

“As Personal As It Gets”

Dear friends, greetings (once again) as we gather to celebrate an event that changed the course of our world forever. We wouldn't be here tonight, were it not for what happened on that first Christmas. You wouldn't be here tonight, were it not for what God has done for us in his Son. This night is as personal as it gets.

Did you know there are more personal messages sent during the Christmas season than any other time of the year? According to the U. S. Postal Service, more than 2.1 billion cards are sent during the month of December alone. There's something about Christmas that encourages people to stay in touch. There's something about the Christmas season that causes us to think in more personal ways about each other (and about God) than any other time.

One little boy decided to write a (personal letter) to God. He said, “Dear God, I've been a really good boy this year...” And then he (stopped writing) because he knew that wasn't always true.

He started again. (He said), “Dear God, I know I haven't always done everything I should have, but I've really tried to do my best...” That didn't sound right either, so he threw it away.

By now, he was getting frustrated. Then he noticed (on the mantel) a manger scene, with a beautiful hand-carved image of Mary, the mother of Jesus...and it gave him an idea.

He ran out of the room, came back with a towel and a shoebox, wrapped Mary in the towel, placed her in the shoebox, and then put the shoebox in the closet. Then he sat down again and began to write. This time (he said), “Dear God, if you ever want to see your mother again.”

Knowing what to say (to God) isn't always easy. Knowing what to say to (each other) isn't always so clear. But when God says something (to us), he wants it to be clear, and he wants it to be personal, and that's exactly what happened when God sent Jesus into our world.

The Bible says, “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.”

The Christmas message is as personal as it gets. There's nothing more personal than what God has done for us in Christ. And it's personal for four basic reasons, and that's what I want us to think about tonight. Let's take them one at a time.

Christmas is personal (#1), because it's a message designed to connect...a message designed to connect. Do you know what's so fascinating about our world today? (All kinds of things.) We live in world today where there's more information at our fingertips than there was information available less than a generation prior.

When I was growing up, my wife (Mary) and I were having kids, it was nothing like it is today. When we needed to know something (find out whatever), we pulled out our encyclopedias and looked it up.

For some of you here tonight, if don't know what those are, look it up on your phone and you'll see them. You needed an entire bookshelf to have it all. Now, you just google it and there it is. It's fascinating how much more (there is) and that we now know.

What's also fascinating is that with this advance in technology, ability to find and access more information is the fact that we now have more access to more relationships (with more people) than has ever before been possible.

When I was a kid, my friends were the kids who lived next door or down the street. We went to the same school or (the same church) and those were the friends we had. Everyone else was (everyone else) and they were there, but they weren't your friends.

Today, you can have friends on the other side of the world. You can have relationships with people (today) who live in places where you've never been and whom you've never met. The whole definition of “friends” needs to be redefined from (the days) when your friends were actually friends.

Do you know what else is fascinating, almost frightening? In this world where there's more information available (and accessible) than ever before, and where it's now possible to have more friends in more places, and have more contact with them (and fast) than we've (ever before) seen, there's also a growing number of

people in our world, individuals in this connected and friend-filled society, who are feeling less-connected and more de-friended than ever before.

Recent studies have shown that (for many) there's more anxiety over losing a phone than there is over losing a friend. For many, their best friend has become their phone. And their phones are the main and the primary connection they have with their best friends.

Not surprising that some of the (same studies) have also shown that there's a longing in our society (like never before) for connections and communities that actually care for each other. In this increasingly more-connected-than-ever world, there's a longing for more connections that really count.

Now, don't mishear (any of) what we're saying. I'm not going after phones (or friends) or technology in any way. I have one myself. I have many myself. And technology is a gift...for all of us. But there's an impersonal aspect (to all of this) that we dare not miss. There's a not-so-connected element to all of this that can keep us not-so-connected if we're not careful.

On that first Christmas, God was careful in making the connection he did when he sent his Son into our world. And God was personal (in doing it), because he was doing it in the person of Jesus Christ. He was connecting with us, so we could connect with him. He was becoming a person (with us), so we could begin to see him (and know him) in a personal way.

I came across a story of a woman who had a hard time relating to Christmas. In and out of church all her life, but (for some reason) it never sank in, it wasn't real...until it began to happen.

She was a single mother, working as a nurse, trying to make ends meet. Her husband had left her (the year before) with a nine-year-old son and six-year-old twin girls. Her dad had just been moved to a convalescent home, and she wanted to go visit him, didn't have the time or the money. (But she certainly felt the guilt.)

