

### ***“When Christmas Gets Messy”***

My mother is a perfectionist. Always has been, always will be. Sometimes I love her because of this trait, sometimes I love her in spite of this trait. She likes everything to be perfect, but especially her house and the holidays. She wears herself out making sure that everything is perfect. Can you imagine how hard it was on her having to raise two boys that were typical, rambunctious, energetic, sometimes destructive, always dirty boys? I'm sure it was a great relief to her to finally get us out on our own because then the carpets would be clean, the walls wouldn't have BB holes in them, the linoleum in the kitchen wouldn't have burn holes in it, the screen doors would not be ripped apart.

I love my mom and I love being around her, but my brother and I always walk on eggshells a bit because Mom still wants everything to be perfect. Like I said, especially the house, especially the holidays.

Well, my brother and I and our families went to Mom's for Thanksgiving this year. As usual Mom had everything perfect. We had a fun day—we're a loud family. We had eaten and then gotten down to the serious business of playing some games in the formal dining room. This year it was Minnesota Farkle--kind of like Yahtzee. All the adults had been playing for a while and we decided to take a break for a snack. Mom asked if we wanted anything, and my brother said, "Some cheese sounds good." Mom came into the formal dining room with two cans of Easy Cheese **[PICTURE: Easy Cheese]**—you know, spray cheese. I took off the lids and they both had that crusty plug of dried cheese in the nozzle—that's always a little gross. I pulled those out and one of them was a little off color. Kind of brown. So I checked the expiration date on these two cans of spray cheese, one expired a year ago, the other 3 years ago.

I wasn't about to eat that stuff—it was brown! But I'm curious, I'm a boy, so I push the nozzle and out comes the brown cheese, straight up. Kind of stiff and pasty. Well it was just me and my brother, Mark, and my step dad at the table at that point. And of course this became a competition for who could get the longest piece cheese squirted out before it fell over and broke off. My brother took a turn, then my step dad, me again, then Mark. Then Mom walked through, and what did she say? "Don't make a mess!" And what did we do of course? Ignore her.

My step dad went next and got the longest piece. Not to be outdone, I was ready to really concentrate and win, I held the can in both hands and really gave that nozzle a push...and then there was a small explosion. I look over at my step dad and he is covered in cheese—or what used to be cheese 3 years ago. It's on his face, his head, his clothes. We're all frozen. Then we look up at the ceiling and see this large, greasy, spot of cheese. Then we began to laugh. But that was short-lived because mom heard the pop and our laughter and came in. She saw her husband covered in cheese and says, "Did it get on anything else?!" She looks up at the ceiling and once again we're frozen. Is she going to pop, is she going to freak out, is she going to cry, what?

The holidays can be messy, can't they? Christmas can be messy. I mean emotionally, spiritually, relationally messy—exploding can of cheese kind of messy. So often we set ourselves up for disappointment around this time of year. A lot of people experience sadness around Christmas, depression, the holiday blues. Sometimes the season that's supposed to be about love, and joy, and peace ends up being a season where, instead, we struggle, we get overwhelmed and wonder what it's all about, where life seems messy.

Maybe you're facing financial difficulties at Christmas. Maybe you've recently experienced the death of someone you loved and this will be the first Christmas where you sit around a table and there will be someone missing. Maybe it was even too much to put up a Christmas tree or hang any decorations. Maybe it was all you could do just to show up today. Christmas can be messy. As much as we would like for it to be just perfect, it's messy, just like life.

And so tonight I want you to know that the very first Christmas was kind of messy too. Here was Mary who was nine months pregnant. And there was an emperor thousands of miles away who was decreeing that every Jew in Palestine needed to go back to the town of their ancestors' origin, to be counted. She would have to go with her new husband, Joseph, to the town of Bethlehem, a week's journey away by donkey nine months pregnant. Now, I've never been pregnant, so correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty

sure that riding on a donkey for a week when you're nine months pregnant might be a mildly unpleasant experience.

