

God's Present

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Preacher: Dave Hampton

[0 : 00] Well, good evening. Lovely to be with you. And hello at home if you're watching in. Right, you know the moment. It's Christmas Day and someone gives you a present you really don't like.

You know, it's awkward, yeah? You're sat in front of them and they give you a present and you open it and you don't like it. What do you do in that moment? Like, what's your go-to? Turn to the person next to you, 10 seconds, what would you say in that moment?

Okay. Okay. I wonder what you'd say. It is, it's awkward, isn't it? It's made 10 times worse by the fact that they're there in front of you and you've got to respond and you say something like, thanks, it wasn't even on my list, you know?

Oh, I didn't even think of this as an idea. It's the last thing you wanted. Right, flip it. What if someone gets you something you really love? You know, it's perfect for you. They've got it bang on.

What's your go-to there? What's your reaction? Are you a jumper, a screamer, a hugger? 10 seconds, person next to you, tell them what you do. Okay. You love it and it's made 10 times better by the fact that they're there in front of you and you can express how much you appreciate it.

Maybe you're a screamer, a crier, a simple nod.

[1 : 24] You know me. You know that feeling. It's brilliant. And I guess in some ways, last year, COVID stopped us and we hope and pray that it won't stop us this year, but it did in some ways stop us from experiencing that, didn't we?

We weren't able to be physically present with the people that we loved to be able to give the presents and we weren't able to give our physical presents to people around us.

My wife and I, we were due to go down to Cardiff, where my family are. We had the two kids in the back, roof box full of presents. We were driving down to Cardiff and we were just stopping for a bit of food at Gretna Green Services before we got into the English border.

And as we're finishing off some dinner, my phone pops up, all the headlines coming in saying, Sturgeon urges people to stay at home for Christmas. And we had that awkward moment. What should we do?

Should we pretend we were kind of already there and just ignore it? Do we do a U-turn and go back home? Much to my children's protests and tears, we decided to do a U-turn, drove back home, unloaded the car, got the presents out the roof box and we just did Christmas, the four of us at home, which was so different to normal, particularly for my wife. She's from a big family.

[2 : 40] She's probably not done Christmas with no less than 15 people. And she was stuck with me at home and our two kids. So it was different. It didn't feel quite right. Maybe you had a similar experience.

You weren't able to be present with the people you wanted to. And for us, we miss the joy of seeing our kids opening up all the presents from their aunties and uncles. It was different. And we hope it won't be the same again this Christmas time.

And amongst, of course, the sadness and the seriousness that COVID brought, this was a way, it kind of did affect all of us in some way or another, didn't it? Well, look at the heart of the Christmas story that we've been considering tonight through what we've sang and some of the stuff we've read.

We actually see a God who delivers on those two things. Nothing prevents him from revealing his presence to us. And also nothing affects him giving us a present, which I believe is for us all to respond to this evening.

I wonder if you heard it. It was wrapped up in the two little names that were read in the middle reading we just had of the three readings. If you want, you can look it back up. It's in Matthew chapter one, but let me summarize it for you again.

[3 : 53] An angel appears to Joseph and says, basically, don't freak out, Joseph. The woman you're about to marry, she's got a baby in her tummy, but it's been given to her from God through his spirit.

And it says you're to name him two things. Firstly, you're to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. And secondly, this fulfills, the angel says, a big promise God made hundreds of years before where a woman who's going to give birth is going to have a baby in her to call it Emmanuel, which means God with us.

So there's Jesus and there's Emmanuel, two names given to this baby. But what do they mean? And what difference could it actually make to us this evening, I wonder?

Well, for many people now over the centuries, they've asked one big question. Does God exist? And there's a whole range of thoughts and opinions, of course, on that.

Christianity has a resounding yes, he does. More than that, he has made himself known because he wants us to know him. Imagine with me just for a second, we're in a room right now with no windows, no doors, no way in, no way out.

