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Advent 4 – Matthew 1:18-25 – The True Meaning of Christmas

12/14-18/22 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

If you listen to the radio or watch any TV around this time of year, you're bound to hear all about the true meaning of Christmas. Well, not the *actual* true meaning of Christmas of course, but you hear that phrase thrown around a lot anyway. So how many different true meanings of Christmas have you heard so far this season? I've heard things like, the true meaning of Christmas is to love each other. The true meaning of Christmas is to be generous to kids and those less fortunate than you. And my personal favorite, the true meaning of Christmas is to *just believe!*

But by the grace of God, we know what *the* true meaning of Christmas actually is. All those things are good, but none of them mean anything apart from the birth of Jesus Christ into this world. We love each other because he first loved us. We're generous to the young and the old and to those less fortunate than us and everyone else because that's how God was with us, by sending us a Savior from sin that none of us deserved. And we *just believe* because we trust that our eternal salvation rides 100% on Christ alone. Apart from Jesus Christ, there would be no Christmas; apart from Jesus Christ there would be no joy to the world, no peace on earth, no goodwill toward men; and apart from Jesus Christ there could never be salvation for sinners like us.

And that's a story that goes much further back than Christmas itself, of course. See, when God first created this world, he created it flawless, sinless, intending that he and his people would live together in perfect peace and harmony for all eternity. But then one of his angels – Satan – decided he didn't want to live under God's power and kingdom anymore, and he didn't want humanity to have to, either. So Satan rebelled against God and convinced us to as well. That rebellion against God is called sin, and that's what the devil used to turn our peace and harmony into suffering and disaster, pain and heartache, doubt and distrust – the kind of doubt and distrust that very nearly shipwrecked Joseph and Mary's marriage before it really even got going – and finally, the devil turned our life of harmony into the discord of death.

And that's a shadow that still hangs over every one of us even today. See, Satan managed to convince Adam and Eve to take that forbidden fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden, and he hasn't stopped trying to do the same to you, too. So what's the forbidden fruit that you just can't stay away from? Maybe alcohol or drugs, maybe pornography or sex outside marriage, maybe bad eating habits or not taking care of yourself, maybe stealing, gossiping, dirty language, talking bad about the people around you, talking down to your spouse or children, or disrespecting people in authority, the president, or the police. Whatever it is, we all have one – probably more than one. And make no mistake about it, in God's book, the wages of sin is death – death in this world, and death forever in hell.

But here as we approach another celebration of our Lord's birth at Christmas, we're not focusing on what we deserve because of what we've done. No, our hopes are focused squarely on what we receive as a gift of God's grace because of what Jesus has done for us, because that's what Christmas is really all about. Into the darkness of sin and death, there came a gift of life and light. It was the one that had been promised for ages past, even all the way back in that Garden of Eden, when God vowed that he would fight for his people, that he would never leave us to die; and when he told Satan that he may have won the battle, but he would never win the war – "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*"

And that's what makes Christmas so amazing, friends, because at Christmas God began to make good on his Gospel promises in the most wonderful of ways. In fact you might say that Christmas is the most amazing thing that this world has ever seen, because of how truly meaningful it is. I mean, take what Matthew says about Jesus' birth: "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us.'*" We call Jesus Immanuel because he is God made flesh, God who came down to earth to be one of us so that he could know us and be like us, so that he could share our burdens and walk in our shoes, and so that he could redeem us from the devil and everything he did to try to hurt us and ruin our lives and eternities. I mean, who could ever imagine almighty,

all-glorious God leaving his throne in heaven to lower himself to identify with his creatures who only rebelled against him and hated him? We owed him everything and he owed us nothing except eternal punishment and condemnation, but instead he gave us everything – all his gifts of goodness and grace – and he required of us nothing. Jesus came down to us because that’s what he had to do in order to bring us back up to heaven with him.

So you remember how we said before that by our nature and by what we have done and left undone, we were sinners and rebels against God who deserved his punishment both now and in eternity? Well for Jesus’ sake, we aren’t anymore. Because Jesus Christ came to fight and conquer the devil and all the forces of evil for us, we’re on his side again and he’s won the victory for us. We’re not God’s enemies anymore – we’re his children now. We’re not at war anymore, not in turmoil anymore – we’re at peace with God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And so that means we’re not headed for hell anymore, either. We’re on the path to heaven now, because *that* is our true home. And that gives us a special, spiritual peace and joy that can only come as gifts from God and that can never be taken away from us, no matter what happens to us or around us now. I mean really, who could imagine that God’s love for us was so great that he would sacrifice his own power and glory and even his very self to save us? *Who could ever imagine that?* Our God could, because that’s exactly what our gracious God has done for us now – and that’s why Christmas is so truly meaningful to us.

Christmas means so much for us because of what the angel said to Joseph, “[*Mary*] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name *Jesus*, because he will save his people from their sins.” Jesus came into this world for one purpose, and it’s what his name means: salvation. Jesus was true God and true man in one person so that he could be our substitute, so that he could be our sacrifice, and ultimately therefore so that he could be our Savior.

See, by his perfect life as our substitute, Jesus kept God’s Law flawlessly for us – because we haven’t and couldn’t – and he gave us the credit for it, so that now when God looks at us he sees those perfect, holy, loving companions that he always meant for us to be.

And by his sacrificial death on the cross for our sake, Jesus paid for all your sins and he took them away forever; he defeated and destroyed death and the devil, he slammed shut the doors to hell and threw open the doors to heaven, and he promises you now that whoever believes in him shall never perish but shall have eternal life with him there in Paradise forever.

You know, about four months from now, we are going to celebrate the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Without Christmas, though, neither of those events ever happens and we’re still lost in our sins. The reason Christmas is so truly meaningful is because it points forward to the cross and the empty tomb – it’s the first step toward our sins being paid for in full and our eternal life in heaven being guaranteed! Christmas got the ball rolling on our salvation. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is the down payment on what’s still to come for us. This is how we know that God really is serious about His love for us, how much he wants all of us to be saved, and how far he was willing to go for us to make it happen. He wasn’t willing to let us die in our sins, so he himself came to save us – to conquer sin, death, and the devil for us, and to bring peace, hope, and joy to a world full of darkness and despair. My friends, because Jesus Christ came for you, know that your sins are forgiven, salvation is yours now and in eternity, the doors to heaven are standing open for you, and your Savior is waiting there for you with open arms.

So that means that now and always, God’s people know the true meaning of Christmas. It’s not just about our love for others, it’s “For *God* so loved the world...” It’s not just that we should give generously toward others, it’s “that *he* gave his one and only Son...” and it’s not that we should *just believe*, it’s “that whoever believes *in him* shall not perish but have eternal life.” God bless you all this Christmas season as you marvel at our God who loved us enough to sacrifice his own life in order to save ours for eternal life in heaven with him forever. Amen.