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Christmas 2014

Matthew 1:18-25

Prayer: *Father God, I do thank you for the gifts that you bring to us, we thank you for the gift that Christmas is. And Father, we just again, we want to grow in our knowledge and appreciation of what this gift really is. And so Father, Christmas brings us to the point where we re-examine just what took place at the incarnation, and so I pray this morning as we do just that that your Holy Spirit would guide us, that you would accompany us, that as we open up your book, we would have the privilege of your Spirit's presence. Guide us into your truth, give us the ability to understand on a deeper level than we've ever understood before, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Luke 2 says this: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is

pleased!" Luke's gospel lays out the Christmas story that all of us are incredibly familiar with, I mean, we have Mary and Joseph, we have the manger, the baby, the swaddling clothes, the shepherds watching their flocks by night, we have the angels appearing, the glory descending, and the multitude praising God. I mean, it's the story we all picture at Christmastime. Well, Matthew's gospel gives us the back story of Christmas. Matthew is discussing the exact same events, but Matthew's gospel describes it from a very different angle, and in Matthew's gospel we encounter some of the other parts of this story. We encounter Joseph's bewilderment. *Matthew 1:18* says: *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.*

Now from Matthew's gospel we also learn about Herod's murderous attempt on Jesus's life. This is *Matthew 2:16*. It says: *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for*

her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." We learned also that Mary and Joseph had to flee for their lives to Egypt only to return when wicked King Herod had died. This is verse 19. He says: *But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.*

I think we can see there clearly is a glory side and a dark side to the story of Christmas, and without both Matthew and Luke's account, we would never have an accurate picture of the events that surrounded the three people who are at the heart of the story. For Joseph and for Mary and for Jesus, there was glory and there was wonder. But there was also fear and bewilderment, rejection, and sorrow. You see, the Christmas story that we hear each year is a sanitized tale that gets so swallowed up in the myth and the spin and the folklore that we often times lose the true meaning of the day. And so what is the true meaning of Christmas? Well, it's actually spelled out very clearly, spelled out in verse in the angels' praise in verse 13 and 14. It says this: *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"* Christmas is about peace.

Peace would come because God was going to enter into human flesh. God would come to earth in the form of a baby born to live a perfect life and then offer that life up for our imperfect lives. You see, the peace of Christmas is not a peace between peoples or tribes and nations as is often presented, instead it is a peace between God and his redeemed creation. It is a peace purchased by the blood of that child now grown into a perfect adult. You see, ever since the Garden of Eden, man has been estranged, man has been at war with God. And now God is entering into space and time to rescue and to redeem those who by grace are who the angels said -- quote -- *"Among those through whom he is pleased!"*

Okay. Logical question we might ask: Who is God pleased with? Well, the answer is as simple as it is profound, and that answer is found in *Hebrews 11:6*, it says this: *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.* See, Jesus Christ came to ransom and redeem any and all who are willing to put their faith and trust in him. And the reward, the reward of that trust is eternal life. *John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

Now, the true wonder of Christmas is that God acted preemptively

when he came into the world of flesh. You see, God did not respond to an invitation, because mankind had no interest in inviting him at all. Ever since Adam sided with the serpent, we like Adam have been hiding from God. See, when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, our perfection was shattered, our natures were changed, and that change affected every single son or daughter of Adam. As Bob Dylan once put it, everyone of us is born spiritually -- quote -- "stone cold dead as we stepped out of the womb." We were alienated, we were fearful, and we were filled with hatred towards God. I know people have a hard time believing that, but the proof is an historical fact. The fact is, 2,000 years ago God gave up his prerogative as God and he became one of us and then he lived among us perfectly for 33 years and then he allowed himself to be arrested, and the rest is history. We spit in his face, and then we stripped him, and then we beat him, and then we crowned him with a crown of thorns just to mock the idea that he thought he was a king. And after that we turned him over to be scourged, and when Pilate paraded Jesus in front of the crowd pointing out how pathetic he was, hoping in some way that he could be taken off the hook by showing this pathetic figure of Jesus, he parades him in front of the crowd and he says, "I am innocent of this man's blood," and then we screamed, "*May his blood be on us and on our children,*" as we demanded that he be crucified. We are those children.