Not only that, but Mary has to leave her mom and dad, even though she's young and frightened, having her first child. She comes to Bethlehem with Joseph and they find there's no room in the inn. There's only a place in the stable with the sheep and the donkeys and the horses.

Can you imagine Mary's heartbreak, the disappointment? This is not how she imagined having her first child. All those years growing up, she thought about being married and having children. It was not supposed to happen like this. How disappointing. The tears must have streamed down her face. This was scary and it was painful and it was not how she dreamed it would be.

You see, the world is messy. Even Christmas is messy. As much as we want it to be perfect. In fact, this may be the most important thing to remember tonight--Christmas happened not because the world is picture perfect, and you're somehow missing out on it now. No, Christmas happened **because** the world is messy, and Christmas is God's answer to the messiness in our world.

This most important event in human history, the birth of the Christ child, wasn't about God fixing the messy world we live in. It was about God entering the messy world that we live in and walking with us through it—guiding us through it.

Today let's ask three big questions about Christmas and see if we can find answers. First, what is the relevance of Christmas? In other words, why is it important? **[SLIDE: "The relevance of Christmas: God came to earth.]** I can sum up the relevance of Christmas in one phrase – God came to earth. God invaded earth about 2000 years ago. It was big news when man walked on the moon. But it was bigger news when God walked on the earth. And not only did God come to earth but most shocking of all he came in the form of a human being.

Notice what the Bible says, **[SLIDE...]** **"Jesus Christ is the exact likeness of the unseen God. He existed before God made anything at all. In fact, Christ himself is the creator who made everything" (Colossians 1:15-16, LB).**

Jesus didn't start in the stable. His beginning was not that little manger scene. He existed before creation. The Bible says, **[SLIDE...]** **"He became like men and was born a human being" (Philippians 2:7, Amp).** And he was born in the simplest surroundings in a little backwater village, in a little backwater country in the Roman Empire.

Now, if I was God I would have done it differently. I would have come to earth in a much more spectacular way. I would have added a little more pizzazz and flash – I would have planned my arrival at half time during the Super Bowl, or on the season finale of *Dancing with the Stars*, when the whole world is watching with lots of fireworks and thunder and lightning cosmic sounds. But God had another idea. He would come into this world the same way that everybody in this world came into this world – by being born into it. All of God's plan for the world was wrapped up in that fragile little infant. Of all the ways God could have come to earth why did he come as a baby?

I'll tell you why. Because he came to save us not to scare us, and nobody's afraid of a baby. The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ was in every sense a human being. He was born like us. He grew up like us. I don't want to blow your stereotype, but Jesus didn't walk around in spotless white robes with a halo and a glow on his face like they show in some of these movies. He worked in a carpenter's shop so he probably was covered in sawdust and dirt and sweat most of the time. He had calluses on his hands and strong muscles. He looked just like an average guy because he was.

The Bible says that while he was here on earth he had the same struggles that I have and you have-- the same temptations, the same desires, the same drives, the same problems. The Bible says he suffered just like we do. It says, **[SLIDE...]** **"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18, NIV).** There were times when Jesus was lonely when he was tempted to be discouraged, when he was frustrated. There were times when he was utterly exhausted.

That's good news. That means that he understands how you feel. God says, "I've been there. I'm not some distant God who doesn't understand what you're going through. I've been there. I came to earth and experienced what it means to be a human." When we face pain, when we struggle, when we grieve, when we're betrayed, you can know that Jesus Christ understands. He knows exactly what you're feeling right now

because he's been there himself. What we and billions of other people celebrate this weekend is not the birth of some average, normal baby. This baby was God in human form.

Christmas is a big deal because of its relevance. God came to earth. He came to earth as a human being and that's what split history into A.D. and B.C. – the most significant event in history. But that's not the good news. The good news is why he came. And that's the reason for Christmas.

