

Christmas Eve: Enjoy the Magic, Live the Miracle
December 24, 2013

Merry Christmas!

My name is Alex, I'm the lead pastor at Chatham Community Church, and we're delighted that you've joined us this evening on this greatest night of the year

Let me add my invitation to the ones already extended for those of you not connected to a church anywhere in the area to join us on Sunday mornings.

Especially if church is kind of not really your thing—we've got a whole lot of people just like you

In fact, just about 6 weeks ago we took a survey of people in our church and one of the questions was how long was it between your last church experience and coming to CCC?

How long had you been out of church before coming to join us? 25% of people who responded said it had been 5 years or more since their last church experience

And now all these people are beginning a new season of a spiritual journey that's leading to awakenings and life change in real and practical and specific ways

Our vision at Chatham Community Church is really simple: connecting people to God and to each other, we'd love for you to come and be a part of it.

I'm going to be brief tonight because it's Christmas eve and you've got more important things to get onto

But I want to talk briefly tonight about the magic of Christmas and the miracle of Christmas.

Because Christmas, especially this night, is magical—all the anticipation and beauty and wonder of Christmas eve

The magic of Christmas is a wonderful thing!

And one of the things that gets repeated over and over again in popular Christmas songs is this wish that the peace and wonder and love of Christmas might last all year long

But what we find is that the magic of Christmas is just like every other magic: it's temporary, and based on an illusion

My family and I became experts at this whole magic thing this fall, through the generosity of some grandparents back in November we spent a week at the most magical place on earth: Disney!

And one afternoon at the end of the day in Animal Kingdom my wife and her stepdad were riding the Everest roller coaster
and they're cranking up this big ginormous hill for the big drop on the other side

And suddenly the coaster comes to a complete top—and they're stuck right there for about 20 minutes

And the workers come to get them after a while and there's stairs right next to the coaster and the way that they're going to get down is through some stairs in the heart of the fake Mount Everest

Given the magic kingdom's reputation for famous customer service, Kelly expected them to bend over backwards apologizing to these slightly traumatized riders who didn't feel so great about being stuck a hundred feet up in the air.

But while they did apologize, the primary message to these poor stranded Everest riders was not we're so sorry

But as they were going to walk through some back-stage, behind the scenes stuff as they walked down the escape hatch and steps that was through the fake mount Everest, the main thing they said to them was "NO PHOTOGRAPHY"—no photos, no cameras, over and over again

See, if you get behind the scenes on something that's based on magic—it gets exposed, you see how it all actually works.

Didn't want to the magic to be exposed

See, whether it's Christmas magic or Disney magic, the only way to enjoy it for what it says it can deliver is to not look too closely

Here's the thing about magic: it's all based on an illusion. Magic makes it look like something's happened that didn't really happen.

But when we start talking about a miracle, now we're talking about something that's in an altogether category

A miracle actually delivers what it looks like—it takes a situation and incredibly, improbably and beyond the realms of our understanding brings some power to bear that actually changes the situation

If we want something that will actually change the world—we want and we need is not Christmas magic but a Christmas miracle.

And the good news is that the real story and meaning and mystery of Christmas is that the miracle that we want and desperately need has been given to us in Jesus

That in Jesus Christ, God himself has put on flesh to heal his creation and to rescue anyone who would be willing to be rescued.

This is how the Scriptures describe it:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

-1 John 4:9-10

Do we have any runners here this evening? I'm married to one of you, I don't really get you people—y'all are strange! Running hurts!

It's taken me a long time to find an exercise that I actually enjoy—all exercise stuff is kind of painful

But a number of years ago I finally figured out that I liked trail biking and I found that when I actually do it I actually kind of like it

I feel better, energized, all that stuff that exercise people said that I would feel—I thought they were all just pathological liars previously, but no, it's true, exercise actually CAN make you feel better!

There's just one problem: I can't get myself to do it.

Even though it's good for me, even though I know that I feel better afterwards, all kinds of benefits, I just can't get myself to consistently get out of bed a little early to get out and bike.

The path to health and better life is right there in front of me, and I can't bring myself to consistently walk down that path.

Christmas is all about this: God himself comes to save us and deliver us because our track record as humans over the past 5,000 years is that we're somewhat miserable at finding our own way to joy.

We try to find peace, we try to find purpose, we try to fix broken relationships, we try to control the voices in our own heads

We try to make decisions that we think will bring us happiness and peace

and some of us even try to make sacrificial decisions that we think will bring OTHERS happiness and peace

And yet what we find is that we continuously shoot ourselves in our own feet, don't we?

Sometimes we're just selfish and mean; sometimes we're well-intentioned and trying our best

But regardless, we find that we're unreliable guides to finding our own joy.

