

## 2012-12-23 sermon: Nothing Ever Changes (Christmas 2012)

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...hit it, we got a reward for you. Obviously the reward is in heaven for the reading of God's word, but we have a clipboard that's going around and if you actually began the year and have committed to reading through the Bible and you made it, then we have a special reward for you. We haven't decided what that reward is. I'm probably going to leave it up to Andy Goh, our Christian education deacon on that, but I want to give you that chance.

Now some of you are saying, I stopped and I didn't quite make it. Well, you know what? It's only December 23rd. You've got seven, eight days, okay? Think of it like a Harry Potter novel and just, boom, right through for the next week, okay? And then you can get that prize. So if you did read through the Bible, please put that down. We want to acknowledge you and show our appreciation.

You know, my wife was telling me the other day because she knows I've done it now for quite a few years. She's like, yeah, but how much do you really learn? You need to be more in-depth. I said there is a time for in-depth Bible study, but there is a discipline to reading through the Bible. And you know, I'm still trying to get through Ezekiel and Chronicles and some of those books are a little harder to read, but you know what? There is a joy, a blessing in reading through the Bible. So hopefully you've done it and we will reward you for going through that.

Now I want you to open up your Bibles and somewhere now, I want you to or Luke to and you can open up on the inside of your outline as well on the left side and follow along with the sermon.

You know, one of the greatest benefits I've had now that I have a daughter, two daughters who were in elementary school is the fact that there's a benefit and there's a challenge to having school-aged kids. And that is in order for me to help them with their homework, that means that I have to keep up with what they're learning. You know what I mean?

So with that in mind, I've had to learn and have learned a lot about geography, history, literature that I forgot decades ago because I've been out of school. It's funny, my daughters are reading some books and I said, hey, those books were around when I was a kid and they go, really dad, they're that old? You know, I'm like, okay, yeah, I'm that old. But you know, it's very interesting.

Last week though, however my oldest, Bethany, who's 10, asked me to remove one of her books from her room. That was a classroom text and I said, why? And she handed it to me and it was the complete works of William Shakespeare. Fifth grader, having to start that, you know. But it wasn't the fact that she had to read William Shakespeare, it was the fact that on the cover was a skull. And she said, it's scary, daddy, can you get it out of the room? So we put it in the

playroom and she didn't have to look at it until the New Year when she'll have to read it.

Those of you who've read William Shakespeare and the skull might know what that might be referenced to. And what it's referenced to is Hamlet. And if you've read Hamlet, you know Hamlet is holding the skull of the jester York. He's in a graveyard and he's waxing eloquent about the relationship he had to this jester when they were kids. You might not remember the scene, you may not know much about Shakespeare but you might remember that classic line where he says, Alas, poor York, I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest and of most excellent fancy. And then the soliloquy goes on.

Hamlet is one of 38 plays written by what the world considers to be the greatest playwright, possibly greatest author of all time, William Shakespeare. And if you haven't read any of those plays or seen them by way of movie or on the stage, you certainly have heard of them. Romeo and Juliet, As You Like It, The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar, Othello, and King Lear, among others.

Art and literature, and I was an art major, art and literature come and go, friends. But why, I thought to myself, has Shakespeare's work withstood the test of time for the last five, six hundred years? Amazing. And as I thought about it, and I thought back to some of the words I've read of Shakespeare, I realized it's because his work reflects the human condition so well.

If you've read any of those plays, you realize and can relate to the stories of ambition and treachery, tragedy, jealousy, sacrifice, and love. And yes, times have changed, and some of the conditions from Elizabethan England, we cannot relate to at all. But nevertheless, there's a general understanding of the human condition that echoes forth from those works even to today.

And as I thought about that, I thought, wow, amazing, that one man could come up with so many works. And there are others in music and in art and literature who have also touched the human soul. But in writing, it's William Shakespeare. And as I thought about Shakespeare, I thought, as important as he has been to humanity, I submit to you that he pales in comparison to the human condition recorded here in the Scripture.

