



The Comfort of Christmas

John 3:17-18

David Sunday December 20, 2020

“Come, all you unfaithful...” A slight change to one word—just adding that prefix “un”—liberates the message of Christmas from the familiarity that can bring contempt. It brings it down to earth, into the wreckage of our lives—right where it belongs. Someone asked Kate and me what we felt was unique in terms of insights about Advent and Christmas that we were experiencing in 2020. Kate said, “It’s that song, ‘O Come, All You Unfaithful,’ that is speaking to our hearts so powerfully this season.” It’s exactly the song we needed this year; 2020 is not a time for syrupy sentimentality.

About a year ago at this time, we thought we were heading into the roaring ‘20s, a decade of unlimited opportunity and new beginnings. Then an invisible virus showed us how in control of our destinies we really are. The worldwide death toll from COVID-19 is at 1.67 million and counting. Some of us might know someone whose life is hanging in the balance right now. I do. Some of us have suffered painful losses in this year. All of us have had to deal with prolonged frustration. Meanwhile, police shootings, racial injustices and a contentious election have frayed the social fabric of our nation to a degree not felt since at least the 1960s. Unemployment is soaring. Jobs are hard to come by. We’re fed up with our institutions. We’re skittish with one another. We’re not sure we can trust anyone. Then there’s the mental health impact, as our neighbors, friends and families hide the torment of crippling anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation beneath their masks.

It’s for us, in this mess, that the song says:

O come, all you unfaithful
Come, weak and unstable
Come, know you are not alone

O come, barren and waiting ones
Come, weary of praying
See what your God has done

O come, bitter and broken
Come with fears unspoken
Come, taste of His perfect love

Come, guilty and hiding ones
There is no need to run
See what your God has done

Christ is born. Christ is born.
Christ is born for you.
He’s the Lamb who was given
Slain for our pardon
His promise is peace
For those who believe

[From “O Come, All You Unfaithful” by Bob Kauflin and Lisa Clow]

If Christmas is only for the faithful, dare we believe there is any good news for us? Maybe this year we're poised to really hear the message of Christmas. Maybe all the disruptions, divisions and disappointments of 2020 have opened our hearts and made the good news that God brings us in the Christmas message more permeable—the good news of comfort and joy.

After all, what do we mean when we say, “Christ is born”? We mean the Creator, through Whom all things were made, has come down into His creation to know the creation from the inside. We mean God came to us with skin on. C.S. Lewis put it like this:

The eternal Being, Who knows everything and Who created the whole universe became not only a Man, but before that, a Baby, and before that, a fetus inside a woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.

The Gospel of John describes it like this: “*The Word*”—speaking of God the Son Who existed forever, Who made the world and the universe—“*became flesh and dwelt among us.*”— He pitched His tent in our midst—“*We observed his glory*”—we actually saw it—“*the glory as the one and only Son from the Father.*” What was He like? “*Full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). John chooses a word here that describes humanity at its weakest and most vulnerable—a shocking word, almost crude in its connotations. The word is “flesh.”

The Word became flesh. He became humanity at its weakest and most vulnerable. In His humanity, He embraced all our weaknesses and all our woes. He entered this world through His mother's body, He came out of her sticky and wet, with wrinkled skin. He needed to be cradled in her arms, nursed at her breasts, taught how to walk,, speak and read. He fell and skinned His knees. He needed to be comforted.

He knew what it was like to be made fun of. He loved and experienced not being loved in return. He knew rejection. He knew what it was like to be tempted and overcome temptation. He knew what it was like to be hungry and thirsty; to be misunderstood, abused and tortured. Ray Ortlund writes, “God came down in humility and true glory out of love for us, and His love made Him willing to get hurt.”

Do you think this is a God Who can understand what we're going through in our world today? Instead of letting the pandemic and all the trials of 2020 shape your view of Who God is and what God is like, why not let the message of Christmas shape your view of how you think about all the trials of 2020? Instead of letting the frustrations, fears and failures of this year shape your view of God, why not let the message of Christmas shape how you view your fears, failures and frustrations?

Can you hear what God is saying to the world through the gift of His Son? We've been listening these last couple of weeks to the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16. Let's hear it one more time today: *"For God loved the world in this way..."* In other words, this is how God showed His love to the world. Or more traditionally, *"For God so loved the world..."* How did He do it? *"He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."*

This means, contrary to public opinion, God is not out to get us. God does not take delight in inflicting misery on His creatures. He is a Father full of immeasurable love. He doesn't just say that He loves us, He demonstrates His love in the most generous way possible. He gives the most priceless gift He has—His one and only Son—to those who are least deserving of it. A world who ignores Him. A world who prefers to live without Him. But a world He loves too much to leave to its own desserts. That's the best news in the world: John 3:16. After that, what more needs to be said? I mean, couldn't we just end the Bible right here? This is it in a nutshell.