What was the reason for Christmas? **[SLIDE: “The reason for Christmas: He came for your benefit.]** He came because you needed him to come.

First you needed Jesus to come to earth to show you what God is like. If you want to know what God is like, what makes God tick, what breaks his heart and makes him rejoice. Just look at Jesus. Read about Jesus' life and you'll know he's loving, forgiving, just, powerful, merciful. That's what God is like.

The second reason God came to earth is to show us what life should really be like, to show us how to really live. The truth is most people aren't really living. They're just existing. One of the most famous statements of Jesus is when he said, **[SLIDE...]** **“I have come that you might live life to the fullest” (John 10:10).** Jesus didn't say, “I've come to give you a religion, I've come to make you religious.” He said, “I've come to make you fully alive, to teach you the kind of life that God put you on the earth to live.” And until you get connected with your creator you're not going to live that full life. You're just going to exist.

A third reason God came to earth in the form of Jesus is to forgive everything you've ever done wrong so you can go to a perfect place called heaven when you die. That's quite a deal. The Bible says, **[SLIDE...]** **“He became a man so that he could take away our sins” (1 John 3:5 LB).** Jesus Christ came to earth to die for all the things that you've done wrong, so you don't have to pay for them, so you can be forgiven. That's called grace and it's the only way you're ever going to get into heaven because none of us are perfect. What a deal!

It didn't cost you or me anything, but it cost Jesus Christ a lot. God sacrificed a lot to do this for you. Jesus Christ didn't stay in the manger. He didn't stay in the crib. He went to the cross. Why in the world would he do that? Why in the world would God come to earth in human form and die for you?

I'll tell you why. Because he loves you! You've probably heard or read the phrase, “Jesus is the reason for the season” that is true – Jesus is the reason for the season. Christmas is not about a Santa. It's about a Savior. But let me teach you a deeper truth than that. You are the reason for the season. If God hadn't known that you needed him to come to earth and die for you he wouldn't have done it. If you didn't need what Jesus Christ had to offer he wouldn't have wasted the effort. You are the reason for the season. You are the reason we celebrate Christmas. It's God's Christmas gift to you.

The relevance of Christmas is this: God came to earth as a human being. But the reason for Christmas is this: He came for your benefit. What is the result? What is the result of Christmas? **[SLIDE: “The result of Christmas: You can know God.]** You can know God personally. You can have a personal relationship with the creator of the universe. A personal relationship. That's the greatest gift of all. God says, “I want you to know me like I know you.” But you have to receive the gift if it's going to make any difference in your life.

I mean, if I told you that I have a gift for you and that gift will solve all your biggest problems, heal all your deepest hurts, forgive every single mistake you've ever made, help you understand the purpose you were put on earth for, make you a better person, fill your life with confidence and joy and peace and eternally secure your future in heaven would you be interested in a gift like that? I guess so!

So let me ask you a very personal question. How many more Christmases are you going to go through before you finally accept God's gift to you? You celebrate this event year after year after year without unwrapping the biggest gift under the tree – God's gift to you – the whole purpose of this. How many more? An unopened wonderful gift is a worthless gift. Today, now, this time, don't let another Christmas go by without accepting and unwrapping God's gift to you.

Back to the story of the exploding can of cheese. Mom saw the mess on her husband, she saw the mess on the ceiling, cheese dripping off the chandelier. We were wondering what she was going to do, cry, freak out, what? And then she just started to laugh. In the midst of the mess, peals of laughter and a lot of joy. Guess what Mom is getting for Christmas this year. Lots and lots and lots of easy cheese.

Life is messy, Christmas is messy, it's never going to be perfect, we're going to be disappointed, but God has given us the greatest gift of all in the midst of that mess. The gift of Jesus Christ. The gift of himself.

