



TIME OF GRACE®

Simply Christmas: Seek. Speak. Think.

Study Notes

Summary

Life slows down after Christmas. The season passes, and the winter blues begin. But not on that first Christmas. The shepherds burst with good news and blurted it out to anyone who would listen. Mary treasured up the truths about her newborn son. People went home glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. What if we did the same?

- **Luke 2:15,16:** ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.
- Christmas is a time to _____.
- **Luke 2:17,18:** ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.
- Christmas is a time to _____.
- **Luke 2:19:** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.
- Christmas is a time to _____.
- **Luke 2:20:** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Points to Ponder

1. What amazes you most about the birth of Jesus? Read Luke 2:1-20 and find three things that cause you to praise God.
2. Agree/Disagree: The number-one obstacle to speaking about Jesus is thinking too little of Jesus.

3. Think about this statement: God was born to save you. What do you discover as you dig into the meaning of that simple truth?

Homework for Next Week

Read 2 Peter 1:3-9.

“The very purpose of Christ’s coming into the world was that he might offer up his life as a sacrifice for the sins of men. He came to die. This is the heart of Christmas.”
—Rev. Billy Graham

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Luke 2: 15-20
December 29, 2019

Pastor Mike Novotny

You know, it was about a year ago that I actually chose the paragraph of Scripture that I planned on speaking on this evening. And so, a few weeks ago when I opened up and I reread that paragraph to see if it's still what I wanted to say, it was crazy because I realized in this little chunk of Scripture, five or six verses, there's something for everyone.

Well, I have to admit that I have a love - hate relationship with Christmas. I really love Christmas as a Christian and a pastor because you are all here. It's like my Christmas present to look out and see zero seats available; to know that I'm speaking with so many people who can't see my face because they're sitting out in the lobby. I've been thinking and praying about all of you for literally months and now to see all of you here from so many backgrounds and so many stories is like the best Christmas gift of all. I mean, looking out at so many faces that I recognize and so many that I met for the first time tonight. I'm looking at people who go to church every single Sunday and some of you who haven't been in a church in a long, long time. I know there's some of you here today who come so often to this place that you have like "your" seat and maybe someone came early and they snatched your Christmas seat and that's messed with your Christmas already. And there's some of you who haven't seen these seats since last Easter or a year ago at Christmas. There's some of you who are absolutely convinced that Christianity is the right thing to believe and there's a whole bunch of you that have questions and doubts and objections to the story. There's some of you who were raised Lutheran, some were raised Catholic, some who were raised Baptist or nondenominational; some who were raised Christians, some were raised Muslim, some who were raised with no religion at all.

And I think about all of you gathered in this one place and this is what I love about Christmas; that we have so many different behaviors and so many different backgrounds, so many different beliefs, but here we are in this one place, in this one moment, and we get to talk about what I think is the most important thing on earth. That's why I love Christmas!

But I also hate Christmas and I hate Christmas because you are all here. Is that an offensive thing to say in church? "Hate" is probably the wrong word to pick but you should know that you make this really, really hard for me because here you are, you have so many different stories and backgrounds, and I really want this moment to be something more than just checking the church box. Like, I don't want to just get through the next few minutes, send you back to your cars, and have you go back to life as normal. I want this to be meaningful to each of you no matter what your story. Like, I want to say something so interesting and intriguing that you think about it tonight as you're opening gifts or next week when you go back to work. But then thankfully, thankfully, the Bible bailed me out. You know, it was about a year ago that I actually chose the paragraph of Scripture that I planned on speaking on this evening. And so a few weeks ago, when I opened up and reread that paragraph to see if it's still what I wanted to say, it was crazy because I realized in this little chunk of Scripture, five or six verses, there's something for

everyone. Like if you're not so sure about Jesus and you probably don't plan on coming next Sunday to worship Him here at this church, there's something for you. If you have kind of questions and doubts or maybe you do your own spiritual thing but you don't connect to a spiritual community, there's something here for you. If you've been worshipping and celebrating Jesus for decades and decades, this is like your seventieth rodeo on Christmas Eve, there's something here for you. If you're someone who's kind of new and you're really intrigued and interested in Jesus but you really don't know much about him and you don't know what to say to your closest family members and friends, there's something here for you.

