

“Let Us Go Over to Bethlehem and Find the Faith of Christmas”

Date: December 3, 2017 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Advent 1
Text: Luke 2:15-20 **Theme:** Acceptance, Forgiveness, Christ

Today we start a four-part sermon series that begins with the title “Let us Go Over to Bethlehem.” For the next several weeks we will be preparing our hearts for the birth of Jesus, which we know took place in Bethlehem. Today though, we begin not in Bethlehem but close, the Middle East.

You may not remember Tom Southerland but you might remember his story. Many years ago, Shiite Muslims held Tom Southerland captive for four years. Much of his time was spent in solitary confinement. When he was finally released and he spoke at his press conference, he asked a profound question.

He asked, “Do you know what it’s like to be in prison, to be held hostage? It’s very lonely and you worry that people will forget you. I felt abandoned. I didn’t think anybody even knew I was in prison.”

During his imprisonment, Tom Southerland could hear a radio that the guards had. It was tuned into the BBC channel and every day Southerland would listen intently to the newscast, hoping and praying he might hear his name. Hoping and praying the newscaster might talk about him on the air and tell about his imprisonment. But he never heard his name mentioned, so he assumed he had been forgotten.

Finally, after four years of captivity, Tom was released. Our government flew his wife Jean to the area so they could be reunited. They were so excited to see each other. A few days later they flew home to San Francisco. As they were getting off the plane back home in the States,

Tom was amazed to see there were lights and television cameras, reporters, and people holding signs. There was a huge crowd at the airport.

Tom turned to his wife and said, “Jean, look at all these people. There must be a celebrity on the plane with us. Look around and see if you can spot who it is.” And Jean gently said, “Honey, they are all here for you! They came to see you and welcome you home. Tom, this is all for you!”

When his wife told him that, Tom Southerland started crying like a baby, and he couldn’t stop. He couldn’t believe it. He said, “I thought everyone had forgotten about me. I didn’t think anybody knew I was in captivity. I felt completely abandoned. I didn’t think anyone cared. Thank God I was wrong.”

The shepherds at the first Christmas may have felt something like Tom did. Society had cast them out and pushed them down to one of the lowest rungs on the social ladder. They were considered unclean – both physically and spiritually. And they must have felt abandoned and forgotten. They too must have felt like nobody really cared about them.

But then they found out on that first Christmas night, thank God, that they were wrong. Somebody did care! The One who counts the most did care. He was there for them! Of all the people on the face of the earth, the angel of the Lord appeared to them.

And as they made their way to Bethlehem to see the Miracle of Christmas, they discovered in the process three gifts that Christmas gives. They are three gifts that money can’t buy; three great gifts, given to you and to me and to the world. Let’s take a look at these together.

First of all, there is the gift of acceptance. “God so loved the world that...” (Can you finish the sentence?) God wants to bring all of us into His circle of love. He comes with the open arms of acceptance for all of us. To each one of us, God says, “You are valued. You are included. You are wanted. You are precious to me. *This gift* is for you.”

Imagine what Tom Southerland felt at the airport. Now, imagine when you give your life to Christ, thousands of angels in Heaven rejoice with you, and for you. Your salvation matters to God. Now hear, though. We have to do our part. We have to accept God’s acceptance of us. We have to receive this gracious gift, the gift of God’s only begotten Son. We have to welcome Jesus into our hearts with faith.

When we receive God’s gift of his Son, we receive God’s precious gift of acceptance. If you want to give something special to someone this Christmas, just say to them, “You are valued. You are appreciated. You are included. You are wanted and needed. You are precious to me.” Put it into your own words, and you will give someone something special, the gift of acceptance.

Second, there is the gift of forgiveness. I confess I never saw this movie, but I’m told it’s powerful. Steven Spielberg’s movie *Schindler’s List* is a graphic, shocking portrayal of the 20th century’s most staggering horror – the methodical, brutal extermination of millions of human beings in those awful Nazi death camps of World War II.

Oskar Schindler was an unlikely hero, but through his efforts, some 1200 people were saved from certain death. He put them to work in his factory where he could protect them. One of the most powerful moments of

the movie occurred when Schindler is in a conversation with the commander of a labor camp in Krakow, Poland.

They were talking about power, and the commander brags about the authority he has over these people in the camp. If a man comes before him, he has the absolute authority to kill that man, if he so chooses. And the commander has been in the habit of doing just that – killing people left and right with no conscience at all.

But Oskar Schindler said in rebuttal, “Oh no, commander, you are wrong. That is not power. Anyone could do that. But to have a man come before you and to say, ‘I could take your life if I so choose, but no, instead, I pardon you. I pardon you.’ *That*, commander, is power.”

Indeed, real power is found in forgiveness. And it’s the Christmas gift that God offers to us all. God comes into the world offering the gift of forgiveness. “I pardon you. I forgive you. I want to reclaim you.” That’s the gift God offers.

But once again, we have to do our part. We have to accept the gift in faith. When we do, when we accept forgiveness, and offer forgiveness to others, and live in the spirit of forgiveness, then we are doing a God-like thing. We are offering a present wrapped in heaven, the gift of forgiveness.

Third and finally, there is the gift of Christ. He is God’s gift to the world, the gift of a Savior, a gift that money cannot buy.

Did you know that Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50 years and Aristotle for 40 years? Jesus only taught for three years, and yet the influence of Christ’s three years of ministry infinitely transcends the impact

left by the combined 130 years of teaching of these three great teachers of antiquity.

Jesus painted no pictures, yet the paintings of Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci all received inspiration from Him. Jesus wrote no poetry, but Dante, Milton, and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by Him. Jesus composed no music. And yet, Haydn, Beethoven, Bach and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the hymns, symphonies and oratorios they composed in praise of Jesus.

Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble carpenter from Nazareth. Precisely! – The gift of Christ. No question about it, he is the greatest Christmas gift of all.

Remember at the start of this sermon, how Tom Southerland thought he had been forgotten and nobody cared, and how his plane landed in San Francisco and he saw all the people and the lights and the cameras, and remember how he thought there was a celebrity on board the plane, and remember how his wife said to him, "It's for you! This is all for you!"

Well, that's what I want to say to you this morning about the birth of Christ – the true meaning of Christmas: "It's all for you. The Christmas gift of acceptance, the Christmas gift of forgiveness, and the Christmas gift of Jesus Christ – they are all for you!"

Please be sure to open and receive all of your Christmas gifts this year. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the sermon by the same title written by Dr. James Moore.