But there is more that needs to be said because inside your heart and inside my heart is this gnawing fear that maybe this time I've blown it too badly. Maybe my condemnation is inevitable; maybe no matter how much good news there is in the Bible, the truth about me is so bad that I'm doomed.

Maybe you've believed in the gospel for many years and you know Jesus came into the world to live the perfect life you've failed to live and to die in your place as a sacrifice for your sins so that you can be forgiven, so that you can have eternal life. Even if you believe that message with all your heart, there are probably times when that nagging fear and unbelief rise up in your heart and cause you to wonder, "What if God is not satisfied with me? What if I've failed one too many times? What if I'm really doomed?"

God wants to banish that fear from your heart this Christmas. He wants you to know He didn't go to all this trouble of sending His Son into the world just to point an accusing finger at you and tell you how bad you are. He sent Jesus so you can know every accusation against you has been answered and the penalty for all your sins has been satisfied. Every trace of guilt has been wiped off the hard drive of your record forever. That's why He sent Jesus. He wants you to be from the dread of condemnation, so that you can shake off your guilty fears and celebrate the good news of the birth of Christ with the joy it deserves.

That's why God doesn't end the gospel at John 3:16. He gives us John 3:17 to assure us. Look at what it says: *"For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world..."* In

other words, He knows what we're thinking. He knows we can hear the good news of verse 16 and still say, "Yeah, but what about me? Yeah, but look at how bad this world is and how bad I am. Can it really be true?" God says, "Oh, yes. Let me underscore this point. I did not send My Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

This is not what we would expect. For God to send His Son into this world at all is amazing; for the Creator to now know His creation from the inside is astonishing. God sent His Son into such a world "where hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will toward men." This is not a world where most people are lamenting over our sin, wishing earnestly the way would be made for us to be saved and struggling unsuccessfully to get free from our bondage and sin. No, this is a world where the popular vote, year after year, results in a landslide against God's rule and government. We don't want Him ruling over us; we want to go our own way.

It was into this world that God sent His Son. God knew how His Son would be received in this world. He knew the world that had stoned His prophets and rejected His messengers throughout the generations is not going to suddenly bow down before the humility and grace of His one and only Son. He knew His Son was going to come into this world that was made through Him, but that this world would not recognize or acknowledge Him. The Father knew His Son would come to His own, but His own people would not receive Him.

God knew He was sending His Son into enemy territory. He knew we would thirst for His blood and not be content until we had beaten, scourged and nailed Him to a cross of wood. God knew all of that about this world. It would be perfectly just for God to have said, "Yes, I'm going to send My Son into this world to put an end to this futile war My people have been fighting against Me all these years. He's going to crush them, condemn them and put this rebellion to rest." But God did not send His Son into the world for this. *"He did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."* Does that sound like good news to you?

What about justice? God is not a God Who can turn a blind eye toward sin. He is holy. Justice must be satisfied. The only people who think all sin should automatically be forgiven are people who think of sin lightly. They have not yet considered what a heavy weight sin is. They're also probably people who've never been deeply sinned against. Once you've experienced injustice, once you've had evil done to you, you become thirsty for justice. You realize that a world without judgment is not good news. A world in which sin remains uncondemned is a war zone of terror. So what about justice?

This is where you need to understand the Father's plan and the Son's mission in coming into this world. Jesus came to satisfy the demands of God's justice. That's what Paul says in Romans 3:25. He says God presented Jesus, His Son, as a sacrifice of atonement, a sacrifice that would cover the guilt and shame of our sins, absorbing the holy wrath of God that was due us for our sins. God presented Jesus to be that sacrifice of atonement so that we could be declared righteous and so that God could demonstrate His justice.

So whenever you see a manger, see looming over that manger the shadow of a cross. The poet John Donne wrote it like this: "His birth and His death were but one continual act, and His Christmas Day and His Good Friday are but the evening and the morning of one and the same day." In other words, Jesus was born into this world in order to die so that we may live. He bore the condemnation our sins demand so that we can be declared not guilty and righteous forever. That's what John says in the very next verse, John 3:18a: "*Anyone who believes in him is not condemned....*" Underline that and let it be God's Christmas message to you today. Anyone who believes in Jesus is not condemned. "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1).