See, the Bible doesn't just narrate about the condition of humanity, friends, rather it is the very history of humanity. And more so, I believe at this time of the year, when we focus on the Christmas story found in Matthew 2 and Luke 2. Because what we experienced today, and I don't know what your 2012 was like, but in the midst of the season, there's still a melancholy feeling. You know what I'm talking about? The sorrows, the triumphs, losses, and victories.

No matter what we've experienced, it still is seen what we have experienced in the Christmas story 2,000 years ago. In other words, things never change. Things never change, even after 2,000 years. So as we think about that, I went through the Christmas story and I realized, wow, what we're going through now, they went through back then.

The first is this, scandal. Scandal. The very word evokes a response of cocked heads and leaning ears. And quite frankly, the only difference between scandal during the time of Jesus and scandal now is the fact that we're a little more coarse and a little less embarrassed. But back then, when the angel announced to Mary, a teenage virgin engaged to a young carpenter Joseph that she was pregnant with child before they ever came together, well, back then that was a social no-no.

It's hard for us to comprehend that. But think about that fact. Remember in John chapter 8, the religious leaders are trying to trap Jesus and they come before him in a crowd and they throw a woman down before him and they say, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery, Jesus. And the law says that we are to stone her for being caught in the act of adultery. What do you say?

Can you imagine if we in modern times were stoned for the act of adultery, how many people would be dead here in this country? But that's the way it was back then. Times have changed, haven't they? It's normal for a non-married couple to live together, to have children out of wedlock. In fact, in America, I think 25% of all children are born out of wedlock. It's not a big deal anymore.

In fact, if a single woman chooses not to get married, that's not a big deal. If she chooses to want to have children by artificial insemination, it's not a big deal. In fact, we applaud them. Hey, you're taking control of your life. You're making a family for yourself. A lesbian couple decides to get a sperm donor to complete their family. What's the big deal? That's just the way it is. That's progress.

We aren't in control of ancient mores and things and cultures. We can do what we want to do. But unfortunately we're fortunate that was not the case for Joseph and Mary. I try to empathize with Joseph, who is caught between a rock and a hard place, quite frankly, in that situation.

I mean, he loves Mary. He's committed to Mary. But there's a social stigma that comes with this that is impossible for him to deal with. Matthew chapter one verse 19, it says this, because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and didn't want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. This was the best alternative, the best solution that he could come up with.

I can't marry her because the social stigma would be impossible to deal with. But I'll just quietly divorce her. She can go on with her life. I'll go on with my life. I don't want to embarrass her. He makes a bad situation and he tries to make it as good as possible. But it's really a compromise. And yet God wants to take this bad situation, a scandal, and make it a good situation. God intervenes and we see it in verses 20 and following.

He says, but after Joseph had considered this, an angel of Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife

because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Now think about Mary. Instead of facing public humiliation, instead of being left alone pregnant without a husband, without a means of life, socially outcast from her society and community, Mary goes home with Joseph and he takes care of her. God takes a bad situation, a scandal, and makes it good.

The story continues in Luke chapter 2 verses 1 and 3. In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken to the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria and everyone went to his own hometown to register.

You see friends, unlike censuses today taken in America, which is done every decade, which the purpose is to measure the growth of our nation and also the demographic changes, this first ever census done in that area was done with the sole purpose of identifying individuals and their net wealth and then being able to tax them appropriately. That was the whole reason for the census. Gee, does that ring a bell with any of you during this presidential election?

Everyone said that the election would be about the economy and jobs. And to that end, how do you stimulate the economy? How do you create jobs? Spend more money? You spend more money, you've got to tax people. One party says raise taxes for the wealthy, make them pay their fair share. The other party says cut spending, the government's too bloated, but both parties regardless of the rhetoric friends, they want the money. They need the money. We have to pay taxes and they need to get it. Well back then it was no different.