And so, I realized this was God's gift to me at Christmas to re-gift to you. Just to work through these five or six passages and see if there isn't a word powerful enough to help you, bless you, and change you when you walk out those doors. So let me take you back 2,000 years to when that paragraph happened in history. The story that many of us have heard many times, Caesar Augustus issues this decree, and it sends Mary and Joseph back to their hometown of Bethlehem and the time comes for their baby to be born and they name him Jesus. And there's shepherds watching their sheep and God sends a messenger, an angel, and he says, "Don't be afraid; this is good news from God that will cause great joy for all the people. A Savior has been born to you." And then a whole bunch of angels show up, like an army marching from heaven, to prove that here is Jesus and he's come to fight for us, to get us back, to rescue us from embarrassment, sin, shame, guilt, and hell itself. And that's where we pick up the story today in Luke 2. Here's what it says: "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in a manger."

If you're not really a church person, you're not so convinced of Christianity, the shepherds are your guys. These are blue collar, third shift, bearded men, callouses on their hands, who spent their weekends outside at work and not indoors at a church. And if the rumors from the rabbis were true, the shepherds were not the most sanctified people on planet earth. They had a reputation for lying, for sinning, for cheating. They're the kind of people that if they walked into a synagogue, they might expect it to burn down. And yet, here they are hearing something incredible. You know, they had a past, they had a story, they had a history, but now the angel comes to them with this incredible news that someone has been born and not just a someone, but a savior, a rescuer, a deliverer, a king, a warrior, a messiah, the one that God himself chose to save them from their sins and so I love their reaction. The angels disappear like a light switch and the shepherd's eyes are as big as Christmas ornaments and they look at one another and what do they say? "Let's go!" Like if this is even halfway true, if right over there in Bethlehem our Savior has been born, let's go! And I love the verb that Luke chooses. He says, "So they hurried off," like they didn't wait. In that moment, they went. There's no coffee break, there was no smoke break, they didn't even hit the brakes; they just sped off 100 miles an hour to see could it possibly be true?

They sought Jesus. If you're taking notes in your program today, that's a word I really want you to remember; that Christmas is a time to seek. It's a time when you take a step in Jesus' direction, to see if this good news of great joy could possibly be true for you. And as I look out at all of you, I wonder if that isn't God's word for you this Christmas; to seek. Maybe like the shepherds, you have a story, a history; maybe it's been a long time since you've been in a church.

But God, today, is nudging you to hurry off, to take a step, and to seek him, to see if this couldn't possibly be true. And I love the shepherds because God didn't make them jump through a lot of hoops, they didn't pass a lot of moral tests; he just gave them a sign. He said right there in Bethlehem, you are going to find the most amazing child in the world.

I was thinking - can you imagine if one of the shepherds didn't go? I mean, if he was like a hundred yards from possibly seeing the Savior of his soul and he if he just said, "Shepherds, you know guys, you go ahead. I'm going to stay here with the sheep." And they're like, "Ah, Bob? Are you sure? What are you going to do?" "I'm going to stare at sheep for a while." Like are you sure, Bob? You don't want to go? It's right over there." And he says, "No, you guys go ahead." Like can you imagine? Like even if it was totally made up, even if it was a rumor, if he was this close to finding something incredible, wouldn't it be worth exploring? And that's my question for you. Maybe Christians are all wrong; maybe Jesus isn't that special. Maybe he isn't worth worshipping but if it's even halfway true, that God came into the world to seek you and to find you, to forgive you and to save you, wouldn't that be worth taking a step and seeking him?

