

Best Decorating Experience Ever

Best Christmas Ever: Week 1

11/29/15

[Christmas Vacation scene with the ridiculous lights as a bumper video]

Welcome/intro

Hope everyone had a great Thanksgiving experience, we're delighted to have extended families joining us today and out-of-town guests here for the holidays, thanks for being here

Our vision here is really simple: connecting people to God and to each other
We hope that even if you're not a church-type person that you'll experience both of those things today

This is our kick-off week of our Christmas series we're calling "The Best Christmas Ever"

And the idea for this series is that Christmas comes with a sort of fixed set of traditions and experiences that we all participate in

Some of us LOVE this time of year, and LOVE all the stuff that comes with it: presents and decorating and feasting and celebrating and time with family
OTHERS of us, it drives us a little crazy!

And some of you are in a house divided:
Maybe one or two of the people in your house LOVE all the buzz around Christmas while others of you could do WITHOUT all the buzz around Christmas

Generally speaking I love Christmas, although there are some parts of it that do drive me a little crazy

But as we were talking about what we might do for our Christmas series what we decided was this

Since we're just about all already doing Christmas stuff:
decorating the house, exchanging presents, feasting and celebrating and time with family

So what if we took those practices, those traditions that we're all already doing and made this the best Christmas ever
by connecting the dots from the things that we're already doing to a larger purpose and a larger story

to what God is up to in the world: who God is, who we are, and how that might be fully experienced here in the midst of what we're doing to get ready for Christmas

What if we took the things that are already on the calendar or on the to-do list and filled them out and fleshed them out so that they weren't just random one-off experiences or events or obligations, even if we like them!

But what if these activities found their larger meaning and a deeper energy and joy as we discovered that as we do THESE things we're being invited to be a part of the life and work of God?

What if Christmas 2015 was the best Christmas ever because we met God at every turn?

And what if that happened because all of us went about it and entered into it with eyes wide open to the fact that at every turn, God invites us into his wonder and his work and his mission and his joy?

And what if we together did the work here on Sunday mornings to put the framework in place
so that you can leave here on Sunday afternoon ready to walk into the Christmas wonderland of your week ready for the best Christmas ever?

To start with this week we're going to tackle maybe the riskiest and trickiest of the topics we're going to talk about.

This week we're going to talk about decking the halls with boughs of holly and trimming the tree

This week we're going to talk about decorating the house for Christmas.

One of the most recent Christmas trends over the past couple of years are companies who offer to come and hang your lights for you, maybe you've seen these

Lots of us want our houses to look festive and Christmas-y on the outside, but as Chevy Chase demonstrated in the clip we just saw, it's a whole lot of work!

So we do it the American way, we outsource it!

But what actually makes this the riskiest and trickiest of all the topics we're going to talk about

is that I risk losing 90% of the men in the audience when I say that decorating the house is what we're going to talk about today

So let me talk to the guys here for a minute before I lose you.

Guys, if you're married and if your situation is like many of the other married men I know, here's how this rolls

At some point this weekend or next weekend, your wife declares it's time to get the Christmas decorations out of the attic and start decorating for Christmas

To which you inwardly or outwardly groan and curse.

And so you dutifully traipse into the attic or into the basement, and start dragging out boxes and boxes of decorations that you have been collecting for decades

And every year you and your wife say to one another that you should probably do a little bit of a purge and rid yourself of the Christmas knick-knacks from twenty years ago that you've kept and continued to accumulate along the way

But every year after you've done all the work to put out the decorations or take them down, you're too tired to actually do it

And so here you go, pulling out the same 34 boxes that are full of Christmas decorations

which spells the doom of your next 6 to 48 hours which will be consumed by you being directed to do a variety of decorating tasks which you are only marginally interested in

While there are perfectly good football games going on to be watched or other projects that you're much more interested in and that have a much greater long-term return on the time investment!