You know, I think if anyone can make the case that we genuinely hated God, well God can. I mean, we were in the dark and that's just the way we wanted it. *John 3:19: "And this is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."* Christmas is a celebration of the light preemptively flooding into the darkness that we craved. *Matthew 4:16* says: *"The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned."* So if Christmas has any meaning to you at all other than the fact that it's a national holiday, if you recognize that you have a need of a Savior, that you are hopelessly unable to redeem yourself, it's because God has not only entered into this world preemptively, it's also because he has entered just as well into your heart that way, because the very desire to trust God is the ultimate Christmas gift from God. *Ephesians 2:8: For by grace you have been saved through faith, that the that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.*

What happens, what happens if the gift of Christmas doesn't feel like a gift any more? What if fear and bewilderment, rejection, and sorrow are far more prevalent in your life as a believer than the ideas of peace and joy and good will towards men? Now I ask that because I know that to be the case for many of us this Christmas season. And so if you've received the gift of Christmas

and you're struggling in some way this Christmas, I want to speak specifically to you this morning. I want you to understand the nature of the gift that you've received because it's so easy to get distracted by sorrow and to lose sight of how grand a gift you've been given. See, I think most of us go through life as believers in Jesus Christ with an understanding of the way things are supposed to be, that in itself is a huge source of pain and struggle to us. The basic underlying theme that describes most of the way most of us think life should go is one that cuts across Christian and non-Christian alike. In fact, being truthful, it has far more to do with karma than it does with the gospel. And it's a way of thinking that's reducible to a simple formula, and it's a formula that plagues us in a sense. The formula is this: I try my best. I play by the rules. And if I try my best and I play by the rules, then life should work out for me. I mean, there's even scriptures that you could quote to back that formula up. In *1 Kings 2*, David says this, he says: *"Be strong, and show yourself a man, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn."* In the New Testament in *Luke 11* we have the words of Jesus himself, it says this: *As He was saying these things, a woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "The womb that bore You and the one who*

nursed You are blessed!" And he said, "Even more, those who hear the word of God and keep it are blessed!" And you know, surrounded as we are by prosperity preaching and the prosperity gospel, it's not hard to see how many folks think the basic formula of life is what I said, you try your best, you play by the rules, and you're going to be blessed. Well, first of all, that formula is absolutely true. I mean the hard part, the part that we need to unpack is the final conclusive statement, the one on the other side of the equal sign that says: You will be blessed. Where we get into trouble is how we understand that word "blessed." So in honor of Christmas, I want to look at the Christmas couple and their child this morning to see how that formula worked in their life, because nobody tried harder, nobody played more by the rules than Mary and Joseph and their child, Jesus. In Jesus's case, he played by the rules perfectly. Now the question is were they blessed? And the answer to that question is going to define whether or not you understand the gift of Christmas.

So let's first look at Mary. Now, I want you to imagine you've been told you are the recipient of the greatest blessing a human being could ever receive. Mary receives a direct revelation from God that she would become pregnant even though still a virgin and the child she is carrying would be King Jesus. Joseph also received a direct revelation from God that he would be the King's

stepfather. *Matthew 1:18* says this, it says: *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

Now this morning I want to look at the three main characters in the Christmas story; that is, Joseph, that's Mary, and Jesus. They were arguably the three most beloved by God humans to ever walk this planet, by far the most blessed individuals to have ever lived. And yet Christmas for them was anything but what we would think of when we think of the word "blessed." You know, we've heard the story so many times, it's easy to get this romanticized notion of what actually took place there. I mean, between creches and living nativities, it's very easy to be lulled into thinking that Jesus's entry into our world was anything but cold and brutal and heartless, but it was precisely that. The contrast between how loved and blessed Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were, and how wretched and difficult their circumstances were is nothing less than

stunning. So I want to look at each of these lives that are represented by our first family to see if we can't apply some of what their life experience was with ours.

No one on earth was more loved by God than Joseph and Mary. And yet trouble and difficulty played prominent roles throughout their lives. Jesus was not only beloved by his father but he was also the only flawless human who ever lived this life we all have to live and yet the scripture says he was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. So somehow or other those two notions, blessed and loved by God and a life full of difficulty and sorrow just don't seem to go together, especially if you believe you try your best, you play by the rules and life is going to work out for you. So how did life work out for Mary and Joseph and Jesus, blessed as they were? Well, the answer is pretty obvious, I think. What I would like to argue is that sorrow and difficulty do go together with blessings and love and Christmas is at the heart of how they do. But what it requires is a complete understanding of what God means by that word "blessed."

