

Carol Service

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] I'm Martin Ez, I'm the Senior Minister here at St Silas. I'm delighted you could come this evening. It's been great so far, isn't it? Wonderful with Rachel and the choir and the musicians. I don't know how you feel about Christmas, but I love Christmas.

I think it's a great time of year. Having said that, it's also good to acknowledge, isn't it? Christmas is actually quite a weird time of year. Weird things happen at Christmas. I don't just mean the new things that are a bit weird.

It's a good idea. The KFC 11 Herbs and Spices Yule Log that's on sale. I don't know if you've seen that. It lets you fill your home with the smell of fried chicken.

Because, of course, nothing says Christmas like a home that smells like a branch of KFC. Or the Millennials Christmas tradition of putting out avocado on toast for Santa because there's only so many mince pies that a man can eat.

But I don't just mean the new things. There are weird things, even in our traditions, about Christmas. We bring trees into our living rooms. That's a bit odd.

[1 : 06] We eat weird food. Food that we never normally eat. The sprouts come out. I actually quite like sprouts. Every year I wonder, why don't I have these more often? But they're a Christmas thing.

There's the bread sauce that comes out on the dinner table. Again, I like bread sauce. But in my experience, this is the only time of year when we seem to want to liquidize bread to have it to sort of moisten up the meat a bit at dinner.

But for lots of us, one of the most weird things about Christmas could be that it's a time of year and perhaps the only time of year when people talk about God or they think about God.

Even some of the great Christmas number ones, the great Christmas pop songs, you know, once you get past Mariah Carey, some of them speak about God. And then you find yourself tonight in a church.

And maybe that's an odd thing for you. Maybe all this God stuff for you just seems so speculative that it comes out again at Christmas. You might think of yourself as an evidence person, a science person who wants hard evidence before you'll believe in God.

[2 : 15] So that all this religion at Christmas might feel a bit like the emperor's new clothes to you. If you just look down at the bottom of the reading that Graham just read for us there, it was John chapter 1, just back inside the service sheets.

At the very end there is a little verse number, verse 18, three lines from the bottom, where John says exactly what you might be thinking, the apostle John. He says, no one has ever seen God. And if John stopped there, then we'd be right to be skeptical, to be agnostic when it comes to God. But crucially, John doesn't stop there. If you just read on in verse 18, he says, no one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

John was a first century follower of Jesus. He was an eyewitness, a good friend and close companion of Jesus. And he doesn't give us the details about the stable and the manger and the shepherds that we get from other accounts of Jesus' life.

But he's writing years later and reflecting back on the true meaning of the gift that God has given us at Christmas. And so we're just going to think for a few minutes tonight, with John's help, about how the person of Jesus could really transform your whole thought about God and about Christmas.

[3 : 42] I've got two points as we do that. And the first is this. It's in Jesus, people really did see God. If you look at verse 14, just up there, the penultimate paragraph as it starts, verse 14, John calls Jesus the Word.

Let me read what he says. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. He calls Jesus the Word because words are a way that we reveal ourselves to other people. You get to know someone through their words. And Jesus reveals God to us.

He is God the Son who has always existed with God the Father. And on that first Christmas, he became a human being. He is God stepped into our world.

There's a line in one of the carols, Low within a manger lies he who built the starry skies. Our cosmos, it's incredible, isn't it?

[4 : 50] We gaze in wonder at the discoveries we make. Billions of stars, 100 billion galaxies in our universe. It didn't just spring into existence from nothing or through an impersonal force.

Rather, there is a personal creator God who is good and generous and loving and life-giving. And in Jesus, he stepped into our world so that we're not left in the dark about God.

The great news of Christmas is that God isn't hiding from us. One of my daughters, I've got three daughters, and one of them used to love playing hide and seek.

And one day she said to me, Dad, can we play hide and seek? And I said, okay, what rules are we playing? Because one thing I've learned is that with children, you have to clarify the rules at the beginning. If you ask for a rule clarification when the game is underway, it goes against you.