And as a result, sometimes when you're dutifully doing what you're supposed to be doing, we're not always so happy about it

In fact, sometimes we find ourselves snapping at our spouses or our kids because we're grumpy about this whole thing and didn't want to be doing it in the first place

I, of course, have NEVER had such a decorating experience, I ALWAYS find it to be nothing but happy happy joy joy

But I have heard stories that OTHER people have on occasion felt this way about this part of the holiday experience

Now of course on the other end of things, some of you LOVE decorating for the holidays. In fact, for some of us this can become a sort of obsession

And for some of us, we can get so caught up in the obsession over it, and always looking for ways to improve it and always looking for ways to make it bigger and better

That it can become this thing that takes on a life all it's own

And for some of us, we get so caught up in having to have the perfect Christmas house with the perfect Christmas look

that we end up putting all this pressure on OURSELVES and/or all the people around us!

And when things don't quite come together the way that we dreamed that they might, we feel it deeply, and sometimes we make the people around us feel it deeply, too.

So let's talk about this—whether you LOVE the decorating for the holidays or you'd rather do just about anything else

Chances are you're going to be DOING it this holiday season.

And so what if as we're doing this work this Christmas

what if there's a way to embrace the lights and the tinsel and the decorating in a way that you experienced God's pleasure over you as you did it?

That's where we're going today as we open the Scriptures to the very beginning. If you've got a Bible turn with me to Genesis 1, if you don't it's on the screen behind me

and if you don't own a Bible, merry Christmas, we've got free Bibles on the book table, we'd love for you to take one for being with us here this morning

This is the creation story and at some point we'll circle back and do a real in-depth study of Genesis

and maybe address and deal with some of the questions swirling around this text as to whether this means that God literally did create everything in 7 days or if there's other things going on here

Some of you are deeply engaged with those questions and wrestle deeply with them, others of you don't really care

I'm just going to ask you put those very good questions on hold for now

because I think at the very least this passage is trying to tell us something about the nature and character of God and about who God made us to be

And that's what I want to dig into here this morning as we read excerpts from Genesis 1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ...

³And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. [DON'T YOU WISH IT WAS THAT EASY?] ⁴God saw that the light was good..

9 And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so... And God saw that it was good.

11 Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation... And God saw that it was good.

14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years... And it was so... And God saw that it was good.

20 And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." ...And God saw that it was good. ...

24 And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds... And it was so. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over [all the animals]

***27 So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them...***

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

My wife Kelly and I have been married for 17 years and we've had some great Christmas's together

But one of the most distinct Christmas memories I have with her is early on in our marriage, we were living in an apartment

and we had a bunch of travel on the calendar for December—gone for weeks at a time for most of the month, including the entire week of Christmas itself

So we decided it just wasn't worth it to do all the hassle of getting and decorating a Christmas tree.

We were going to be gone for so much of December it was going to dry up and turn into a giant match-stick before we got half-way to Christmas!

So we got out a few Christmas knick-knacks and some lights that we strung around our living room

But a funny thing happened –when we got back into our lightly decorated apartment after one of our trips and it's somewhere around December 19th.

It just didn't feel right. It sort of felt like a pitiful little apartment during Christmas time that we hadn't put much effort into

And so we started talking about and we decided, then and there, six days before Christmas, we're leaving again in like 3 days

We decided that we needed to up the Christmas décor ante! We needed to go get a tree and do a real Christmas, not this half-baked of a pass on Christmas!

So I'm going to go to the local Christmas tree lot and hunt and gather us a real Christmas tree!

Now it is around December 19th, and we are admittedly a bit late in the game at this point!

All the trees at the local Christmas tree lot have been pillaged and ransacked and scavenged by happy people who planned ahead to enjoy Christmas!

And so I approach the Christmas tree lot on the evening of December 19th and it is a ghost-town.