[5 : 03] It's just a cube, yeah? And within a few minutes, a conversation emerges and someone says, do you think there's anything beyond these four walls? And different people start to give their opinions of whether there is or not.

We have a few different groups of people, maybe the pragmatists amongst us, who say, well, there must be something. We kind of got here in the first place. There's got to be something, surely.

There's the wishful thinkers amongst us.

I hope there's something out there and this isn't just it. And then there's always the odd token pessimist. You know who you are. Oh, it doesn't really matter. Who cares anyway? But the conversation goes round and round.

Different people give their opinions whether they think there's anything beyond those four walls.

Until someone, I guess, has to concede, really, on behalf of the group and say, I guess you'll just never know, will we?

See, how's the only way eventually we would know that there's anything beyond these four walls?

Well, it would require something or someone, wouldn't it, to burst through, to break through into the room and reveal themselves, to be present with us and to tell us what life is like beyond those four walls.

[6 : 10] Well, here in the account of this baby being born into the world, we find the God of the universe bursting in, revealing himself, making himself present in our world.

See, God is not some distant, abstract thing way up high that you just can't get anywhere near. No, he is not that. Through coming to this earth in the form of a baby and growing to be a man, he knows what it's like to live here.

What does that mean? It means he's seen stuff that we see. He's heard stuff that we hear. He's felt stuff we feel. Because he's walked this earth that we walk on.

And I put it to you this evening. If you were to examine the life story of this bloke, there are very few circumstances and situations you might be going through right now that he's unable to relate to, to understand, and to help you in.

See, God with us. That's what Emmanuel means. And just like now, over the next few days, some of us might travel quite long distances to be with the people we love, to be present with them at Christmas time.

[7 : 25] God's no different. So great is his love for you. So much he wants to be with you and in your life that he's prepared to travel all the way to this earth and reveal himself.

He's Emmanuel, God with us. That's what's wrapped up in the name Jesus. Well, I've started to realize over the last few years that the presence people are buying me for Christmas is starting to change a little bit.

I don't know if you're in this life stage yet. Mostly in the room, I think I wonder, maybe similar. See, gone are the days for me where I get the kind of fun, cool presents.

You know, things like a popcorn machine, you know, or a stomp rocket. You know what I'm talking about. Things you just don't really need a few weeks later in life, but they're great fun in the moment. I don't really get those presents anymore.

I get far more practical presents like Allen keys or spirit levels. You know, things that just you kind of need when a certain life stage comes around.

[8 : 27] As I say, some of you maybe are at that point, others of you not. You might be in for a set of pillows or something like that at Christmas time. I think it's as if my family have gone, well, Dave, you're kind of really at this point where you need to be able to fix stuff if it breaks.

And I see all these various needs that I have at the age that I'm at. And instead of me going and buying it, I think they feel like maybe we'll buy it for Dave at Christmas time. And don't get me wrong, I do like presents.

I do, and it's very kind. And it helps a lot when the kids break everything all the time to be able to fix them. But it has changed. I've noticed it. And see, within this Christmas story that we're thinking about tonight, not only do we see God revealing his presence to us, he goes one step further. See, this baby coming to this earth is actually God's present for us, which he's given to us to meet a need. To fix a problem.

A few years ago in Edinburgh, a church did a survey out on the street. They asked people one really simple question. How would you fix the world? And different people gave different answers.

[9 : 35] They managed to ask about 760 people. And you can imagine, hey, a full range of different responses from kind of government level to just human responsibility. Everyone giving their different opinions.

But do you know what I thought was most fascinating about the survey? Out of the 760 people they asked, how would you fix the world? Only one person replied with this.

It doesn't need fixed. 759 people all thought that things could be better. 759 people, I guess, in some ways expressed some sort of discontent, some issues, something where they didn't think the world was quite working the way it should be working.

