

Christmas Eve 2022

This Christmas, What Are You Looking For?

Pastor Ethan Moore

- ***Have you ever made a decision that at the time didn't seem like a big deal - but in retrospect it profoundly impacted your life?***
- ***In 1989 I graduated from college in Texas and took my first job in Charleston, SC. Two weeks in, if you had asked me, what was the decision you just made that will change your life, THAT'S what I would have said! I just packed up and moved clear across the country to a new job in a new town where I didn't know a soul.***
- ***But I would have been wrong- that was a big decision, but it paled in comparison to the result of the decision I had made one week prior, after being in Charleston just a few days.***
- ***You see, on my first Friday evening in my new home, I got a call from my mom...***
 - ***Hey mom, thanks for calling! I'm fine, yes, people at work seem nice, YES I am SWAMPED already, NO, I'm not unpacked... Then mom asked what part of me knew she was going to...***
 - ***Am I going to church on Sunday? Ugh... mom... I'm super tired, I need to get unpacked.... Maybe next weekend... I don't even know where to go.***
 - ***Then my mom said two of the most impactful things she ever said to me.***
 - ***If you don't go now, you never will. Make a choice!***
 - ***I ran across your old youth pastor from high school- it turns out she went to the college of Charleston herself, and when she heard where you had moved, she said you needed to go to Ashley River Baptist Church. It's where she went when she lived there.***
 - ***SILENCE from me...***
 - ***"She said they had a really great singles ministry" More silence... sigh...***
 - ***She said it was highly populated with attractive young single women....!***
 - ***OK.. That doesn't sound bad.***
- ***By the end of the phone call I had promised mom that for the first time in over 4 years I would go to church, and that Sunday I did.***
- ***As I walked up to the door past the sign that said 'singles'... a young woman greeted me, shook my hand, and introduced herself as Lisa Ferg, and she was so glad I had come to visit.***
- ***She invited me to a singles event at her apartment the following weekend. Then a singles trip to Atlanta two weeks after that. We were dating within the month, and married 11 months later.***
- ***It turns out that in 1989 my life altering decision wasn't to move half way across the country- it was to heed my mom's voice and go to church.***
- ***That Sunday I wasn't looking for anything significant to happen. I certainly wasn't looking for a relationship, much less one that would change my life. But that's what happened.***
- ***This Christmas season- or even just this season of your life, are you looking for anything?***
- ***Maybe it's simple as a wonderful time with your family, a little time off work. Perhaps it's much more- there's something big in your life, you're looking for an answer to some question, be it a decision about a job, relationship, or something deeper about who you are and what you believe. For some people this is a season they just look forward to being over.***
- ***Most of us are looking for something. I remember in 1987 when I got my hands on what I still think is one of the greatest albums of all time- U2's "Joshua Tree"... In 2010 Rolling Stone magazine named the second track on the first side one of the greatest songs in***

music history- "I still haven't found what I'm looking for"- the lyrics resonate with our humanity- and even many believers can relate to the song's last verse-

I believe in the kingdom come

Then all the colors will bleed into one- Bleed into one

But yes I'm still running

You broke the bonds- And you loosed the chains

Carried the cross Of my shame- Oh my shame

You know I believe it - But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

- **Is that you?**
- **Almost 3000 years ago there was a man living in a tiny country considered insignificant by the rest of the world at that time, and when he looked around at his people, he saw them searching. They were looking for something, but they were not finding it. In fact, he described his people as... Oppressed, burdened, and living in darkness...**
- **This man was Isaiah, and as we look into the ancient Hebrew Scriptures and learn the story of his people- the Israelites- we learn that they were a people searching for HOPE. In a time of uncertainty and turmoil, they were searching for PEACE. In a time marked by suffering, they were searching for JOY. And as a people the world considered insignificant, they were searching for LOVE.**
- **In many ways our lives and culture couldn't be more different than that of the ancient Israelis. But in the core of our humanity, we are just like them- and like them, we are looking for the same things they were.**
 - o **We are searching, hungry, for HOPE.**
 - o **In our relationships, our families, and across our world, we are searching for PEACE**
 - o **We long for JOY, we hunger for it, but we are almost afraid to look for it because it seems so elusive**
 - o **You could add to this list our fundamental needs of identity, security, purpose.**
 - o **But most of all, we hunger for LOVE. In a world of performance based acceptance, we long for relationship of true and unconditional acceptance.**
- **NOW- it will come as no surprise for me to assert that in all of these things, what we are truly and ultimately looking for is only found in the person of Jesus Christ. Many of us here would say- AMEN- so be it- that is my own story.**
- **If that's not your story, my prayer is your decision to come here tonight may turn out to be more significant than you thought. That your time here this evening, or your time with your family and friends that brought you here, would be start of you considering Jesus.**
- **I recognize there are barriers to surrendering- because that's what it is- to believe- have faith in Jesus and his message from the New Testament, which we call the gospel. The Good news.**
- **Some may point to the question creation versus evolution. If I have to believe that to be a Christian... well, I'm just not there. Maybe there's other doctrinal questions from the bible you struggle with.**
- **Some people have been emotionally wounded by people who profess to be Christians. Your barrier might be something about Christian culture or things you've heard people say, or seen people do, in the name of God and Jesus.**

