

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 11, 2011**

## **THE POINT OF CHRISTMAS**

**John 1:29-36**

### **A CASE OF MISSING THE POINT**

It was 108 years ago this week, on December 17, 1903, when the Wright brothers, Orville and Wilbur, made the first airplane flight at Kitty Hawk, on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. It was Orville who actually made the first flight, traveling a distance of 120 feet in a flight that lasted 12 seconds. The brothers made several more flights that day, each of them successively longer. On the final flight of the day, Wilbur flew their plane 852 feet. His flight time: 59 seconds.

Fascinated with flight from an early age, the Wright brothers had begun manned gliding experiments at Kitty Hawk in 1900. They selected Kitty Hawk because of its favorable wind conditions and its proximity, relative to other recommended locations, to their home in Dayton, Ohio. Finally, after four years of experimenting, in December 1903, they succeeded. Following the first flight, Wilbur rushed to the local telegraph office in great excitement and sent the following message to their family back in Ohio: WE HAVE FLOWN FOR 12 SECONDS – WE WILL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS!

After receiving the telegram, their sister Katherine went to the newspaper office in Dayton, told the editor of her brothers' new flying machine and informed him that they would be home for Christmas, in case he wanted to set up an interview. The editor politely thanked her, and said he would be sure to put something in the paper about the boys. Which he did: On December 19, the newspaper ran the following headline on page 6: "Wright Brothers Home for Christmas." It was the biggest story of the year – the first successful airplane flight – and the editor missed it. It was right there in front of him, and he missed the point.

### **MISSING THE POINT OF CHRISTMAS**

A lot of people today miss the point of Christmas. It is not hard to do. You know how it is, with the economy so dependent on the sales numbers from Black Friday, Cyber Monday, and the rest of the "holiday shopping season." So much attention is paid to shopping and spending, giving and receiving, making a list of our wishes and wants for Christmas, and then sharing our list with those from whom we hope and/or expect to receive a gift, that it is easy to miss the real point of Christmas. "'Tis the season to be busy," and too much of our busy-ness, I'm afraid, has little to do with the real point of Christmas. Not to mention, of course, that so many people have replaced Jesus with Santa Claus as the focal point of Christmas.

The lives of way too many people, including way too many Christians, are characterized by frenetic busy-ness and the spirit-sapping stress of doing, doing, and more doing. As a result, the real point of Christmas is obscured, if not missed completely. Even though what I'm

saying is intuitively obvious to anyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear, it still needs to be said. And heard. And understood. Lest any of us miss the real point of Christmas.

### **THE TESTIMONY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST**

Like a voice crying in the wilderness (John 1:23), which is how he understood his calling from God, John the Baptist helps us see the point of Christmas. When he saw Jesus approaching, he pointed to Him and said: “Look! There He is – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). The next day, it was déjà vu all over again. Seeing Jesus, he said to the two disciples who were with him: “Look! There He is – the Lamb of God” (1:36).

Lamb of God. It may seem odd to us in our culture today. But to Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it would have been a powerful symbol. It refers to the sacrificial character of the mission of Jesus. It points to the purpose for which Jesus came and lived among us. It reveals the reason for Christmas. It shows the reason Jesus was born, the reason for His incarnation, the reason for His sinless life as a man, and the reason for His death on a Roman cross with spikes driven through His hands and feet. It helps us to see the “why” of Christmas.

### **THE WHY OF CHRISTMAS**

*Why did Jesus come?* To give His life as a voluntary, vicarious (as a substitute, in our place), perfect, once-for-all, completely sufficient, sacrificial offering to take away the sin of the world (1:29). Consider 1 Peter 2:24, which says that Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might be done with sin and live for Him. In His death, Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. He paid the penalty for my sins. For your sins. All of them. Whatever they are. He paid the penalty for the sins of anybody and everybody who will receive Him and the deliverance from the power of sin and guilt that only He can deliver.