I have a computer that's right about 3 years old--what happens to computers at about 3 years old?

It's starting to fall apart! And I start to hate it!

It is wholly unreliable! Some days I open it up and it starts off working great, then slows down and then just quits altogether

After Christmas, we're going in for a hard-drive transplant

and if that doesn't work, I'm going to climb to the top of the courthouse and with great delight I'll throw it down to watch it smash into bits and get a new one!

My computer is wholly reliable—it's got something wrong inside of it that undermines its ability to perform and operate like it was designed to perform and operate.

We like to think of ourselves as reliable guides to our own happiness and joy and purpose

But what we find is that we, too, are un-reliable.

We've got something in our operating system, we've got stuff at work in our hearts and minds and spirits that cause us to mis-fire, shut down, malfunction.

The Scriptures call that sin—sin just means broken relationship

and sin not just something that we've picked up along the way like a virus—it's something that we've been implicit in, we propagate it in ourselves

We choose sin over and over again—like an addict who goes back to the same destructive behavior over and over again

and that's the source of our misery.

Christmas is the celebration of God's landing in our world in the flesh to be our help, to undo our misery by taking on and destroying our greatest enemy of sin

The mystery and wonder of Christmas is this: God himself puts on flesh to fight for us: to turn the tide of the great battle which we lose over and over again in our own—he comes to fight for us

An atoning sacrifice will be made to cleanse us of that sin and give us a new hard-drive

He's gives us a new heart, a new mind, a new Spirit.

Christmas is the D-Day of the universe, the day that God himself lands into this world that he created to bring redemption and healing and hope into what he created.

Dig too deep into magic and you find out that it's not as cool as it first appeared

But dig deeper and deeper into this mystery and this miracle of God coming to fight for us and you get this wonderful news:

God is more for you than you are for yourself

Christmas is God himself coming to do win a battle that we could never win on our own

God is more for you than you are for yourself

and he has come to rescue you from all the things that would rob you of joy—including and especially to save us from ourselves and our tendencies toward self-destruction

And to bring you into eternal joy forever and ever—to secure for you the life you were created for to begin with

To bring you into a relationship with God, the good and perfect heavenly Father who created us

the presence of God in our midst, loving on us and loving us into the creatures that he made us to be

leading us into a life of mission, a life of purpose

C.S. Lewis is the guy who wrote the children's books The Chronicles of Narnia

But he was also a deeply thoughtful Christian and he writes that at the end of the day

there are two kinds of people: those who say to God, "your will be done" and those to whom God says to them, "**your** will be done."

For God to leave us alone and to our own devices, to our own mis-management of our lives, to be stuck in the pit with our sin with no ability on our own to get out

That's the worst possible thing that God could ever do to us.

And so God, in his mercy and grace, and because he is more for us than we are for ourselves, ***pursues us and initiates*** with us and sends his son to be our rescue
To take away our sin, and to restore us to be who we were made to be.

He pursued us 2,000 years ago, that's what we celebrate tonight;

God who is kind and relentless and fierce and gentle and pure love all at the same time
will never, ever stop pursuing you up to your final breath on this earth

With his never stopping, never ending, always and forever love. Because he is more for you than you are for yourself

On the surface, this story is not that spectacular—there have been hundreds of millions of poor, peasant children born in less than ideal situations

What makes this story spectacular is that this peasant child isn't like any other child, poor or rich, to ever walk this earth.

What makes this story spectacular is that the people who interacted with this child, and then with him as he grew up

Declared that he taught and lived and died and rose again like no one else ever in history

They said that this child wasn't just a mere human being, that somehow in Jesus God himself shoe-horned himself into a human body—the greatest mystery of all of history

And this God-in-the-flesh came and lived among us, taught like no one else, did astounding miracles, was killed and then rose again from the dead

And over the past 2,000 years, the claims made around this child have been the most hotly contested claims about anything for all time

But amidst all the different arguments and disputations, for 2,000 years more people have found life in this peasant child's teachings and in following this man in their personal lives

Than any other movement or philosophy or government or religion ever.

And tonight, all around the world, every hour on the hour, in almost every language, in every country, people will gather tonight and worship and celebrate the coming of this baby: Emmanuel, God with us, the one who has come to rescue us and give us life.

This Christmas eve, enjoy the magic! There's all kinds of beauty and laughter and delights to be had tonight and tomorrow.

But the invitation from the God of the universe to YOU tonight, directly to you as he's brought you here, is to live out of and into this miracle

God has put on flesh to deal with, take away, atone for all our sin, that we might be free to live the way that we were designed to live.

That's the real miracle of Christmas that delivers the love, peace, and joy that we can't seem to find for ourselves and that we were made to live for.

PRAY