Unlike today the government back then didn't have the IRS. They had a different way of collecting taxes. They relied on individual tax collectors to get the money. And so these tax collectors called the Talionists were able to tax the people and then whatever extra they could get they could keep for themselves. So you can imagine why tax collectors like Levi, Matthew were hated by everybody because they just extorted money from the people.

And so the census was taken at that time for two purposes. One, it would allow the government, the Roman government, to figure out how much taxes everybody owed. But secondly, they had to keep the tax collectors in check. They had to know, okay if you're collecting this amount that's an appropriate amount, okay if you're taking more you're not stealing from us. So that was the reason why they took the census.

And because of this, Joseph and his wife Mary were required to make the 70-mile trek by donkey to Bethlehem to register for the census. Politics and taxes were the reason for the inconvenience of them having to make a 70-mile trek. Now for us, 70 miles, no big deal. Getting the car an hour later you're over in the other side of town. You go and stand in line and you take care of business. 70 miles back then was a big deal.

This one, anyone here pregnant? Eight and a half almost nine months pregnant right now?

Okay, imagine yourself ladies, eight and a half nine months pregnant and I'm going to put you on a donkey and you're going to travel to, I'm trying to think, what's 70-mile? Globe. How do you like to do that? Inconvenient. Dangerous.

And yet because of the requirements of politics and money, that was what Mary had to do. And you know what, some of us might say the same of government today. Oh man, they're crooks. They're all crooks. They're wanting our money. It's inconvenient.

You know poor Pastor Yang, I feel for him. Pastor Yang got called to jury duty. But it wasn't one of those one two-day things. It was a grand jury and he has to report to jury Tuesday and Friday, every Tuesday and Friday, all day until April. And the poor guy's trying to get out of it. He really is trying to get out of it. I told him, well you're an immigrant, just say you don't understand the English. No, no. That would not be showing any integrity. But that's what, you know, that's part of being a citizen of this country. Inconvenience. Taxes. Following the laws. You know, doing all these different things. And that's just the way life is.

It was a bad situation for Joseph and Mary. But God made it good because in spite of the long track, and she's nine months pregnant, they made it safely. Praise God.

Well what happens? We find out in verse six, while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. And she gave birth to her first born, a son.

You know, many of you know one of the biggest issues these last few years. And it was passed about three years ago was what is called Obamacare. Our healthcare system has been overhauled and has been sworn into law. But there's still been a lot of controversy. But the fact remains whether you're pro or against it, that 16% of Americans have no health insurance. And that we spend per capita more, 7,200 per person. And that the percentage of the gross domestic product, 16%, is greater than any developed nation in the world. We spend a lot on healthcare. Medical debt contributes to 46% of all personal bank receipts. Medicine healthcare is huge in this country.

But here's the deal. Whether you think that we have a good healthcare system, or a poor healthcare system, or you've got a good healthcare system, or a poor one, or you like your doctor, you don't like your doctor, guess what? Didn't really matter for Mary. She had nothing. During that time, she had no one, no institution, no doctor, nothing to help her during the delivery. See normally, if she was home back in Nazareth, some of the women in the town would have acted as midwives and they would have helped her deliver her first born son. But not this time. This time she's alone. And having never gone, she's a first time mom. She's a 14, 15, 16 year old girl, never gone through the process, never helped any of the other women have babies, and now she's having a baby on her own.

And what help do you think Joseph is, guys? He's freaked out, I'm sure. He wanted to go hang out with the donkeys rather than be with her. She's alone! Reminds when my wife and I went to

Rwanda a few years ago on a mission trip, and we went out to this remote area, and there's this little clinic, LC knows what I'm talking about, and they're delivering babies at this clinic. And ladies, you would be horrified at what we saw. There was no cleanliness, there was no anything. These women are just sitting there, no anesthesia, no monitors, nothing. They're just waiting to deliver their baby. And they got a guy with 7th grade education who's going to do it. If there's any complications, the baby dies, the mother dies. That's just the bottom line. You know what? That's what Mary faced, even worse because she didn't even have a guy with a 7th grade education to help. She's on her own. That was a bad situation guys. And yet, God was with her, wasn't he? Because the baby was born, and the baby was born perfect.