You see it, don't you? To say that the birth of Jesus was a defining moment in history is an understatement of epic proportions. God becoming man: It is of infinitely greater significance than the achievement of the Wright brothers, and all the inventions of Thomas Edison and Steve Jobs put together. The idea that the God of the universe would humble Himself and be born as a helpless baby in a barn in Bethlehem is astounding but true. The baby born to Mary and Joseph was and is the Son of God – God incarnate, God in real flesh and blood. But even if you know this, you can still miss the point of Christmas. You can know all the facts and details of the Christmas story and still miss the point. The point of Christmas is not just the coming of God to us in the birth of Jesus His Son. There is more to it. The real point of Christmas is that Jesus came to die for us. He came, in His own words, “to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). He came to offer Himself as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). His death on the cross was the reason for His birth. You cannot fully appreciate the incarnation if you don't see it in the light of the atonement.

The point of Christmas is that Jesus was born to die for us. To give His life as a sin offering for us. To do for us what we could never, ever do for ourselves. To give Himself as the

perfect, completely sufficient, totally acceptable, never to be repeated sacrifice for our sins. You will miss the point of Christmas if you do not see the birth of Jesus in the light of the cross.

The apostle John understood the point of Christmas. He “got” it. He says in 1 John 3:5 that the purpose of Jesus’ coming was to take away our sins. A few verses later, he says the reason the Son of God came was to destroy the works of the devil (3:8). How? By means of His atoning death on the cross for us. The birth of Jesus points to the death of Jesus, which is really the point of Christmas.

### **MORNING AND EVENING SACRIFICES**

Think with me for a few minutes about how the Jewish people would have understood the claim John the Baptist was making about Jesus. The Jews were well-acquainted with the offering of lambs as sacrifices to God. The Law of Moses (Exodus 29:38-42) called for a lamb to be sacrificed for the sins of the people every morning and every evening. Every day. Seven days a week, 365 days a year. Year after year. Decade after decade. Century after century. It was a part of their individual and national consciousness, a twice-daily reminder of their sinfulness, and of the justice and mercy of God.

### **ABRAHAM AND ISAAC: GOD HIMSELF WILL PROVIDE THE LAMB**

The Jewish people also knew from their history about the testing of Abraham by God, when God told Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac to Mount Moriah, near the site of Jerusalem, and to sacrifice his son there in order to demonstrate his devotion to and trust in God. You can read the biblical account in Genesis 22. The birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah in their old age (Genesis 21) was a miracle. It was a gift from God. It was a promise from God fulfilled. And now God wanted Abraham to sacrifice his son to prove his loyalty to God? Are you kidding me? Who can explain this? Not I. It is unthinkable from a human perspective. But God’s thoughts and ways are different from ours. And God was not kidding. Abraham, to his credit, stepped out in faith and obedience.

As father and son made the three-day journey to Mount Moriah, Isaac carried the wood to be used for the offering, and Abraham carried a knife and perhaps a live coal or some tool with which to start a fire. Along the way, Isaac asked his father a question: “We’ve got the wood and the fire,” he said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham gave the classic answer of a man or woman of faith. Do you remember what he said? “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering” (Genesis 22:7-8). God Himself will provide the lamb. God *did* provide the lamb – actually, a ram – for Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, just in the nick of time. God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. Later on, God offered His own Son on the cross as a substitute for us. Though God stopped Abraham from sacrificing His Son, He did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all (Romans 8:32).

## **THE BLOOD OF THE PASSOVER LAMB**

There is a connection between John the Baptist's identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God and another defining moment in Israel's history, going back to the exodus, when God brought His people out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Remember the Lord's instructions to the Israelites? Every household was to slaughter a lamb and, before roasting and eating it, they were to put blood from the lamb on the sides and tops of the doorframes of their houses. For what purpose? So that, when the Lord would pass through the nation of Egypt that night and bring judgment on the nation by taking the life of every first-born son and every first-born animal in all the households of Egypt, the Lord would see the blood on the doorposts and "pass over" the houses of the Israelites. In the Passover feast, the Jewish people commemorate God's deliverance of them from their slavery in Egypt, and His mercy and grace in causing His judgment to "pass over" all whose homes and lives were covered by the blood of the lamb.

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5:7, identifies Jesus as our "Passover Lamb," who has been sacrificed for us. Because the blood of Jesus covers us – covers everyone who turns to Him in repentance and faith, and trusts Him to save us from our sins – our sins are now forgiven, we have been reconciled to God, and the judgment of God passes over us. Instead of judgment we receive the blessings of mercy and grace, which come free of charge to people who do not, cannot, and will not ever deserve them. The point of Christmas is that the baby born to Mary is the Passover Lamb provided by God to cover all our sins through His sacrificial death for us on the cross.