There is no one else there shopping for a tree, the worker is taking a nap in a small heated little temporary shed

And there are a handful of the most pitiful and passed over Christmas trees left there on the lot

I pretend to do a thorough assessment of all of them, knowing that it does not really matter because they are all pitiful!

I select one and pay for it and lash it to the roof of my car and bring it home

And we put it in the tree stand and string it full with lights and decorations and then we step back and it is clear:

it is the single most scraggly, pitiful, thinned out, balding tree that either one of us has ever seen

We called it our Charlie Brown Christmas tree and we cracked up at it

But even as we did so, we both knew in our hearts and said out loud: "this is good." It made a difference to have introduced this little bit of beauty into our home for the holiday season

Even as pitiful as it was, it was good.

Genesis 1 is written to tell us first and foremost about the character and nature of God.

The Bible is most interested in answering 4 questions in this order:

1. Who is God? What's his nature, what's he like? Is he angry or judgmental or loving or kind or generous or moody?

2. What does God do? What's God's activity and involvement like in the world? What's he about in this world? How involved is he, really?
3. Who are we as human beings? Are we basically good or basically bad? Are we slaves of the gods like the other creation myths talked about at the same time as Genesis was written or is there more to us than that? What's our name and what's our identity?
4. What are we to do? What's our work? What's our role in the world? What should we do and how should go about doing it?

The Bible is interested in answering these 4 questions in this order—and notice that it all starts with God!

The Bible is obsessed with God and is all about God and of course there is plenty in there about us, but that's of secondary concern!

The Bible is obsessed with God while we are obsessed with ourselves! It's no wonder we get so lost and don't understand the Bible!

The Bible is obsessed with God and with telling us exactly who this God is and what he does and here's how it starts:

In the beginning, God created.

Who is God? What does God do? The very first record, the very first recorded work or word of the God of the Scriptures is that He creates. He's a creator.

Over and over again throughout Genesis 1, God creates beauty and perfection
 Light shines! Water bursts forth! Heavens and skies open up! Perfect blues, wonderful greens, bright yellows, deep reds, royal purples

All of it invented for the very first time, all of it ordered and organized and put exactly in the right place for life to happen

And not just life to happen, not just to eke out a bare and pitiful existence, but for life to be enjoyable, good, delightful

Over and over again, God makes stuff and when he makes it, it is good, it is good, it is very good.

Dazzlingly and dizzingly beautiful, wondrous, teeming with life and energy and complexity and simplicity

Full of sounds like bubbling brooks and crashing waves and birds calling and hyenas howling
 and lots of still quiet

and popping with colors and play and wide open spaces

And then, in the midst of all of this beauty, he does his best work--he makes people IN HIS OWN IMAGE, in his LIKENESS—repeated four times here in just a couple of verses

Questions 1 and 2 were who is God and what does God do, we've gotten our first answers to that

Question 3, you want to know who you are, who you are at your core, who you were intended to be by the manufacturer and the maker and designer of the universe?

You are made in God's image. Image-bearer. That is the truest thing about you and the person next to you and every single person you will ever, ever meet.

This is huge and we could spend weeks talking about all that means, but just to start with today

let's just say that it means that each of us bears his stamp, has something of God's qualities embedded in our very nature

One author I read described it like we were meant to be icons of God, like an icon on your computer screen

And every time you and I got clicked on, every time we answered an email or had a conversation or did a project around the house

Every single time we got clicked on and did anything at all, something of God would open up and spill out.

Something of God's character and nature and goodness and love would be expressed

So God, who is first described as creative and a creator, makes people who have some of his own qualities in them

And he puts them in a perfect paradise. And everything there is good, and good and very good

It is all lush and beautiful

But when God puts people made in his image into this perfect little idyllic setting, he does something rather unexpected in the very next chapter

In Genesis 2 it says this: ***15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.***

God puts people in paradise and doesn't tell them to take a long vacation! He puts people in paradise and tells them to work it!