It says that she wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. And that speaks of materialism.

If you were here last week for our musical, which was great, and I applaud all those who helped. I want to thank all of you who are involved in our service and helping out. You'll notice that I, you'll recall that I mentioned Black Friday. Black Friday has been around for a long time. It was originally coined in Philadelphia by the local government to talk about the congestion and traffic that occurred on the Friday after Thanksgiving when everybody went into the retail area of town and went shopping. But it was also called Black Friday because of retailers. Because that was a day that they were making a lot of money. And as they said, we went from the red being in debt to now being in the black making a lot of money. And that's why it's called Black Friday.

Well in a sense, and by the way, retailers and merchants love big events and holidays and any kind of situation that can draw people together into their stores. And it was no different during this time of the census. In a way this was Bethlehem merchants own Black Friday because of the census where they could proclaim greed is good. I mean they have a good situation. Demand outstrip supplies so simple economics says that these innkeepers can charge anything they want because they have a captive audience. And after going from every inn in town to every inn in town, Joseph quickly realized that a lot of money won over compassion for a very pregnant woman. I'm sure the innkeepers really wanted to help her out but I'm like this guy's going to pay me five times what you're going to pay me. So sorry, it's not going to happen.

So what did they do? They had to purchase one of the cheap seats. In the Greek it's called the kataluma or inn. And it means cells. And the way an inn worked back then was there was two stories. And the upper story is where the people lived or stayed. Little cells, apartments. And so you would be up there. Below them were the stables. And that's where the animals that they came in on would stay. So you would be upstairs living in the little inn room and downstairs would be your animals, the donkeys, the oxen.

Well guess where Mary and Joseph had to stay. And they probably had to pay for it. They stayed in the cheap seats downstairs among the animals. And the martyr and early church father claims that Jesus actually was born probably in a cave outside of town. But in either case a stable underneath or cave out in the woods friends, that's no place for the king of kings to be

born. But that's what materialism brings out. It brings out greed in us.

You know I remember talking to a gal who worked in a boy's home. And these were troubled kids. And one of the things they were trying to teach them is fairness. And she told me the story one night there was a bunch of french fries left over on the meal. And two of the boys wanted the french fries. Well you add, those of you who have kids, siblings too. And they want something. How are you going to split it to make sure it's fair? Well she did the right thing, which is what I've done. One of them gets to choose to split the two piles. The other one gets to choose which pile they want. Makes sense? It's a great way, right? It's fair. Well evidently the kid who was splitting the pile in the story she recalled to me wasn't as smart. So he's doing these two pile of french fries. It's like, here's one that's like this. And then there's one like this. And he's really careful. He's got it all figured out, which one he wants. And so there's a big pile of fries and a little pile of fries. And all of a sudden you know, okay, the other boy, which one do you want? He takes the big one and the other guy shocked. You know, he got ripped off. I tell you, it happens with my daughters, man. I'm generous enough to buy them lunch this last week. Costco. Hot dog. And they said, dad, could we have a churro? I said, well honey, it's a dollar. I don't know. You know. Okay, you can't have a churro each, but you can split it. Same thing, you know. Again, you would think that they were trying to split an atom. I mean they're just both going at it, just trying to, you know. And that's the way it is. You would think they'd be happy at dad's generosity. But no. They're finagling over this much churro that one got over the other. That's the way it is. Materialism. Greed. I thank God I'm not like that. I don't know where they get it from.