The next day at work (the Sunday before Christmas) was a total disaster. She had a confrontation with another nurse, lost her composure with one of the attendants, and then one of her favorite patients passed away. (And that's when it began to happen.) She went home that night, picked up her kids and they went to church. It was the annual Sunday school program.

Now, there was nothing out-of-the-ordinary about the program: the usual shepherds in make-shift robes, a manger, Mary and Joseph, and the baby. But there was something about the baby that was different, because this year, it wasn't just a doll, but an actual baby. And the actual baby in the program was doing its actual baby-thing.

It started out unnoticed, almost comical. At first, it raised its hand and started pulling at Mary's nose. Then it started to squirm, and soon it began to cry; and not a gentle cry, but an all-out scream. At that point, no one could hear the boy reading at the podium. Hardly anyone was watching when (the wise men) walked in. Finally, one of the teachers ran in from the side, carried the baby off-stage, just as the congregation was beginning to sing "Silent Night."

And that's when it hit. (For some reason, it had never sunk in!) But that night it did. (It had never seemed real!) But all of a sudden it was! Because it wasn't just a story! It was a real baby. God came into this world. Jesus was one of us. And for the first time in her life, she began to understand.

"Like father, like son." Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." (That's what was happening on that first Christmas.) God became human, so he could relate to us. God took on our flesh, so we could relate to him.

It's a personal message at Christmas...as personal as it gets, because it's a message designed to connect. It's (also) a message we need to hear.

I don't know about you, but there are a lot of messages I don't want to hear, don't need to hear. I started thinking the other day about all the different messages there are: email, the telephone, answering machines, newspapers, magazines; there's voice mail, text-messaging, instagram. Thankfully, we don't have to listen to all of them. Not every message (you receive) is something you want to hear.

But the message God sends at Christmas is one you need to hear. (Remember what the angel said?) He said, "Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." A Savior who is Christ the Lord!

Now, maybe you're thinking, "Why do I need a Savior? Why do I need someone in my life who can save?" I'll tell you why: because your life doesn't measure up to what (God requires) and neither does mine.

My life doesn't even (come close) to what God asks...and it never will. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," every one of us.

Now, our world (today) doesn't want to hear that, but it's true. Our world today (is in denial) of its deepest needs, but denying the truth doesn't make the truth any less real. In fact, I'm starting to think we're getting it all turned around, even in the church. This whole idea: God loves us and he cares about us and he accepts us as we are?

I'll never forget the magic set one of my buddies got for Christmas when we were kids. We used to spend hours with that magic set. You could do tricks with cards. You could swallow fire and not get hurt. You could make a flower appear and then disappear. (I tried it on my older brother.) It didn't work.

Do you know how it works? It's called deception. It's called distraction. You know what deception is? It's getting you to think or to believe that something is true when it isn't. You know what distraction is? It's getting you to look somewhere else. Over here, when the real thing's happening over here. If you want to play a trick (on someone), you need to either deceive or distract.

Now, let me tell you something. Satan is a master deceiver. He wants us to believe or to think something is true when it isn't. "I don't need a Savior in my life. I don't need someone else to pay the price for my sins. I'm living a good life. I'm doing my best. Why do I need a Savior? Why do I need someone to take my place?"

Do you know what? You've been deceived. You've been distracted. You think you can find forgiveness over here, but the only place you can find it is over here...on a cross, in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In 2018, we lost one of the most influential Christian leaders our world has ever known. Six decades on television, "crusades" from 1947 until his retirement in 2005, a spiritual advisor to 12 different presidents, without question, Billy Graham was one of the greatest Christian evangelists who ever lived. He saw more changes (in his 99 years), preached to more people than most of us will ever see or know.

Do you know what he said about the problems we face in life? Do you know what he identified as the single-most (basic problem) we have? He said our basic problem is not a race problem. It's not a war problem. It's not a poverty problem. It's not an immigration problem. Our basic problem is a heart problem. It's a sin problem. It's a problem only God can fix.

Do you know how much God loves you? Do you know how much your life matters to him? He gave his only Son, (sent him to the cross), and he sent him to the cross because he didn't want to lose you.

Paul says, "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law."

A God who loves you? (Absolutely!) A God who cares about what's happening in your life? (More than you'll ever know!) But a God who accepts you as you are?

My friends, Jesus didn't come to accept you. If you were acceptable, he wouldn't have had to come. He came to save you. He came to die for you. He came to give his life so that you could have yours.

Christmas is as personal as it gets. It doesn't get any more personal. It's a message designed to connect. It's a message we need to hear. And it's a message that makes a difference.