And remember, all of this is happening before sin or anything bad enters the picture whatsoever! Work is good!

And what Adam and eventually Eve are to do here in this place is enter into all this beauty, and wade into all this paradise and you know what they're supposed to do?

Express their image-bearing-ness by taking all this that is good, and good and good already, and make it even better.

Put their God-given creative energies to good use to employ creativity just like their God had.

God creates, and then creates people in his image and he gives them a delegated power and authority to have dominion over this place and to work this place

He says, "go to work, little tykes!"

"Go and to make it even more beautiful because YOU are made in MY image and you were made to be creative, just like I am creative

And you were made to make things beautiful, just like I have made all this so very beautiful."

GO and DO LIKEWISE

And then the biblical story in Genesis rolls along and sin enters the picture, distorting everything

But we see God creatively working through all kinds of people to try to bring good and redemption out of the pain and brokenness

And from Genesis into the book of Exodus and you've got all kinds of pretty famous Bible characters: Noah, Abraham, Joseph and Moses—people that get Hollywood movies made out of their lives!

But here's a little Bible nerd piece for those of you who are Bible nerds: do you know who the first person to be described as being filled with the Spirit of God is?

God throughout the Bible fills or promises to fill people with his Spirit, and the first person to be described in this way isn't Abraham or Noah or Moses

It's a guy in Exodus 31, as God is telling Moses how to build the tent of meeting, the holy place where God is going to meet his people

And God gives Moses all kinds of detailed instructions as to what this thing is supposed to look like

And then here God says this to Moses:

31 ² “See, I have chosen Bezalel ... ³ and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—⁴ to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ⁵ to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts.

The very first person in the whole Bible who is said to be filled with the Spirit of God is an artist

An artist who’s job it is to create a beautiful, holy space for the rest of the people to meet the living God.

In the beginning, God created all of this world to be a place where we might all regularly and without interference meet with him

Here, after sin has been introduced into the world and our connection with God has all kinds of interference and static

Bezalel is given the Spirit to create this kind of space all over again: holy space for God’s people to meet with him

One of the most important things that happens on the other side of Jesus is that the Scriptures say that we all now have this same Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit, dwelling inside of us

And one of the most important things that Spirit does is move us and equip us and bless us to create beautiful and holy space where people might meet and experience God.

Eric Lidell is the real guy made famous in the movie Chariots of Fire—

A great 80’s movie featuring white guys in short shorts running in slow-motion

And he once said, “God mad me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure.”

As someone who never quite got into the whole running thing, I’d like to say God made me to eat, and when I feast like I did on Thursday, I feel his pleasure, too!

As you and I go to work over these next few weeks, decking the halls with boughs of holly or setting up the lights

the Scriptures invite us into the best Christmas decorating experience ever by feeling God’s pleasure over us as we go to work creating beauty

God made us in his image to do exactly this!

Which means that we aren’t just doing it because someone else is making us

nor are we doing it in this obsessive, gotta’ be the perfect Martha Stewart house, grasping and striving kind of a way

But instead we're recognizing that God has created a dazzlingly beautiful world
and he has made us in his image to go to work and create beauty wherever
we go and whatever we're doing

And when we do so, we're invited to feel and know God's pleasure over us and in us
God, who is Creator and who is wondrously creative, made you, also, to create. And
when you do, he delights in you.

This has all kinds of HUGE applications and implications for just about every area of
our lives, including how you go about decorating your house this season

But let's start bigger: ***where is God calling you this season to feel his pleasure as
you bring creativity and beauty to bear in this world?***

God's Spirit is a Spirit of creativity and beauty, and we've been given this same
Spirit.

Where is God maybe calling you to bring creativity and ***beauty to fix a problem or
heal broken places outside of your current comfort zone or what's normal for
you right now??***

Maybe it's a broken home or a kid in need or a broken relationship at work or
a need in our community that you've got a burden for?