- **These are all very real, very legitimate things to discuss. We NEED to wrestle with these, because God is in business of removing barriers. In fact, the entire Christmas Story- what we call the INCARNATION- is the story of how when we as humanity wouldn't turn to God, God crossed every possible barrier to come to us.**
 - **But when it comes to struggling with the teachings of scripture, one of the biggest barriers isn't what we believe to be true about God (although this is of course super important), rather, it's what GOD SAYS IS TRUE ABOUT YOU. Let's go there for just a minute.**
 - **First- and THIS IS THE HUMBLING PART- through scripture God tells us that apart from what Jesus made possible through his death and resurrection, we are separated from him. Every single one of us is an eternal soul, a precious creation of God, but apart from Christ we are spiritually dead and separated from God.**
 - **THIS takes us all the way to the beginning- the creation narrative of Genesis 1-3. Man and woman are living in God's presence, in Garden of Eden, in complete peace, dependence, and harmony.**
 - **THEN, in Genesis three, Satan enters the picture. He tempts Adam and Eve with the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. He hints that God is holding out on them, keeping the good stuff to himself, and that if they eat of the fruit and receive the knowledge of good and evil, they will be like God themselves.**
 - **THIS IS KEY. When Adam and Eve sinned- the famous original sin, from which we have the whole idea of the FALL and the onset of what we would call the human condition- WHEN THIS HAPPENED, that FIRST sin – first act of human brokenness- was NOT a moral choice between right and wrong. It was the choice to be our OWN GOD rather than surrendered trust and dependence upon God.**
 - **It was the decision to say "God, I'M GOING TO BE IN CHARGE of my life, rather than trusting you and your goodness with my life."**
 - **To be clear- there IS such a thing as good and evil, right and wrong. The New Testament does describe a morality that reflects the goodness and love of God- to violate God's goodness is what scripture calls sin. BUT HEAR ME- in the midst of our endless moral debates- the essence of sin isn't a question of WHO IS RIGHT, but WHO IS GOD.**
 - **In the classic football film RUDY, there's a pivotal scene where Rudy (Sean Astin, aka Sam) in a place of great desperation, asks the priest Father Cavanaugh if he could intervene on his behalf. The priest replied: "Son, in thirty-five years of religious study, I've come up with only two hard, incontrovertible facts; there is a God, and, I'm not Him."**
 - **We may say, OK! I get it. I'm not God- but WHO IS God?**
 - **AND MY FRIENDS, the question of WHO IS GOD was most clearly and definitively answered in the Birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.**
 - **As we read in Matthews Gospel, right after Joseph learned from the angel that Mary was pregnant...**
- "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*
- **We've all heard this- basic Christianity 101- but it's easy to miss the significance that IN JESUS CHRIST we see the fullness of the nature and character of God.**

Colossians 1:15 *The Son is the image of the invisible God,*

Colossians 1:19 *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ,*

Colossians 2:9 *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form*

In John 14 Jesus said to his disciples: *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*

- **And when we look at the life of Jesus- we see the nature of God expressed as a person who PARTICIPATED in the lives of broken people- who wasn't afraid to ASSOCIATE with rejected people, and who ACCEPTED broken and outcast people as his friends, at significant cost to his own reputation.**
- **This is getting to the next big thing God has said is TRUE ABOUT YOU, and we see it clearly in the incredible poem in Philippians chapter 2:**
Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!
- **In the book of Hebrews we are told that for the “JOY SET BEFORE HIM, Jesus endured the cross, scorned its shame as he bore our shame, and set down at the right hand of God.”**
- **God made himself nothing? He took on the nature of a servant? God humbled himself, even to the point of a willing and sacrificial death?**
- **FRIENDS! This all proclaims that GOD'S TRUTH ABOUT YOU is that YOU MATTER TO HIM. Your life matters to God. God-in-Christ did this all for YOU.**
- **Kent Osteen shared a devotional last Sunday... “We often say that Jesus is the reason for the season...but the reality is that WE are the reason for this season. YOU are the reason the Word became flesh. YOUR NEIGHBOR, your co-workers, your political adversaries are the reason Christ endured the cross and its shame.**
- **Writer of Hebrews goes on to say “So CONSIDER HIM who endured such opposition from sinful people- US- so that you will not grow weary and lose heart!**
- **You see, on that cold, uncomfortable night some two-thousand years ago, a baby was born into this world for the purpose of staging the greatest jailbreak in the history of humanity. He came to set us free from the tyranny of being bound to our own ability to live, the bondage of trying to measure up to God- trying to be righteous- on our own.**
- **Some 700 years earlier the prophet Isaiah wrote this about our little baby...**

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

- **That's our baby my friends. You see, when this infant came into this world, and let loose his first indignant cry at its sheer injustice, that cry, like the first tiny snowflakes at the onset of an avalanche, began the cascade of hope that is shaking the hearts and foundations of our very world today.**
- **It began with the cry of birth, and it grew across thirty years of the most honest life ever lived. Then, without resistance, this hope was silenced by the collective pride and wrath of humanity in the form of a Roman Cross- and placed in a tomb.**

- ***Then, for three days, the world was silent like the instant of calm before a dam bursts... because three days later, that is exactly what happened. The floodgates of eternity burst apart in the resurrection of the son of God, Jesus Christ, and the waters of hope and freedom poured out into the world in a flood that continues to this day.***
- ***THAT my friends, is the identity of the baby that was born that night. THIS is the hope beyond hope that Isaiah proclaimed when he wrote these words...***

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

- ***This season, what are you looking for? If your heart is being opened to consider Jesus- the door of the manger stands before you like the door of the empty tomb, inviting you to come and see.***
- ***We are invited to set all our barriers aside, and dressed only in the garment of faith, enter as a child before the child, the man, THE CHRIST... our savior, our hope, our LORD, and our LIFE.***
- ***The gospels begin with the story of Christ's birth. Near the end of John, the fourth and last Gospel, we are told...***

John 20:31 *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

- ***This Christmas, if you still haven't found what you're looking for, I invite you to consider Jesus. To take a step of faith, and join the journey of a restored relationship with your creator- Jesus, the Christ, who loves you and gave His life for you.***