I think that's quite revealing, do you not? And I guess in some ways, many of us would probably agree with it. Look back on the last 24 hours, let alone the last 24 months.

I think we'd all pretty much agree that things aren't quite working the way they should be. Whether it's from the top down or the bottom up, things don't seem to be working the way they should be.

[10 : 41] But do you know what? It's not actually too dissimilar to the time where this baby was born in the accounts that we're reading tonight. See, there was much political unrest.

There was much national oppression. There was actually quite a lot of human horror back then as well as today. And so the writer, particularly this one, is a guy called Matthew who's writing about Jesus' life.

He's writing to a group of people called the Jewish people. And do you know what? They just wanted someone to come in, sort the mess out, bring about a better society where they could live in, I guess, much more peace and harmony.

They needed someone to come in. And I wonder if that might be a way you're feeling right now as we look upon society. Maybe you're just desperate for someone to come and sort things out a little bit so we can live a better life.

But I don't think it's as simple as that. And I don't think it's as easy as that of just bringing in a new leader or changing a load of laws. See, the heart of the human problem is actually the problem of the human heart.

[11 : 50] You may or may not recognize this in yourself. I don't know. I do in me. Human beings are strange people, are we not? This blend of both beauty and beast.

Capable of some incredible things, humans, are they not? Yet at the same time capable of some shocking things. We're this strange blend. But actually deep right down in its core, do you know what the Bible says is true of all of us?

Is that all of us in some way or another are marred by what it calls sin. Which is simply really a self-obsession. Which if it's left unchecked can cause great harm to other people and actually to yourself.

And more than that, sin causes great offense to God. And see, this is now why this baby is called Jesus.

Did you hear it? You could call him Jesus. The angel said, why? Because he will save his people from their sins. See, Jesus arrives on this earth as God's present to us to fix things.

[12 : 55] To fix things. To meet a need. And ultimately that need is our hearts. He's come to give us a new heart. A new life. With him.

And see, this is the remarkable thing that makes this story different to anything else. It doesn't just start in a cradle. But it goes all the way to a cross.

We heard it in that last couple of songs and in that reading. If you were to look at the life story of Jesus, you'd see that at around the age of 33 years of age, he willingly, lovingly, sacrificially died on a cross.

And the Bible says that he does that because he absorbs and takes upon himself every sin that every human has committed. Why? To give us forgiveness.

To wipe the slate clean. And to give us a new style. And this is the great offer of Christianity. I don't know what you think of it. I don't know where you stand before it. But the great offer of Christianity is that through trusting in this man, Jesus, you can find forgiveness and a life with him.

[14 : 00] And this is the great thing because you can get reconnected back with God, which brings purpose and meaning now. But more than that, it secures life forever.

Because the great claim of Christianity is this isn't all there is. This life isn't really where it's found all its fullness. This isn't the way it should be. No, there's a promise of a much better place.

A place with no more sickness. No more crying. No more mourning. No more coronavirus. A place of beauty, constant. And through trusting in Jesus, you can get that place secure for you for when your time up on earth is gone.

So I wonder what you want for Christmas. I wonder if you stuck a couple of ideas in to the people you really love. Maybe you've said a few things you definitely don't want. So you don't have to have that awkward moment.

But here tonight, you've got a God who loves you so much that he's willing to be with you. His presence he wants to make known to you. And more than that, he's got a present for you.

[15 : 05] Please, can I just say to you tonight, please don't treat this present the way you do that present you don't really want. Don't give a fake response. At least look into it. Ask questions.

Consider it. Get along to church here. But remember that present that you love. You know, when it happens, that moment you get something you just love and you just can't do anything but jump and run across the room and hug the person.

Well, maybe tonight for you. Hearing this for the first time, understanding a God that loves you that much and has given this much for you. What's stopping you from running across the room and receiving it for yourself?

Emmanuel means God with us. Jesus means Savior of the world. The big question for all of us, how are we going to respond?