I want you to think for a minute about Joseph. Let's focus in on him for a bit. This is God's choice to be the stepfather of his beloved Son. I mean, of all the people that God could have chosen for a task this critical, God chose Joseph. And the scripture

defines his character by saying this in *Matthew 1:18*, it says: *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.* Now the Greek word for "just" or "righteous" here is "dikaios." It is translated in numerous different translations slightly different ways, the ESV and the King James refers to Joseph as "a just man," the Holman translation describes him as "a righteous man" the NIV describes him as one "faithful to the law." The point is, God's own opinion of Joseph was as high as any recorded of any man anywhere in scripture, which is exactly what we'd expect of the man that God chose to be the main fatherly influence in Jesus's bringing. So I think it's safe to say that Joseph was loved and cherished by God and that he did try his best and that he clearly played by the rules. But as our text this morning indicates, life for him was, if anything, challenging.

Our text this morning says: *Before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.* You know, the wonderful news that Joseph learns is that Mary is pregnant with their son. The terrible news is Joseph already knows that they have not yet come together. You see, our culture thinks absolutely

nothing of the circumstances that Mary and Joseph found themselves in, but in Joseph's culture, this was a shattering event. I mean, legally speaking, this is a capital offense. Joseph and Mary are betrothed. Betrothal was a period of time when the marriage was made contractually legal but without any physical consummation. That can take years to happen. *Luke 2:4* says this: *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.* Now those two statements, "betrothed," and "with child," they don't belong together. You see, to find out during this time that your betrothed is pregnant is the height of betrayal. And in this culture this is a -- an offense worthy of death. That's why the scripture says: *And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.* I don't think we often think about it, but Joseph's world must have been in complete collapse when he first learned about Mary's condition. Just try to put yourself into Joseph's place. You know, you're engaged, you're about to be married and your fiancée tells you that she's pregnant and you're not the father. Scripture says Joseph -- quote -- "considered these things." Again, the scripture is so bare-bones in its description of what had to be absolute agony for Joseph. I mean, his natural reaction probably would have been to reclaim his

honor by publicly accusing her. She would have been ruined for life and maybe even executed, but at least he would have taken the shame off of himself. Just imagine yourself pondering what Joseph had to ponder, and consider how noble and restrained his response was. Again, scripture says this: *But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

The good news is that God met Joseph in a dream. The bad news for Joseph would last his entire lifetime. I mean, understand that people in those days knew how to count as well as we understand how to count. You know, when Mary delivered her baby, they knew that Joseph was at least a cuckolded husband, someone who's not even aware of his wife's adultery, and at worst a fornicator. Now we laugh at such sins today. His culture saw it as worthy of death by stoning. And Joseph carried the burden of that social status for the rest of his life. I mean, we know that because John's gospel tells us of a confrontation that Jesus had when he was an adult with the religious leaders, they claim to be the children of Abraham and Jesus, speaking to them, says in *John 8:39*, he says: *"If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works*

Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did." They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father -- even God." You see, Jesus was so soundly defeating them that they went with their only remaining weapon which was the ad hominem attack, and that was to affirm what obviously the rumors had been for years and years, that Jesus was an illegitimate child, and that lie had blanketed Joseph and Mary for all of their lives, in spite of the blessings. And Mary bore the brunt of that shame as well even though she's singled out as the most blessed woman to walk the face of the earth. That's not just an earthly opinion. That's the Holy Spirit speaking through Elizabeth who said in *Luke 1:4*: *With a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"* So the most blessed woman on earth would spend her entire life under the cloud of adultery only to have her beloved son tortured, stripped, and executed before her very eyes. See, Mary's blessings never precluded her experience of pain, and God would allow both in her life. Even as Jesus was being dedicated as a newborn baby, God spoke to Mary prophetically through the prophet Simeon. We heard that reading this morning, and he spoke to her about the horror she was going to face. *Luke 2:34* says: *And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and*

for a sign that is opposed and a sword will pierce through your own soul also."

Now you may think this is old news, I mean, we all know that Joseph and Mary had no room at the inn and that the birth in the barn fell far short as to what a king's entry into the world should be, we know that what they experienced was the beginnings of the kingdom of God on earth. This was a kingdom unlike any other kingdom that the earth had ever seen before, and in this kingdom everything was upside down. The King creator and sustainer of the universe was making his grand entrance into flesh through them, and they were seeing firsthand that it was anything but grand. God had, according to *Philippians 2:7: Made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.* Mary and Joseph were one of the first to practically see what every member of the kingdom of God also has to see. They saw firsthand what their son would teach them 30 years later in *Luke 14: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."* They saw a kingdom that no one else had ever seen. This is a kingdom that we've spent the last 2,000 years trying to come to grips with, but they had no precedent, no past and no inkling of what was to come in the future. See, we don't know and I don't think we give credit enough to the fact -- to the time that Mary and Joseph both spent being part of something that

God was doing that had never, never been done before. They were ushering in a brand new way of approaching God, perhaps wondering how God could possibly love them since life was treating them so poorly.