And therefore, I want to make you a special Christmas offer today: One hour, one drink, and all Jesus. Like if you're not sure about all this and you're not going to go home and like order your entire life around Jesus, like he is the sun and everything revolves around him, if you're not at that place of faith just yet, here's my offer. One hour, one drink, and all Jesus. You check that little box that says "talking to a pastor," I'll connect with you, we'll spend one hour, I will buy you one drink - one coffee, one diet coke, one beer, one scotch, as long as it's not really expensive, right? I'll pay for the drink and we're going to talk about one thing: Just Jesus. Like never mind religion, let's not worry about church. You might have a story about a pastor or a priest or a parent or some Christian you met. Like let's just get past that and talk about Jesus and you don't have to believe what I say and you don't have to give a dime and you don't have to join the church. I just want you to know, while we have this chance, who Jesus really is. I want you to know why for 2,000 years people have been gathering in places like this to worship him and to give up everything to follow him. I want you to know the real story about Jesus. So let me challenge you: Take a step, like a shepherd seek him. And what's the worst that can happen? I stare at you awkwardly for an hour? That'd be a funny story to tell your friends, wouldn't it? But what's the best thing that could happen? You find Jesus and he changes the rest of your eternity! So seek.

That's not the only word that God has for us today. For some of you, the gift of God is to seek but for others, it might be something else. Let's go back to Luke 2. We find these words: "When the shepherds had seen Jesus, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

Now whenever I read the Bible as a Christian, I always love to find the verbs. Sometimes I'll just write the verbs before a sermon to see like what's the action and the flow of the story and I love the verbs from these verses. They had seen and they spread what had been told and all who heard were amazed at what the shepherds said. I don't want to dis the Silent Night song because we're going to sing that before the end of church but do you think it actually was a silent night? Based on those verbs, if you had to pick a decibel level, would it be completely quiet? Like, I don't think so. I think the shepherds hurried off and they were huffing and puffing and they

finally walked into the place where Jesus was and when they saw him they flipped. Like they said, "Ahh! It's him! Bob! Bob!" Like, "You've got to get over here. It's true!" And Mary, who has her little baby is like, "Shh, keep it down," and so they do that quiet, kind of whisper thing like, "Is this the one? Is this the baby?" and she says, "Yes, it is." And they say, "Ahh! That's seriously the Savior of the world? We get to see him!" and they flip out and Mary kicks them out like a loud kid in church and they're so excited, like they're amazed, they're so amazed, and they can't help but speak because they've seen something amazing.

And maybe that's a gift for some of you; that Christmas isn't just the time to seek but our next fill in the blank, it's the time to speak. It's time to realize how incredible Jesus is and to open your mouth and to tell the people that you know. This is actually what gets me grouchy when I see nativity sets - I'm not sure if you know this about pastors but we get kind of like our holy undies in a bundle whenever we see a nativity set because it's rarely biblically accurate. Have you heard this before? Like everyone puts little wise men right next to the manger, coming in with their gifts, but the Bible says they actually came to the house of Mary and Joseph. It's probably a year down the road so pastors get all grouchy about that. But that's not my real problem with nativity sets. My real issue is the expression on everyone's face. You ever seen a nativity set where people are that happy? I mean, this is good news of great joy. The shepherds are glorifying and praising and do you ever see that on their faces when you drive by the little blowup scene? I don't. I was at Menard's the other day and I saw this nativity set and I had to take a picture to show it to you. I mean, we're going to cut Mary some slack because she just pushed the baby out of her body but Joseph, I mean, come on. And poor Jesus down there is like, "I'm the Savior of the world," and Joseph is totally bored like, "No, no, no." That's not at all the classic story; the story is filled with emotion, with joy, with expression, with rejoicing, glorifying, the shepherds saw something amazing and they had to speak.