I don't know whether you've noticed that. So what rules are we playing? She said, you count to 20, and I go and hide behind the sofa, and you come and find me. So I get to 20, and I'm saying, coming, ready or not.

[5 : 56] And as I walk around the room, saying, where is she? Where is she? Is she in the cupboard? I could hear giggles of delight behind the sofa, because she's waiting to be found. And of course, the highlight in hide and seek is being found.

If you never got found, you would get bored in hide and seek. Well, when it comes to God, it's as though we might look at all the different worldviews, the different ideas, philosophies, religions, understandings of whether there's a God, and how many, and what they might be like.

And we might think, well, is God hiding from us? It seems unclear. When the reality is, God isn't hiding. He has announced his arrival to us.

He stepped into our world so that in Jesus, we can see him. And John and the others who saw him, they tell us all about him, that he lived this extraordinary life.

They themselves took some persuading, but then they were persuaded that they were looking at God. It's remarkable, isn't it? He was born in an obscure village, in a backwater town on the edge of the Roman Empire, raised in a humble carpenter's home.

[7 : 04] As an adult, he never lived the country that he grew up in. Yet today, millions upon millions of people claim to follow him as their leader and their king, and to know him as a friend.

And when you look at his life, he lived like nobody has ever lived before. He certainly taught like nobody has ever taught before, speaking words so profound that still today, people build their lives on his teaching.

He loved as nobody has ever loved before. He loved everyone. He did things that only God can do. He demonstrated power for good over nature, over sickness, even over death.

As eyewitnesses saw him moved with deep compassion to heal the sick, to give sight to the blind, even the dead were raised. And for me personally, you know, I used to think that all the God stuff around Christmas was a bit weird.

And it was when I was 21 that I went on a Christianity Explored course at a church like the one we've got running here in the New Year. And I was just stunned when, as an adult, I took a fresh look at the person of Jesus.

[8 : 15] And the evidence about him in Jesus, people really did see God. In lots of ways, we live our lives today in Scotland without reference to God.

But at the same time, people recognize that there is a great hunger in our lives for God. The writer Julian Barnes summed up how lots of people feel today when he said this. He said, I don't believe in God, but I miss him.

And Douglas Copeland, the renowned modern writer who came up with the term Generation X, he wrote a book called Life After God where he said this. He said, Now here is my secret.

I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again. My secret is that I need God, that I'm sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give because I no

longer seem capable of giving, to help me to be kind as I no longer seem capable of kindness, to help me love as I seem beyond being able to love.

I wonder if the same is true for lots of us, that we just don't know where to find God without any confidence or certainty. And the message of Christmas is, look here.

[9 : 31] We've not been left in the dark. Look in the stable at the baby who became the man Jesus. He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all.

That's our first point. In Jesus, people really did see God. But how do we respond to what we see? That's our second point. Through Jesus, we really can know God.

John describes Jesus coming as light. He says, The light shines in the darkness. It's verse 5. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

And there is darkness all around us. Some things at Christmas are almost like a sentimental distraction from real life. The Christian faith isn't like that. The Bible is refreshingly real about the reality of living in our world today in its brokenness and its darkness.

And it offers us light that can overcome the darkness. We see the darkness as we review the news stories from the year. It happens around this time of year, doesn't it? That the newspapers review what's gone on in the year.

[10 : 38] The TV does. And there have been some wonderful moments this year that 2019 will be remembered for. But it's also been the year when 39 migrants were found dead in the back of Mo Robinson's lorry in Essex.

It's been a year when terrorism has reared its head again. And not just in London Bridge three weeks ago, but in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday when over 200 people were killed. In Christchurch, New Zealand when over 50 people were killed.

And while some of that on a global scale might seem distant from you and me, we also experience darkness in our own lives. We experience unkindness, selfishness, greed.

We encounter, don't we, in our lives, family conflict, loneliness, grief, pain, fear, despair. Why is the world like that?

And why are our lives like that? Well, the Bible tells us the reason there is darkness in our world is ultimately because this is a world where we've turned away from God.

[11 : 47] Each one of us has failed to treat God in the way that we should. And if we want to see a demonstration of how we want to treat God in our hearts, we look at how people treated Jesus when he came.