Scandal, politics, healthcare, materialism. Finally, there's one other area that I think we need to address. And that is evil. The crystal story goes that the wise men from the east followed the star to the Christ shell. Not knowing the way they went to King Herod and asked where this child would be. Well, Herod doesn't know what he's talking about. They're talking about. So he goes to his counselors and they said that a king would be born in Bethlehem. In order to preserve his power against any future king, he tells the magi, go and find this king. And when you find him, come back to me so that I might worship him too. But that's not what he wanted to do, was it? So they go. And they do find the king. But an angel of God tells the magi not to go back to Herod, but to flee and go around. And when Herod finds out what happened, he is furious. Look at what happens. It says here in Matthew 2, 16. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the magi, he was furious. And he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in Spiceni who were two years old and under in accordance with the time he had learned from the magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. A voice is heard in Ramah weeping in great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children and using to be comforted because they are no more.

You know I just read this text the last week or so. It gave me chills. Nothing ever changes. A week ago we were saddened to hear the massacre of 27 people, 20 of them children. I looked at a picture of those children. They're the age of my middle child, Becca, 6, 7 year old, first graders. And I can't comprehend how that can happen. And there's no way to justify what

happened. Everybody's asking how can this happen and I can give you the answer. You may not want to hear it, but the answer is very simple. Evil. It was done out of evil, an evil heart. And when I read this passage a week or so ago I realized that you know what, times haven't changed. This kind of thing happens all the time. Well meaning people have asked where is God in all of this? Where is God? And this last week in Facebook someone pointed to something that was said. Former governor and now TV show host Mike Huckabee was asked this very question this last week. Where is God in all this? And this is his answer. It's a summary. We ask why there is violence in our schools, but we have systematically removed God from our schools. Should we be so surprised that schools would become a place of carnage? Because we've made it a place where we don't want to talk about eternity, life. What's responsibility means? Accountability. We're not just going to have to be accountable to the police that they catch us, but one day we stand before a holy God in judgment. And if we don't believe that then we don't fear that. And so sometimes when people say why did God let it happen? You know God wasn't armed. He didn't go to the school. But God will be there in the form of a lot of people with hugs and with therapy in a whole lot of ways in which he will be involved in the aftermath. Maybe we ought to let him in the front end and we wouldn't have to call him and show up when we are all said and done at the back end. You know maybe, you know I read this. I saw the video and I said amen. He's exactly right. But you know what Mike Huckabee is preaching to the choir. I totally get what he's saying. But you know what, as I read the responses at least half of them were negative. They were mocking him. They were insulting him. They were deriding him. They were calling him right wing evangelist wacko. They were saying what prayer back in school and then it wouldn't happen? Mike you're an idiot. But Huckabee defends himself. This last Friday Neil Cavuto asked him where was God? And I said that for 50 years we systematically attempted to have God removed from our schools, our public activities. But then at the moment we have a calamity, we wonder where he was. It's far more than just taking prayer or Bible reading out of the schools. It's the fact that people sue a city so we aren't confronted with a manger scene or a Christmas carol. That lawsuits are filed to remove a cross that has a memorial to a fallen soldier. Churches and Christian owned businesses are told to surrender their values under the immediate of government order to provide tax funded abortions. You know it's kind of funny Lewisson was talking about BC and AD. That makes sense to my generation. They don't use that term anymore. You know that right? It's C-E and B-C-E. Do you know what C-E stands for? Common era. B-C-E is before common era. That's what the term is used in school now. They take Christmas out. It's not called Christmas vacation. It's called winter break. It is true what he has said. We carefully and intentionally stop saying things are sinful. We call them disorders. Sometimes we even say they're normal. And to get to where that we have to abandon bedrock moral truths, then we'll ask, well, where was God?