And if this was God's blessing, then what's a curse like? You know, scripture says that when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he considered these things. And again, you talk about understatement, you talk about the dark agony of the soul, what do you think Joseph felt as he -- quote -- "considered those things?" But remember, an angel appeared to him and again, this is an incredible blessing, something that not very many people experience. But how long after that angel appeared did Joseph start to wonder if it was his imagination, especially since he and Mary's birth experience was hardly the experience of the birth of a king. Now, I don't know how Joseph felt because the scripture doesn't say so. I do know, however, how human hearts work, and I know that what seems actually set and certain at some point in short matter -- in a short matter of time can also fade into something far less certain when your expectations are repeatedly shattered. It's hard to think that you're special, that you're beloved, and that you're blessed when all your experience is that life is kicking you in the teeth. Mary was told that she would be the vessel in which the Savior would come. Think to what's going

on in Mary's mind. All Mary knew from the Old Testament was that the great men and women of God, they'd all been blessed, they'd all been honored, from Abraham to Moses to David and Joseph, even to Sarah and Rebecca and Miriam, they were all spiritually blessed but they were physically blessed as well. Mary's just been given the greatest blessing a human could ever receive, and yet she -- here she is, mired in rejection and poverty, thought to be an adulteress woman on top of that. Do you think Mary ever had a moment when she wondered how could God possibly love me, still let me wallow in this pain?

Then we get to Jesus, the blessed child of Mary and Joseph. We don't have to speculate about how loved Jesus was because God even said so in *Matthew 3:17*, it says this: *And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."* And yet we also know that Jesus experienced the most profound rejection a human being could ever experience. The psalmist records Jesus's deepest groaning in Psalm 22 where he says, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* And so we asked is there a pattern here at all? Do we see something developing here? It seems like those deeply loved by God are often times cast in deep waters that will make them question what kind of love is this? Could I be experiencing fear, bewilderment, rejection, and sorrow and still be basking in the love of God? Well, the answer

is an emphatic yes!

Consider the book of Hebrews with its faith hall of fame. God there is speaking of terrible things, awful things happening to those who tried their best, who played by the rules. It says this in *Hebrews 11: Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, and sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated -- of whom the world was not worthy -- wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.* God lists a catalog of horrors. It's a catalog of horrors that these individuals went through and instead of blessing, they all received what we wouldn't want in our worst nightmare. And yet God in the middle of this catalog of horrors makes one little parenthetical statement. He describes these folks in verse 38 as *those of whom the world was not worthy.* What he's saying is they tried their best, they too played by the rules but the blessing they received looked more like a curse. And in the midst of that catalog of horrors, God is saying that these people were so precious that the world itself wasn't even worthy of them. Just

think of that.

Actually Christmas showcases a similar kind of blessing. Now, we can't help but wonder what thoughts are going through Mary and Joseph's mind as they went through this cattle car process of registration. *Luke 2* says this: *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Not only did Mary and Joseph have to go all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, but they had to do it in Mary's ninth month of pregnancy. That's a trip of about 90 miles. You know, to put it into scale, if you're thinking right here in Port Jervis, that's like going to Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania or Albany or down to the Jersey shore. That's a decent drive, but think about making that journey not in a car, not with climate control and CDs and iPods but on the back of a donkey or a camel, if you could even afford that. You know, today it takes us about an hour and a half, two hours to go 90 miles and to do that in absolute comfort. It took them at least a week, traveling in a way*

that was extremely dangerous. They didn't have lighted rest stops and food courts and State Police cars patrolling their route. No, they had thieves, they had robbers, they had assorted wild animals, and again, Mary's about to deliver. And so when they finally arrive in Bethlehem, after what has been a brutal and exhausting trip, they're met there with the classic "*There's no room for you in the inn.*" You know, we all know the story of how romanticized it is in creches and nativities, but the fact is they wound up, thanks to somebody's pity, with Mary in advanced labor delivering her baby in a cave or a barn. The facts are it was hostile, it was brutal, and it was incredibly degrading.