And if you're a Christian, I want to remind you of the same thing. I bet in the next 48 hours, someone will throw you a softball to talk about Jesus. They're going to ask you how Christmas went and what you did. And you were here. They're going to ask you what the best part was or what's the greatest gift that you got and it will be so, so easy to speak but you know what some of you are going to do? You're going to freak out. You're going to be so worried about like how people react and will it be too much and will I say the wrong words, do I know the right answers to their questions, but that's why I love the shepherds. Did the shepherds study theology? No. Did they have baggage and sins they need to fix? Absolutely. Had they read most of the Bible? Probably not. But they saw something amazing and so they had to speak. And if you keep your eyes fixed on what makes this faith so amazing, your mouth will speak too.

A couple months ago, my family got to take a really incredible vacation. We ended up visiting this little mission church on the coast of Mexico and some people at the church hooked us up with this little snorkeling company and so we all got our gear on, we got in the boat, it was a windy day, kind of choppy waters. We jump in the water, we can't see much, and then we put our faces beneath the waves. Whoa. Like right below us, like seven feet away, is this sea turtle with a shell like this. And he's chomping down on his lunch on the floor and then he swims up, like right past us. And then our guide points in another direction and we turn our heads and there's this massive eagle ray. His wingspan is bigger than my wingspan; jet black with these big white spots. He was so close I could have reached out and touched him. But I didn't because I

wasn't sure if it would kill me. This huge thing! And then this baby turtle, cutest thing in the world, like straight out of Nemo. Like he swims past my youngest daughter and I grab her hand and we chase it and we're flipping after him with his little fins and we get so close and I touch his shell and he jets off in the water. And our whole family, we get up above the waves, and we climb back into the boat and do you know what we did? We spoke. We could not shut up. Like we were talking over each other, interrupting each other, because we had seen something amazing and when you see something that good, you have to speak.

I hope if you've been a Christian for a long time that you still think the birth of Jesus is amazing because it is. Like I just told you a story of a sea turtle but today, we get to celebrate the birth of a Savior. I mean, it was incredible, right, to have like a one hour experience? But because of Jesus, you have everlasting acceptance from God. I saw like this little slice of God's creation but in Bethlehem, we see the Creator himself entering into our story, to your story. That at Christmas, God showed up not to condemn you, not to correct you, not to judge you, but to forgive you. That Jesus came in flesh and blood so he could shed that blood on a cross so that God could cleanse you. He could so entirely forgive you that when he looks at you, like he sees nothing wrong and everything right. That's amazing! And that God would give all of this salvation and forgiveness to you as a gift; you don't have to get better first to receive it. That you don't have to fix yourself. Instead, God says whoever you are and whatever your story, this is what I've done for you. Trust in Jesus and eternal life is yours. It's amazing! I bet in the next day, if you get an amazing gift, you will tell people about it. You won't be concerned if they like it or not; it will be so good you'll have to speak and I want you to remember that Jesus is amazing.

Which brings us to our final word today. For some of you, the word is "seek," for some of you it's "speak," and for others of you it's what happened to Mary in Luke 2. "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Any introverts in church today? Show of hands nice and high. I'll trust that you're here. Any extroverts in the house today? Yeah, there you are. Thank you for not breaking out in a dance in the middle of the church: "We're here!" If you're an introvert, Mary's your girl in the story, right? I mean, the shepherds are screaming, they're jumping, they're rejoicing, and here's quiet Mary soaking it all in. I love the verbs: She treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Yep, treasure is like to look at it and then to ponder is to remember it. It's like Mary's snapping as many pictures as she can, like the mom behind the camera, and then she's going home and just looking at them again and pondering what they mean. She's making a scrapbook of the whole year: When the angels spoke to her. And then she was with child. And then the baby came. And then the shepherds came to worship him. And she leaves this scrapbook right in her kitchen so she can think about just how incredible this Jesus is.