Verse 11, if you just have a look down, verse 11. He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him. Jesus came and lived the perfect life.

He loved everyone. And yet people rejected him. I don't know if you've seen the Oscar-winning film from last year, Green Book, won numerous Oscars.

It tells the story of a black pianist touring the Deep South in the US. And it was a groundbreaking tour in an area that was still entrenched with racism.

And there are concerts that he performs at. And they put on dinners for the guests. And there are these incredible evenings with him as their special guest playing the piano.

[12 : 46] But he's not allowed to eat in the restaurant with all the guests because he's black. And he's not allowed to use the toilet in the restaurant or the hotel because he's black.

And you're outraged as you watch it because you think, this guy is the whole reason you're having the evening and you won't let him in. Well, when God stepped into our world, that's how we treated him.

He's the reason for it all. But he wasn't received. And later in John's Gospel, we see Jesus confront the people who are rejecting him.

And he says to them, I'm paraphrasing here, but in effect he says, you're rejecting me because you don't want God in your life. And the Bible explains for us that the reason we do that in our hearts is because we've settled for too little.

We think God might spoil my fun. He might interfere in my life and it would spoil my fun. God thinks we're too easily satisfied.

[13 : 49] We were made to find true joy and satisfaction in knowing God. But we've turned to other things to satisfy us instead. And as our world turns its back on a good, generous God who gives meaning and joy, we get left in darkness.

A darkness that God sees in each one of our hearts. And if that's how we choose to go on, then Jesus warns that we will be left away from God forever in darkness.

But wonderfully, the message of Jesus coming is that God really does love us. We see it in verse 12. It's a real climax of the reading. It's right dead center. Verse 12. Have a look at that.

Verse 12. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. I need this just as much as anybody else.

Without Jesus, it's as though we've all run away from the family home. We're lost. But Jesus came into our world to bring us home to God. It cost him everything to do that.

[14:58] In love for us, he had to die in our place on the cross, bearing our darkness for us so that we could go back into the light of knowing God as our Father, being adopted by him.

And it means the great gift that God gives us at Christmas is himself. That's what we love about the best Christmas gift, isn't it? We don't want to give people a voucher.

When a gift is thoughtful, it gives us something of the giver. You might remember the big Sainsbury's Christmas advert a few years ago when the main character, he decided that he would be there for his family at Christmas amidst all the busyness.

And the line in the, I think it was James Corden singing, he said, the greatest gift I'll give this year is me. Well, in Jesus, God gives us that greatest gift.

He gives us himself that we can know him. So that Jesus, having died to deal with the darkness in our hearts, says to you and me, will you come home to God?

[16:03] Come home with me to God. So what is your response to that message this Christmas? I don't know what messages you might get this Christmas, but it was just a few years ago that Betty Barker got an unexpected Christmas message.

Her phone rang on Christmas Eve. She picked it up and the person on the other end of the line said, hello, is that planet Earth? So she assumed, of course, prank call and she hung up.

But in fact, it was Tim Peake calling from the International Space Station. He'd wanted to wish his parents a happy Christmas and he dialed the wrong number and got through to Betty Barker.

And her family, when the story hit the news, as Tim Peake put on Twitter, sorry to the old lady I spoke to on the, they were rolling their eyes because she'd missed what would have been a pretty interesting conversation with a guy in outer space.

Well, look, it wasn't a big deal to miss that. But I'd love to urge you tonight not to miss a key message to you this Christmas. The Christmas bells are ringing, if you like.

[17:11] There's a message from beyond our world and it's for every one of us. It's that there really is a God. In Jesus, people really did see God. And it's that he really does love us.

Through Jesus, we really can know God. Here at St. Silas, we would love you to reflect on that this Christmas time. And we'd love you to come back, whether it's in the coming weeks or in the new year when we've got guest services in early January, just to come and see us on a normal Sunday. And we've got this new Christianity Explored course beginning on Sunday nights in January. But in the meantime, thanks so much for coming and happy Christmas.