"...[B]ut anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God" (John 3:18b). The only condemnation that remains is for those who reject the light God has brought into this dark world through His Son. What does that mean for you and for me? It means that if John 3:17 is true—that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him—then it means God has no reservations about saving you or me. God's not holding out here, trying to decide whether or not He's going to forgive us, whether or not He really, really wants to rescue us. What a glorious truth!

It doesn't matter how unfaithful you've been, God is not reluctant to forgive you. You don't have to talk Him into this. In fact, God's Word is talking you into this today. He's saying, "I did not send My Son to condemn you, but to save you. I am ready right here, right now, to erase your guilt and give you what I have—eternal life." God says to you right now, "We can be friends. There's not one thing in you that ever needs to come between us again. My love has found a way to satisfy my wrath. Justice has been done, so now amnesty is declared for all who will turn away from their life of relying on self and turn to Jesus, My Son, trusting in Him and treasuring Him."

If you still have doubts whether or not this is the intention of God's heart toward you, just come to Bethlehem and see Him Whose birth the angels sing. See Him lying in a manger

and consider what that manger tells you about the tenderness of God's heart toward a world that has rejected Him.

Listen to this meditation from Martin Luther, as he leads us to the manger:

Behold Christ lying in the lap of His young mother, still a virgin. What can be sweeter than the Babe, what more lovely than the mother!... Look at the Child, knowing nothing. Yet all that is belongs to Him, that your conscience should not fear but take comfort in Him. Doubt nothing... Look upon this Lord of Peace and your spirit will be at peace.

See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a Babe with Whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear Him, for nothing is more appealing to man than a babe. Are you afraid? Then come to Him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maid. You will see how great is the divine goodness which seeks above all that you should not despair.

Trust Him! Trust Him! Here is the Child in Whom is salvation. To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe... Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience and guilt, if you come to judge this gurgling Babe and believe that He is come, not to judge you, but to save.

Christ, the Babe, is born for you. Are you ready to open your heart and enter in to the Father's gift of love?

Would you join me in prayer as we bow before the Lord? First, I want to lead you in prayer if you want to open your heart to God's love for you in Jesus for the first time today. Please join me, praying from your heart, just echoing these words:

"Yes, dear God, I agree with You about who I am. I am one of the unfaithful, weak, unstable and guilty. I've been hiding from You. But You tell me today that Christ is born for me and I want to receive Him. I want Him to be born in me today. Thank You that You are eager to forgive me, not condemn me. Thank You for giving me salvation in Your Son Jesus."

For those of us who have known this good news and have received the gift of God's love in Jesus, please pray with me.

Father, though You go to great lengths to persuade us that Your Son has taken away our guilt and shame, we still harbor fears of condemnation in our hearts. We see that in how harshly and quickly we condemn others. We pray that we would live in the comfort of the truth that You did not send Your Son into the world to point an accusing finger at us. Help us rest and rejoice in Your non-accusing, non-condemning, all-forgiving love and acceptance.

We pray that this is what people would experience from us when we come into their lives. May they not feel we've come into their world to condemn them, but instead to point them to Your love in Jesus Christ. Father, we remember those in our church family who are suffering

today. We pray especially for Your comfort to fill Tony and Beth as they are grieving the death of Tony's father this week. We're grateful that Tony and Beth were able to bear witness to Christ in his father's illness and they can now entrust his dad into Your merciful hands.

We thank You that to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government of the universe is on His shoulders, not on ours. We thank You that we can cast our cares upon Him Who is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. We thank You that since we, Your children, have flesh and blood in common, that Jesus Your Son also shared in our flesh and blood, so that through His death He might destroy the one who holds the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those of us who are held in slavery all our lives by the fear of death.

We also pray for Cindy McFarland as she has recently buried her father. We ask, Lord, that You would comfort her in the gospel hope that she shares so boldly and faithfully with her neighbors. Holy Spirit, please empower Cindy and her church in Dearborn, Michigan, as they seek to make the life that is in Christ known to the Muslim community there.

"We pray now, as we prepare to eat this bread and drink this cup that You would strengthen our faith to feed on Christ, as He makes Himself known to us in these sacred symbols of His body and blood. We want to know Christ more truly and more deeply as we commune with You and confess our faith together with all Your people around the world. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

As we prepare to receive the Lord's Supper this week when we celebrate the wonder of the Incarnation of the Word, the Eternal Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, I'd like us together to confess our faith in a creed that has been spoken by Christians since the earliest years of Christianity: the Nicene Creed. Let's worship God in confessing what Christians believe about Who God is—Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through Him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven; He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried. The third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. He proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified. He spoke through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and to life in the world to come. Amen.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

All Scriptures quoted directly from the Christian Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

Text provided by sermontranscribers.com ♦ emily@sermontranscribers.com