The Bible says, "Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly." It says that what happened at Christmas can make a difference. Jesus didn't come to take away your life. He came to make it better, give you something you wouldn't otherwise have.

I was reading a while back. Do you know what it's called when the sun goes down? You're walking along the beach and you watch the sun go down. (Do you know what it's called?) Sure you do. It's called a sunset. You stand there (at night) and you watch the sun set.

The truth is (and most of us know this) the sun doesn't actually set. It doesn't go anywhere. It's the earth that's moving. If we want to be technically correct, we'd call it an earth set. But that doesn't have the same romantic feeling. I'd vote for leaving it as it is.

Well, actually, the American Scientific Association took a survey and found that 21% of those surveyed thought the sun actually did set, orbited around the earth, and another 9% said they didn't know. What that means is that almost one out of three Americans is confused about what's revolving around what!

Now, that might not be such a big deal when it comes to the sun and the earth, but it's a very big deal when it comes to God's Son and your life. What's revolving around what? Who is it that's in orbit around who?

Just think about it, how backwards it is for so many. The approach they take, the place (in their life) they give to Jesus? We're living these days in an "It's all about me" world. It's all about my life. It's all about my decisions, my choice, my rights." It's all about me.

Let me tell you something. It's not all about you. It's all about Jesus. It's not all about what you can gain or want or have in your life. It's about what God has gained and wants and is ready to give (to you) in and through and because of what (he accomplished) in his Son.

What's revolving (in your life) around what? Who is it (in your life) that's in orbit around who? For many, Jesus might have a part. He might even play (an important) role. But it's not central. It's not at the heart. It's on the fringes – on the outside edge. (That's backwards.) It's not the way it was designed to work. And it doesn't.

That's like the earth saying to the sun, "I think I'll go off on this orbit of my own. And then I'll be free. Then I'll be able to go and do what I want." That's what so many people are doing. And that's why life isn't working: all of the loneliness, the emptiness, the confusion about living - the fear about dying.

My friends, you'll never be able to do what you want, (you'll never be free), until you figure out what's revolving around what, figure out who it is that's revolving around who?

The Bible says "we were created by him and for him." The truth is that it's not about you. It's about Jesus. It's not about my life (or yours), but about his.

Now, I realize this isn't politically correct, and I understand the changes. (I really do). But we used to celebrate Christmas in this country. Now we celebrate the Holidays. Our kids used to sing about Jesus. Now they sing about "Frosty" and "Santa Claus" and "Rudolph" and (it's all good), but it begs the question: What's revolving around what? (Who's revolving around who?)

That's an important question for our world. It's an even more important question for your life. Jesus came into this world to give you life, an abundant life. But you'll never know what that means until you set the orbit straight.

It's as personal as it gets. There's nothing more personal than what God has done for us in his Son. It's a message designed to connect. It's one we need to hear. It's one that makes a difference. And it's one that gives us hope.

Have you ever felt like you needed a word of hope? Ever felt as though "the light at the end of tunnel" was growing dimmer by the day? Christmas is about hope. It's about giving us a reason to hope.

There was a story (in the news) a while back about a mail carrier who had recently lost his wife. You know how that works, in the midst of a festive time of year, Christmas can be one of the toughest times for a lot of people.

The first Christmas since a divorce. The first Christmas without a parent. The first Christmas since the loss of a spouse or a loved one. Maybe some of you, here tonight, are going through one of those times. The first Christmas since a major life-change has taken place.

The story talked about how this mail carrier couldn't control his grief. His wife had died just a few months before Christmas, and it seemed like his life would never be the same.

It said, one morning as he was sorting mail at the post office, a few weeks before Christmas, he noticed a letter to Santa Claus that had his own return address on it. Recognizing the handwriting as that of his daughter, he opened the letter and read what was inside.

Do you know what it said? It said, "Dear Santa, My mommy died two months ago and since then my daddy has been crying every night. He says that only eternity will heal him. Please send a bit of eternity to my dad this Christmas."

My friends, I don't know what the future's going to hold in your life, what the coming year might bring. I don't know what's going on in your life right now, let alone what tomorrow will be like, what's going to happen in the future.

What I do know is that Jesus came to give you hope. Jesus came to give you life. And not just hope for today, or hope for tomorrow, but a hope for all your tomorrows - a hope for this life and for the next. And he did it by coming into this world, becoming one of us, by dying on a cross, and rising from the dead.

That's what this night is all about. A message designed to connect, a message we need to hear, a message that makes a difference, and a message that gives us hope.

Whatever's happening in your life, don't miss the message of Christmas: it's as personal as it gets...a Savior...for you and for me. Amen.