So what personal blessing did Mary and Joseph see in the incarnation? Remember, they both received direct revelation from God that they were the mother and stepfather not just of royalty but of supernaturally divine royalty. They were treated like pond scum. How is it blessed to be rejected, humiliated, and abandoned? And they were also told directly by God how pleased he was with them and how privileged they were, there's no denying that. But what followed was anything but what we would call a blessing. Instead of blessing, they got heaping doses of rejection, humiliation, and seeming abandonment. And now my question this morning for all of us is: Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever wondered if somehow or other you missed the boat when it comes

to your Christian experience, somehow someone else always seems to get the blessing but you? The Christ that they know seems to be a Christ you could only dream about. And you see all these folks who try their very best, they play by the rules, and they are blessed. You try your best and you play by the rules and you get your head handed to you. Can you see that you're not only in good company, you are in the great company of Mary and Joseph and Jesus. You're in the company of Hebrews 11. And God says: *And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.* You think they too might have felt the same way you might be feeling?

I know when I was a brand new Christian, I was in a church that had lots and lots of dear older folks, and one of their favorite songs -- you've heard me mention this before -- it had lyrics that say: "I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses, and he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known." I remember the first time I heard that. I thought well, I guess this is the way this goes, I guess you become a Christian, you go to the garden and you tarry with Jesus, he tells you how great you are and how neat things are, you share joys unknown by everybody else. After a short while I wondered why that never happened to me. You see, it took me years to realize it

didn't happen to anybody else I knew. It's what we call artistic license. You know, my problem was I was surrounded by older saints who had been through years and years of trial and trouble and struggle and they had come out of the other side of that absolutely convinced that God was faithful and true and that he had never left them. And so even if that song didn't reflect their personal experience, they felt they could identify with it. Well, there was another song I heard years later that absolutely resonated with me far more than the other one. It was a song by Pam Thum whose lyrics went like this: "Life is hard, the world is cold. We're barely young and then we're old, but every falling tear is always understood. Yes, life is hard, but God is good." You see, if you're Joseph or Mary or Jesus or the heroes of Hebrews 11 and you had to pick a song that represents your reality, I think it would be that song. I know when I first heard it, I thought wow, somebody else thinks like I do. Life is hard, and God is good. It's not an either-or, it's a both-and.

You know I said at the beginning of this message that the key to understanding the gift of Christmas is understanding what the word "blessed" means. For Joseph and Mary, blessed included poverty, disgrace, and rejection. For Jesus, it included crucifixion. I also stated why Jesus came to earth at Christmas. He said this: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that*

whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Can I make a distinction here, an important distinction? You see, the gift that God gave, his only begotten Son, is eternal life, eternal life right here, right now, today. The moment Jesus Christ becomes your Lord and Savior, that moment you step out of time and you step into eternity. We can always say we really have no idea what that entails because we have not yet received what was promised. If Christmas this year finds you hanging by a thread wondering why your experience of Christ in this life includes things that you never thought it would, things that include fear or bewilderment or rejection and sorrow, just understand that you are not alone, that you are not just in good company but the great company of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus himself, and in fact, the more you study scripture, the more you realize the folks who try their best and play by the rules and find themselves without a care in this life are by far the exception and not the rule. And the folks who struggle like crazy to get through the next day, the next hour, even the next minute are far more numerous than you think. They understand that God never promised to get us around our struggles; instead he promised to go through them with us.

In *Isaiah 43* he says this: *But now thus says the LORD, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through*

the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. See, God never takes us around struggles, he takes us through them. We know and God knows that for some of us, particularly around Christmastime, it is so easy to lose heart. God says don't, and here's why. He says this in 2 Corinthians 4:16, he says: So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day, for this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Hear what God is saying to you this morning. God is saying no struggle you will ever have will ever, ever be wasted. They're all preparing a glory for us beyond all comparison, but we have not yet received the promise. See, the unseen things are eternal, the kingdom is eternal, and the gift of Christmas is eternal. Jesus gave his life for something we will not fully grasp until our lives come to an end. And so by faith we press on sometimes through the fear and the rejection, bewilderment, and sorrow, knowing that there is work to be done, there's a kingdom to be advanced, knowing sometimes trouble just goes with the territory, and so we trust in Jesus who said this shortly before he died, he said in John 16: "In the

world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Let's pray.

Father, this Christmas morning, I just want to lift up any of those who are in this building this morning who are hurting, who are in pain, who look around at all the people that they think are trying their best and playing by the rules and life is blessing them abundantly; that's not true. It may be true for the exception, Lord, but for every one of us, life is hard, but God is good. I pray this morning that you would give each and every one of us the set, sure knowledge of your love and of that truth. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.