then we all sit as a family around our dining room table, and when our kids were young, we told them, "Okay, here's some money," and they were really excited about this amount of money that we set apart. We said, "It's not for you. It's for you to give to Jesus. It's your Christmas gift to Jesus. The way you get to do that, is by choosing to love someone else, and here's a whole bunch of options and opportunities, where you get to go shopping. You get to pick whichever one God would put on your heart to help someone this Christmas. How amazing it's been to watch our kids, year by year, embrace that tradition, and to watch the Spirit of God bring different aspects of it uniquely to each of them. It's become so meaningful that even into adulthood, our kids still carry on this tradition.

About five years ago, I remember a significant moment that happened in this tradition. It was the first time that we invited someone else to join us around the table. Five Christmases ago, my son Josh had proposed and become engaged to an amazing young woman, and so we invited Victoria to join us for this special Christmas family tradition. And by this point in Josh's story, he was already, by the grace of God, all in. He was not only excited to give the funds that we set aside for him to give; he was excited to give way above and beyond from his own resources, and so it was just fun to watch the two of them begin to figure this out. So, we put all the opportunities out in front of them and said, "You can begin to decide what you do," and we always close the time by sharing what we were going to give and why, and it was amazing to watch them talk about this together because there was a little bit of an important context. You see, at the time they were

engaged, they were planning for a wedding, and they were broke college students. But even more strikingly was that very month—just a couple of weeks before, in totally separate incidences—they had both totaled their cars. They had nothing! This was not a time for extravagant generosity and may not have even been wise to give a lot, when they had so many expenses ahead. But I can't tell you of the joy to watch them talk together and choose together to take a step of faith that Christmas, believing in the extravagant love of our God, and in His faithfulness to care so abundantly for us. In spite of their circumstances, they gave to the least of these extravagantly that Christmas. I believe it was that decision and others like it that marked the kind of couple that they are today. I'm so thankful for that.

Maybe you have a Christmas tradition like that. I've heard some of you share about some of your traditions that are beautiful in ways to put Christ first at Christmas. If you don't, we want to help. You heard in the video from Jason about the opportunities that we have with some of our trusted partners. They're out in the foyer on cards. You can also find all this information right on our website if you're watching online.

But I wanted to say just a word about that because I have stood in Africa with kids so impoverished that they literally can't pay for their uniform or their high school fees. As a result, they are kicked out of high school and it's the end of their education. It changes the trajectory of their life, sending them right back into the cycle of poverty. But that's changing for many of them, thanks to *The Hope Venture* and the work they're doing with their student sponsorship program. Maybe God would want you, this Christmas, to help them with that.

I have stood in Nicaragua, where in our partnership with *Compassion International*, we are sponsoring kids, and you may recall just over a year ago, about 700 kids have been sponsored through the generosity of this wonderful congregation. Covid has been tough. There are some special needs. Maybe you would like to help this Christmas with that.

I have stood in the red-light district of Mumbai, among women who have been sex trafficked, who are living lives of horror, unimaginable to us. Right in-the-midst-of that red-light district is a little ministry shining a light, helping women to escape and to find an entire new pathway to life. These women have been through significant trauma and need help with trauma counseling. Maybe through our partnership with the *Aruna Project,* that is something God would have you do this Christmas.

Whatever it looks like, I really want to encourage you to make this a Christmas full of love. How do we do that? I believe it can be as simple as two things. You, yourself, choosing to dwell in the love of Christ, and then choosing, personally, to somehow share the love of Christ.

A few weeks ago, I was out for a walk on the path in our neighborhood and it was one of these beautiful days where the temperature was unusually high. I was just so enjoying being outside in nature, and I had my headphones on and I'm listening to worship music. And I just began to become enveloped in the love of God and one song came on, and it just struck me in such a way I had to listen to it several times over. It said, “Where can I go? Where can I go from Your presence? In Your presence, I am known; I am surrounded; I will not walk alone.” And I kept listening to that song and thinking of the incredible reality that we so often take for granted, and that is that I am

never more than one choice away from experiencing the love of God. No matter where I go, because of what Jesus did at Christmas and Easter, because of the restoration of relationship that He made possible through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, I am never more than one decision from drawing near to God and experiencing His love. And as I was thinking about that, on that path, I just couldn't help but sing. So I am walking along, and the Spirit of God was so filling me with the love of God, I just began to sing. Then I realized there's kind of something a little weird about that. See, I have my AirPods in, so I can hear the symphony. I can hear the music; I can hear the professional singers; I can hear it all! Nobody else can. I got to thinking though, "Isn't that a perfect picture of what Christmas is all about?" My friends, if you have come to know Jesus Christ, I don't mean know about Him; I mean, if you personally know Jesus Christ, you can hear the music! The soundtrack of the love of God plays in your soul—sometimes loudly, sometimes quietly. Far too often, maybe most often, unfortunately, we let all of the noise of this world push it so far to the background, that it's nearly inaudible, but it's there. If you know Jesus, you can hear the music!

But here's the thing: we are surrounded by people in a dark and fallen world, who have not yet come to understand what Christmas is all about—*that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son*—who have not yet been restored into right relationship with God, who have not yet had the music of life and love turned back on. They can't hear it. But you know what they can hear? Us…if we're singing! You know, I'm walking on that path and I'm sitting there with my AirPods on, and I'm thinking to myself, "You know, nobody can hear the music; they can just hear me." That's kind of embarrassing because, what if I don't sing so well? Well, I've been thinking about that, and I think, "You know, it doesn't really matter does it? So, what if I'm a little off-pitchy," because we live in a world that is not singing. It is groaning, and so better a poorly sung a song of joy, than the ugly chorus of anger, division, hate, loneliness, and pain that's all around us. The world is not singing; it's groaning. God has called us to sing, if not, actually, metaphorically. And you know what's crazy? Here's what's magical about Christmas. Here, at this time of year, people will listen in a way that they almost never do. How is it that people who are otherwise totally hostile to Christianity can be walking through a mall, most years, and they can literally be singing about Jesus. There is something in this season that softens and opens hearts to a message of hope, to a message of life, to a message of love. We have the music.

I want to end by challenging you to two things. First of all, as you head into this week, if you are not hearing the music, stop whatever it is you're doing, whatever is so distracting you, consuming you. Please, I beg you to stop, reorder your life this week, before you miss it. Take time to dwell in His presence. Let God love you this week. He delights over you with singing. He longs to be gracious to you. If you're not hearing the music, "Stop and dwell in His presence, and let Him turn it up in your soul." And then second, share the music. Sing! If not literally, metaphorically, sing to those who are near; sing to those who are in need. Maybe if we all do that, it just might be a Christmas full of love.

Jesus, thank You for being the kind of God who would not stay in heaven, who would not leave us alone in our brokenness, our loneliness, our suffering and our pain. Oh, thank You, Jesus, for being a God who came near, not just to be born as a baby, not just for the wonder of Christmas, but for the horror of the cross, that You might pay the penalty we owe for our sins. God, draw us to Yourself this week. Turn up the music in our soul, and oh, God, lead us to sing. Use us, God, to shine Your light brightly in a very dark world. In Your name we pray, Amen.

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