What's Mary doing? That's our last blank today if you're taking notes; that Christmas is a time to think, to think really deeply, about what all this means. And that's what I want you to do today. No matter what your background and what your story, I just want you to think deeply about what Christmas is and why we celebrate it. Maybe you can do what Mr. Sakichi Toyota used to do. Sakichi was the father of the man who founded the car company you probably heard of but he in himself was an incredible businessman and he had a way of thinking, of processing through problems, and getting to really good solutions. It's what some business leaders now call the five

why's of Sakichi Toyota. He would ask why, why, why, why and why and at the end of five, he normally got to the root of the problem and found a really good solution. And I think that's an awesome practice for us this Christmas. Let's try to think for a second. Why was Jesus born? Well, to save us from our sins. Well, why do we need to be saved from our sins? Well, because sin can separate you from God. Well, what's so bad about being separated from God? Well, you don't get to make it to heaven. Why's it so bad if you miss out on heaven? Because there's never any pain or suffering in heaven. Well, why is there no pain or suffering in heaven? Because God is there.

That's what Christmas is about. It's not about the trees and the gifts and the candles and the funny Christmas sweaters. The meaning of Christmas is that you could end up in the place where God is. And even if the next 50 years on this earth are difficult and they're filled with pain and confusion and questions, when all of it is over, forever and ever and ever, you will be with God. And there will be no crying, no mourning, no grief, and no pain. That there will be no questions, no confusions, and no frustration. Instead, you will smile and you will rejoice and you will be glad. All the best things of this life will seem like nothing once you look into the face of God. And do you know why you can? Because the face of God appeared on earth. That Jesus came into this world on a mission to get you back for God. Now, think about that!

Actually, let me help you think about that. I'm going to invite Jonathon up, our worship director, and in just a second, I'm going to put four pictures on the screen behind me; pictures that tell of the birth and life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus. The things he did for you when he came in the flesh to be your substitute and your Savior. And over each picture, I've chosen a passage and I'm going to leave you just a minute to quit the Christmas craziness and to take just one deep breath and to think deeply about what all this means. Why are we here? Why do we celebrate? Why do we love Jesus this much? So would you join me in taking one, big, deep breath? Now let's take time to think.

It's so good to think. Salvation from your sins, a Savior who can help you when you're being tempted, freedom from the fear of death and a living hope because of the great mercy of God. And that's my gift to you: To seek him. If you're not convinced Jesus is the best thing in all of the universe, in all of history, take a step, check it out, seek him. If you're going to see people who don't know that Jesus is the best thing that has ever been, remember how amazing he is and speak of him. And whatever your story, just stop for a minute, take a deep breath in the next day, and just think. God came to be with you. Immanuel.

If you do that, you might end up like these guys. "The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." My favorite word in that verse is "returned." They didn't quit their jobs, they didn't hang out with Mary and Joseph; they just went back. The same fields, the same flocks, the same lives except they were not the same. And I hope you aren't either. You're going to walk out those same doors in just a minute, go back to the same cars, the same homes, the same jobs, the same schools but I hope and I pray and I beg God that you are not the same. That in Jesus you find all the hope and all the grace and all the forgiveness and all the meaning and all the purpose and all the life that your heart needs to be happy. Brothers and sisters, the Savior has come into the world and so we rejoice. Think about that and you'll have a merry Christmas.

Let's pray.

Jesus, we love you. I'm so grateful that you came into the world not to give us advice but to give us forgiveness. That we don't have to try to convince our own hearts and minds that we're good enough to be accepted by you. Instead, you have made us perfect and that is good enough. I thank you, Jesus, that you gave up the riches of heaven and you were born in a poor stable, just a manger, so that those of us who are poor in spirit might have riches in the kingdom of God. I pray for everyone who is here today, God, everyone who watches this, listens to this message today and in the days and years to come. I pray that they would find in Jesus everything they need to have a hope, to rest in peace, and to rejoice. Thank you, God, for being great and open our eyes to realize how great you are. We pray all these things in the name of our Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, Amen.