Where is God calling you, prompting you, to step into a broken and messy world and
bring all the creativity and talents and the power of God's Spirit
to fix something that's broken?

Where has God given you His Spirit to bring new energies and creativity
to create something that will improve a situation or a system or an
environment or a neighborhood or a country or a world in desperate need of new
ideas for the many problems we face?

For some of us, that might require you going out of your comfort zone in order to do
the work he's given you his Spirit to do, I pray that you'll have the courage to do so!

On the other hand, some of us just need to ask ***where has God already positioned
you to make a difference*** and how might you intentionally ask God for His Spirit of
creativity and beauty to be put to good use in those places?

This week as I worked on this message I prayed with a much keener sense of
intentionality that I'd know God's pleasure as I created THIS for Him and for you!

This is one of the places where EVERY WEEK God has positioned me to
express creativity in a way that might honor him and I hope bless you

Maybe tomorrow as you drive into work, you just need to pray that you'd know God's pleasure as you bring his creative energies and Spirit into your work place.

Maybe this afternoon as you get home you need to pray for God's Spirit to give you joyful creativity in creating a home that is rich with opportunities for your kids to meet God this season

Some of you need to get out and find a place that's in need of God's creative Spirit to fix a situation or a problem

others of us just need to be more intentional right where we are

And being intentional right where we are is where we'll land as we talk about the privilege we have of creating beauty in our homes this Christmas

What does it mean to be made in God's image to be creative as we roll up our sleeves and decorate the tree this afternoon?

A couple of suggestions for how to make this year the best decorating experience ever

some ways that might open us up to connect with God in deeper and wider ways while also loving the people around you

Best Decorating Experience Ever Tips

1. -Know that making space beautiful and festive is holy work!

This isn't trivial or a waste of time, nor is this just about you trying to out-do your neighbors or prove something to your in-laws!

This is good work, holy work, and important work!

This is what God has made us to do—to take what's present in this world and tend to it and arrange it such that it is very good!

We start here, and it helps us to embrace it for what it is and it keeps us from getting annoyed at it on the one hand or overly-caught-up in it in a prideful, overly-about-me kind of a way on the other

2. Know your limits

Some of us who are super-enthusiastic about Christmas or who feel all kinds of pressures to perform around Christmas can get utterly carried away around Christmas time

And we put all this pressure both on OURSELVES and on OTHERS around us to pony up and do all kinds of slave labor that ends up being completely exhausting.

If you find yourself snapping multiple times at the people around you, you've likely exceeded some sort of healthy limit

Look for opportunities to be gracious and open-handed. Everything you try won't turn out "good" or "very good."

But what matters more than what we create is who we're becoming as we create.

God wants us to become more loving, gentle, winsome, compassionate, and generous as we put our creative talents to work.

Sometimes, failure is our best opportunity to grow.

Know your limits

and if you feel the need to expand your limits and try something new, then just recognize that's going to cost you something: time, energy, money, mental energies

And that's fine, just know that that expansion effort of trying something new is going to cost something and that time, energy, money will need to come from somewhere!

And know that limitless-ness is a myth!

3. Know and Respect Other People's Limits

This is again directed at the Christmas over-achievers!

The goal of creating beauty in the world is in order for that beauty to bless and serve other people in love.

When people made in God's image express God's character in what we do, that's what happens:

we make things beautiful not that the EXPENSE of our relationships, but in order to foster and bless our relationships

You don't want to have a house that looks perfect and relationships that are in shambles.

Don't have a melt-down argument over tree lights. They are important, but they are JUST tree lights.

Don't sacrifice your relationships for your image of the perfect Christmas. Let your good God teach you to love the real people who are present with you this season.

If we're driving other people by our own compulsion and striving into frustration and anger with us in our attempts at creating beauty

the ends do not justify the means

I've had some adult friends who still in their adulthood hate Christmas because growing up it was this rigidly enforced military boot camp exercise that everyone was grumpy about, sometimes including mom and dad!

