

When Christmas Crashes Into Our World

1. Warm up: Not all Christmas memories are happy ones. Jeff shared two bad Christmas memories about crashing into trees. What's a not-so-good Christmas memory of yours?
2. The Biblical Christmas story is a curious mixture of both glory and grit – good and bad. Yet the grit of the Christmas story is where we discover some of its most powerful and poignant lessons. So on Sunday we focused on an often-overlooked critical lesson embedded in the grit of the most familiar part of the Christmas story. Let's read that part of the story together again, Luke 2:1-18 as printed on p. 3, then go on to read the quote that follows from New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias.
 - a. In Old Testament times shepherds were held in high esteem, so much so that God was compared to a shepherd (Psalm 23). But by the first century AD, the reputation of shepherds had taken a nosedive. As global population grew denser and raising crops became a principal occupation, shepherds and their nomadic flocks became a public nuisance. Shepherds were regarded as “sinners” because: (a) they allowed their sheep to roam and trample crops (in a world where fences were rare); (b) they often came in contact with dead animals, making them ritually unclean; and (c) living in the fields made it impossible for them to observe all the religious niceties religious leaders had come to expect of “good religious people.” Shepherds became a despised group of people. Who are the “shepherds” in our culture today, i.e., categories of people that others love to despise?
 - b. If you were born into a first century family of shepherds, that meant you too were destined to become a shepherd because upward mobility was rare in ancient culture. Imagine growing up knowing you were born to be a shepherd, while also hearing that shepherds were “unclean abominations” in the eyes of God. How might that affect how you felt about life, God, and yourself?
 - c. When it came time to announce the birth of Jesus, God could have told the angels to share the good news with priests in Jerusalem, or Roman governors overseeing the region of Israel, or theologians, i.e., scribes, who could help people connect all the dots and recognize how baby Jesus fulfilled all the Messianic prophecies. Instead God sent the angels to shepherds. Why? What's the significance of that?
 - d. When the angel of the Lord first appeared to the shepherds, we're told they were terrified. Why do you suppose they were terrified? Have you ever felt terrified of God? If so, why?
 - e. When the angel told the shepherds that he was actually there to “bring you good news for all people,” how do you imagine the shepherds felt?
 - f. What do you think God is trying to teach us in this important part of the Christmas story? And how does that make you feel?

3. From the story of the shepherds, Jeff suggested we can draw a critical lesson, namely: **Nothing can ever separate any of us from the love of God.** This great promise is explicitly stated later in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul when he said, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38.
 - a. What does it mean to say that “life” cannot separate us from the love of God?
 - b. What does it mean to say that nothing in the “present” and nothing yet “to come” can separate us from the love of God?
 - c. What does it mean to say that no “height” or “depth” can separate us from the love of God?
 - d. What does it mean to say that nothing “in all creation” can separate us from the love of God?
 - e. Jeff shared the true story of a boy blinded in a chemical explosion whose father insisted he still install storm windows after being blinded. In the process, the boy discovered his power again – and later found out his father had been near him the whole time hoping, praying, and ready to catch him if he fell. What does that story teach us about what it means to say that God’s love is always with us?
 - f. When in your life have you felt most Godforsaken? In retrospect, were you?
4. Even when we go astray and mess up our lives, God’s love still “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things . . . , [and] never fails.” I Corinthians 13:4. Jeff told how his mother still loved him desperately even when he got hurt while deliberately trying to create a car crash. When he was bleeding and battered, Jeff said, “I remember how my Mom held me – so tight it was like she couldn’t go on living if anything happened to me, even though I had just been trying to do something really bad.” What does that story, coupled with I Corinthians 13:4, teach us about the love of God?
5. Two key scripture passages – I Peter 3:18 – 4:6, and Ephesians 4:8-10 – indicate that after his death on the cross, Jesus descended into hell, made proclamation to those imprisoned there, and offered them a second chance, which many accepted. Jeff suggested that means that even hell itself cannot separate us from God’s love and that God won’t give up until eventually everybody in hell repents and comes home to God. Many Christians consider that viewpoint to be heresy. What do you think? Does God’s love end when people land in hell? Why or why not?
6. Jeff asked, “If God’s love never gives up on anybody, shouldn’t that also be true of we who claim to follow God – that we too never give up on anybody?” In this Christmas season, who most needs you to love them as God does? Tell us a bit about that person and their situation. What would it look like for you to share God’s love with them?

Luke 2:1-18

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace, goodwill among people!"

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*

“[The term ‘sinner’] was not only a fairly general designation for those who notoriously failed to observe the commandments of God . . . , but also a specific term for those engaged in despised trades. We have lists [from the first century] in which proscribed trades are collected. These are . . . trades which were generally thought to lead to immorality, but above all those which by experience led to dishonesty. [This] included gamblers, usurers, tax collectors . . . , and herdsmen. Herdsmen were suspected of leading their herds on to other people’s land and pilfering the produce [for their] herd.”