You know in the 19 years I've given Christmas messages the least fun. I usually want to make you all happy. You're going to all go out and eat good food and all that good stuff. It's very sobering. And I don't want to end like this. So the question is where was God in all this? Where is he during this Christmas season? And let me give you a historical context. Because as I thought about the historical context of the Christmas story I realized God is just repeating the



same thing right now. Before the birth of Christ you understand between Matthew and Malachi is 400 years. And during those 400 years the fall of Judah and the captivity happened to the Babylonians. And then during that time they were in bondage to the Medes and Persians and then to the Greeks and now finally to the Romans. And that's all happened during 400 years. And during that time the Israelites lost their king, they lost their city Jerusalem, they lost their nation and in some ways they lost their God because God is silent for 400 years. But you know what? God did not lose his people. God was just silent because he said if you're going to fall away from me, if you're going to reject me, then let's see what you do on your own. And then finally God says enough is enough. I will make my presence known. And he made a whisper of his presence by visiting a priest named Zechariah and told him that he would have a baby boy John in his old age who would be the forerunner, the light to tell people about the Messiah coming.

And then he speaks a little bit louder through the angel Gabriel who shared to Mary, a virgin, that she would have God's Son. And finally, he shouts in public his presence that he is with us on the rooftop by the angelic host going to the shepherds in the field, telling them the glad tidings of joy and the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem. God broke the silence and he made his presence known.

And the cynical part of me wants to agree with Huckabee that God has had enough with us. If our society doesn't want to have him, then he's through with us. He'll work through another people or a nation or tribe. He's through with America. It's sad because you know this is my country. This is my nation. I'm so proud of it in so many ways. But you know what? We keep smacking God upside the head just saying we don't need you. Is God done with us?

And yet I don't think God is through with us. Just like he wasn't through in the Christmas story. He was there with Mary at her darkest time, by having Joseph marry and support her during her pregnancy. He was there during the long trek to Bethlehem and provided a healthy birth in spite of no support. And God intervened and warned Joseph to immediately leave for Egypt so that Jesus wouldn't be killed by Herod. See God makes his presence known.

But what about you and I? Can we make God's presence known? And I look at the Scripture and you know we just read Matthew 2 but you go over three chapters to the Beatitudes and Jesus says this to us. Verse 13 of chapter 5. 'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.' See, God has made his presence known in spite of all this, friends.

He made his presence known through the teachers and a principal who died to protect those children. You know the story, right? He made his presence known through a policeman who,

instead of locking up a vagrant, buys him a pair of shoes. He makes his presence known through godly physicians who treat patients who cannot afford medical care and they treat them for free. He makes his presence known among the hungry when people give food to the shelters to help those out who have no food. He makes his presence known through a word of encouragement to those who are in prison. His presence is seen in tutoring an at-risk child, from a big brother to a boy without a father figure in his life.

We see him, and his presence is known, friends, among us when we visit orphans and widows in distress and offer a cup of cold water in his name. That's how God is still present. It's not about government. Jesus can be outlawed in the public arena. He was back then 2,000 years ago but that shouldn't make a difference. So long as we, as Christians, choose to be salt and light and to make a difference.

And friends, that's the message that I'm reminded of at Christmas. The message that we need to take. We're talking about the birth of Christ but I so love the fact that we came to this church and they put up that beautiful cross. I hope you remember that cross every time you come to church because that's the reminder of what our faith is all about. That we share the message of Jesus Christ, that he died for the lost and offers hope. And that while we're still here, friends, our goal is to show people the love of Jesus Christ. In the midst of the sorrow and the scandal and the materialism and the politics and the evil, that we will still be salt and light and make a difference. That's what it's all about. I hope you remember that even in the next few days as we celebrate Christmas.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the message of Christmas. Even in these dark times when things just seem so out of control, you make your presence known and we know you're with us. Would you help us to live for you, Lord? Would you help us to live as you said in your great sermon, as salt and light, to love people and to love you? We thank you for the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the baby that was born 2,000 years ago, 30 years later died on that cross to offer salvation for all of us. We thank you for that message. May we live it as little Christs, so that we might lead people to the Savior. We thank you and praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.