"WE'RE GONNA' BE A GREAT BIG HAPPY FAMILY DECORATING FOR A GREAT HAPPY CHRISTMAS WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT!"

So be wise in thinking about what you expect from the people around you because the goal and purpose of creating beauty is for that beauty to bless other people in love

Now to those of us who are less-enthusiastic about this whole exercise, including the grumpy teens who roll their eyes at everything anyway

The Scriptures call us to a time and a place for all of us of to serve other people. And the reality is that for most of us, we spend most of our time serving ourselves

And part of the gift of the Christmas season is that we have many opportunities to serve others

One of the ways that we can do that is by giving gifts

Another way we can do that is by being willing to do something for someone else that might not be OUR preference but is a tangible way that we can serve and love someone else

4. Pre-frame (and re-frame) through prayer

This Christmas season, just before you get ready to do some decorating, I want to invite you to pray this little prayer:

"God, you are creative and you made me in your image to create beauty, too.

And today, as I do this, I want to feel your pleasure."

Today, whether this is my preferred way to express creativity or not, I'm going to embrace the fact that I'm made in your image in part to create beauty

And so today, Lord, as I do this as an expression of who you are and who you made me to be

I pray that I'd hear your voice, know your delight over me, and feel your pleasure."

Try praying something like that just before you start pulling out the boxes or going out hunting for Christmas trees this season

And see if that might uncork a whole new world of connection and oceans and continents of deeper joy
as you go about doing the work of making your space beautiful this Christmas season

One of the core convictions of the Scriptures is that quite simply the gospel changes everything.

One theologian said it this way,

““There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”

-Abram Kuyper

We're going to press into that this Christmas season as we take up all the stuff that we're going to do this Christmas season anyway and draw us further up and further into the character of God as we do it

Because what we see in the story of Christmas is not JUST that God is creative in his ORIGINAL creation, although he is and we celebrate that.

But the Christmas story also shows us and tells us that the God who was dizzingly creative when he FIRST made this place
is also dizzingly creative in how he redeems and heals and buys back this place

That when sin entered into the world and corrupted this good, good, and very good place

God put a plan into motion, a creative, wonderful, surprising, unexpected plan, to reclaim this beautiful thing that he has made and that he loves

See, at just the right moment in history, God introduces the most surprising, simple, complex, nuanced, and wonderfully creative solution to the problem of a world that was alienated from the God who made it and loved it

God himself puts on flesh. And he doesn't put on the flesh of a king, like the ancient peoples thought—the kings were always claiming to be some sort of deity

God puts on flesh and is born into poverty, in the margins—he's in the category of babies born under circumstances that might be voted “least likely to succeed”

He comes as a helpless baby, un-presuming, to conquer sin and death for us and to reconcile us to God not by force and not by power as we commonly understand it

But by laying his life down for all of us, that we might freedom and grace, and joy forevermore

God is creative not only in his original making of all things, he is infinitely creative in his again-making, re-making of all things

Christmas is the celebration of God bringing all his surprisingly and creative abilities to bear to solve the problem of our alienation from him

This week, as we head into what we're hoping and praying might be the best Christmas ever

We want to invite you to know this creative, delightful God

To know him for the first time if you wouldn't call yourself a Jesus-follower
or to know him in an ongoing way for those of us who already have some sort of a relationship with Jesus

We want you to know this creative God because if your house is decorated but you're your soul is stranded then you've missed the point of Christmas

This week, I want to invite all of us to consciously and intentionally partner with God the one who is THE creative one
you are made in his image to have a deep sense of his pleasure over you as you go to work creating as well.

And to hear the call to make your own part of His world a little more creative and a little more beautiful
whether that's as you decorate your house this season or more broadly as you partner with him in a broken world to bring more creativity and beauty

And all of this as an expression of who He is, an expression of who YOU are, and in order to bless and serve the people around you in love.

PRAY