God brought you here for a reason today. He wants you to accept his Christmas gift, to not go another season without beginning that relationship with him that Jesus Christ came to establish. Or maybe you've been close to God in the past and you've kind of drifted away. There's no better time to come back to God than at Christmas. You don't need to talk to me, talk to God. Tell him your heart. It doesn't matter what you say. What matters is the direction of your heart. Say, "Yes! I want to have a relationship with you."

Let me clarify this. We're not talking about a religion. You may have a religious background or you may not have a religious background. You may be Catholic or Protestant or Jewish or Buddhist or Baptist or I don't know what. We're not talking about that. We're talking about a relationship with God that you were designed to have. And you can begin that today right in the middle of the mess. That's God's gift to you and me. And for today that is the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

#### Prayer:

Tonight as you're sitting here with your head bowed and your eyes closed, there are some of you who came tonight, it was all you could do to make yourself come to church, and you know the disappointment and the hurt. You are not here by accident tonight. And God wants to say to you, "Christmas was for you. Christmas is my way of saying, 'I have overcome death.'" God says to you through Christmas that Jesus promised to give us life eternal and your loved ones are with him, and one day you'll see them again. And this gives you joy, even in the face of grief.

Some of you are here tonight and you have lived this last year in ways that you're ashamed of. You feel shame. In the presence of God, you feel shame. And tonight God would say to you, "You are the reason for the season. Christmas is about your need for forgiveness. I love you and I sent a savior to take your sins away so that you could be clean and new again."

Some of you are here tonight and you're just so excited about Christmas and the presents and the food, and coming to Christmas Eve might have almost been an afterthought, and to you God is saying, "Don't miss the real meaning of Christmas. This is where the joy is found."

So tonight I'm going to be saying a prayer, and I'm going to say just a line, and then if you feel like you want to, I invite you silently or quietly under your breath just to join me in this prayer as you invite God to give Christmas, to bring Christmas into your life.

O God, thank you for Christmas. Thank you that you love us; that you were born among us as one of us. Thank you for forgiving our sins. Wash me clean and make me new. Thank you for walking with us through the mess of this life. I need you. I chose to accept your gift for me. Bring Christmas into my life this year, O God, through Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Candle lighting

- Reminders about safety, tip only unlit candles. Parents help children.

The Old Testament describes the period before Jesus came as a period of deep darkness. The people looked for God, longed for God, but often couldn't see him. It was a time and place where grace and mercy were hard to find, and judgment was readily available. It reminds us of our world today and our lives when Christ is not present. Our lives can be dark and sometimes feel hopeless without him. But into that world of darkness the light came. One light, Jesus. That one light penetrated the darkness. Jesus the light of the world. Born in Bethlehem. Only Joseph, Mary and the Shepherds and Wise Men knew. Jesus grew up and grew in wisdom and love for God and people. As he preached the gospel,

starting at age 30, he called disciples to himself and he began to spread that light. And as he called them and as they followed his light continued to grow. Every time a human being says yes to Jesus Christ, every time they find life through him, every time someone chooses to follow him and to know him and to love him, his light is born in their lives, and it's that light that we invite you to receive today.

The sharing of the light tonight reminds us of the sharing of the Gospel. As you prepare to share the light with the person next to you, I invite you to say as you hold your lit candle up, "The light of Christ." And then pass that light on, and pass it on, and pass it on as we see the light of Jesus in our own lives. Please join me in the lighting of candles and the singing of Silent Night.

#### SINGING OF SILENT NIGHT

I want to invite you to look around. From one light, Christ born 2000 years ago, to hundreds and hundreds, literally billions of people celebrating his birth today and tomorrow. Would you raise your candles up. This is the image of the church. Not individuals on their own, but the light of Christ in many, many people coming together. People there to help one another and bear each other's burdens. If you don't have a church family, we would love to be that for you. If you're not a Christian, if you have big questions, we are a place where you can find answers. This is a place where life can make sense and life can be filled with joy. Would you pray with me.

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