## **THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF ISAIAH 53**

As the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world, Jesus perfectly fulfilled the prophecy of God's suffering servant in Isaiah 53. There, as Isaiah speaks of the redemptive suffering of the Messiah still hundreds of years in the future, he says:

He was pierced for our transgressions.  
 He was crushed for our iniquities.  
 The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him,  
 And by His wounds we are healed.  
 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
 Each of us has turned to his own way.  
 And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.  
 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth.  
 He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
 and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
 so He did not open His mouth (53:5-7)

The child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas was the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, the Lamb of God whose blood was shed for me and for you, for the forgiveness of our sins. This is the point of Christmas.

## **PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN**

In the days of the New Testament church, when the gospel was spreading like wildfire throughout the Roman world, Acts 8 tells of a divine appointment the Lord arranged for Philip, one of the apostles, with a man from Ethiopia who just happened to be reading from Isaiah 53 as he rode in his chariot. When the Ethiopian asked him if he could explain the meaning of the passage, Philip proceeded to tell him about Jesus, about the good news of His coming into the world, His sacrificial death for us, and His resurrection from the dead. Philip understood the point of Christmas. The man from Ethiopia “got” it, too. He believed the gospel message, trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ, and received baptism that very day as a sign of his new identity as a follower of Christ.

All of this is wrapped up in the identification by John the Baptist of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That is who Jesus was. It is who He is. It is what He did. It is the reason He came into the world. If you miss or dismiss the reason Jesus came, you have missed the point of Christmas.

## **WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT**

I met Steve Brown a couple years ago at a seminar for pastors he was leading at the Billy Graham Training Center at the Cove near Asheville, North Carolina. Steve Brown is a retired pastor and seminary professor, the author of a bunch of books, and the host of a syndicated radio program called Key Life. I want to share with you something he wrote not about what John the Baptist said but about another declaration concerning Jesus, this one by the angel who appeared to Joseph in Matthew 1, explaining to Joseph that he didn’t have to break up with Mary, or maybe get a DNA test to prove that he hadn’t gotten her pregnant. As Steve Brown says, the angel told Joseph that this was a God thing and for him to relax. Then the angel said: “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

To which Steve Brown exclaims: “That’s it! That’s what Christmas is all about. Everything else is small stuff. We are needy, screwed up and guilty sinners, and we all know it. Christopher Hitchens (an avowed atheist) knows it, Lady Gaga knows it, Brad Pitt knows it and Osama bin Laden knew it. The politicians, media’s talking heads, professors, abortion doctors, pro-life demonstrators, gays and straights, and world leaders know it. Your neighbors know it, and you know it, too. We deny it, laugh at it, go to counselors to fix it, buy stuff to make us feel better about it, use social media and entertainment to avoid it, and dream up religious systems to deny it. But we all know.”

The name Jesus, in case you don’t know, means *The LORD saves*. His name would define His mission. He was to be given the name Jesus. Why? “Because He will save His people from their sins.”

If you ask, “What sins?” Steve Brown says the answer is: “All of them! It doesn’t matter where you’ve been, what you’ve been smoking or drinking, the people you’ve hurt, or the shame you feel...” No sin you have ever committed or will ever commit is so awful that the

blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world, cannot cover it. In Jesus, there is forgiveness for anyone and everyone who will call on Him in a spirit of sincere repentance and trusting faith. Do you get the point?

### **JESUS IS EVERYTHING**

One last thing: Arturo Toscanini was one of the most acclaimed orchestra conductors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On one occasion, at the conclusion of a brilliant performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, as the audience responded with a long, sustained ovation, Toscanini turned to the orchestra and, having their attention once again, said to them: "Gentlemen, I am nothing." This was an enormous admission, since Toscanini was blessed with extraordinary gifts. Then he said: "Gentlemen, you are nothing." He had told them that before, during rehearsals. Then, in a tone of adoration, Toscanini said: "But Beethoven, he is everything, everything, *everything!*"

When it comes to Christmas, when it comes to life, Jesus is everything, everything, *everything!* Mary, the angel told Joseph, "will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." As John the Baptist said, He – Jesus – is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

He is everything, and He is the point of Christmas. Make sure you don't miss Him or the reason for His coming. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name this Christmas and always. Amen.