

A Broken Christmas: Breaking the Cycle
By Jason Huff
December 2, 2018
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15; Matthew 1:18-25; Hebrews 10:1-4,10-14

Our final Scripture reading today is Hebrews 10:1-4,11-14. May God's blessing be on the reading of His holy and perfect Word. "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming -- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...by God's will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

Sometimes things need to be broken before they can be fixed. I don't know if you've ever helped a child out with a Lego project, but occasionally when you make a mistake following the directions, you have to take out a few pieces you finished before you can fix the one that's the wrong size or in the wrong place. A bone that isn't set fuses together to another bone, but it doesn't really heal, not correctly. In surgery, the doctor breaks it again to set it and help it to heal properly. Remember glo sticks? Until you snap them, until you "break" them, they don't glow, do they? Against all logic, *breaking* things can be a part of *healing* them.

And that's going to be the theme of our Advent series, as we take a short break from our journey through the book of Acts to turn once again to the story of Christmas. A broken Christmas – what does that mean, exactly? Jesus came in order to break things that were wrong, wicked, sometimes things that were even good once but had been corrupted by the world. Jesus came to set captives free from their chains and to break the bonds of their oppression. Jesus came to break down the powers that be and prove once and for all that there is a godly Kingdom greater than any earthly one. And Jesus came to break hearts – hearts full of sin and pain and anger – to replace them with a heart like His. Christmas is the start of all of that.

There's another reason we're going with that theme...it's because our holidays, as we think of them, are broken too. Everybody knows Thanksgiving is broken, right? Because we can't wait to get up from the table Thursday afternoon after being thankful for all the good things we have to rush into the stores and shopping malls Friday to trample people to get a sale on all the things we don't have.

We don't want to think Christmas is broken, but somehow it is. Now most of us grow up loving Christmas. The special decorations, we hear songs they don't play the rest of the year, the trees and the concerts and the wait for St. Nick and then presents on Christmas morning and, if we're blessed, the presence of those we most deeply love with us. All of those things really are pretty great.

But as we grow up, we start to realize the other side of Christmas. If you're like me, you never know exactly where you put the lights, and then you have to go through the lights and find all the ones that mysteriously burned out over the last twelve months while they were in the box. Decorating's hard, time-consuming. Finding time to shop for presents is hard; finding money for presents is harder. All the activities everyone is involved in make for a flurry and a rush and a kind of exhaustion.

For some of us, Christmas is when we remember people close to us who are no longer here, and it's very sad. Not everyone has great Christmas memories. And then we hear so much about "ho ho ho and mistletoe" that we lose sight of the reason why December has become so crazy. We lose sight of the fact that when Jesus came, He was Immanuel – God with us. There have been Christmases when I've gotten to December 26th and I've thought, "Did I miss it?"

I want us all to have a great Christmas this year, and it's my hope that our Broken Christmas series will give us reason for an awesome month of December. Because we are going to focus on Jesus not just as a baby – though we'll hear those stories too – but all the promises He fulfilled by coming and living among us. We'll hear the song of Mary and the song of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah. They knew what the birth of the Messiah meant for the future. It's my prayer that we can realize we live in that future – in the time promised for ages, because Jesus is working even now in our midst through the Holy Spirit.

So let's dig into it. When we think about Christmas and how it comes every year, sometimes we're happy, sometimes we're depressed. It's coming whether we like it or not. There's no way to avoid it, at least not in American culture – it's everywhere. The celebration, for good or for bad, is going to be here for a long time in one form or another. And sometimes we might think, "Is this all there is? Just one more Christmas? One more Easter? One more cycle?"

The Bible talks about the cycle of human existence at length. The writer of Ecclesiastes, long held to be Solomon, understands it very well. As we heard from Ecclesiastes 3 today, there is a pattern to life – a time to sow seeds and a time to reap, a time to laugh and a time to cry. Over and over again, we repeat the same pattern; we copy the models that came before us. In Ecclesiastes 1:9-10, the author writes, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new "? Already it has existed for ages which were before us."

Ecclesiastes is a pessimistic book. It sits in the Bible right next to the book of Proverbs, which is mostly a collection written by Solomon of wise sayings that point out how life should be and how we should live to please God. Ecclesiastes is Solomon's counterpoint – the proverbs are good, but they aren't a promise of what will be, only a statement of what should be. The Bible presents us with how things ought to be in God's world, but it is realistic in knowing that our broken world doesn't work like that. And one of the things that God meant for good, the natural cycles we see in life, often just bring us down.

God established some natural patterns for His people Israel. In the Ten Commandments, He established the Sabbath day after the pattern that He Himself established in creation. We rest as God rested. This was intended to be a great blessing for Israel. All the other nations kept at their labors every day of the week. This was particularly true for servants and slaves. If you want to know one reason people lived shorter lives in the past was because of their constant work without a break. But God made it so that everyone in the community, from the richest to the poorest, stopped to be reminded of God's promises to them. God's promise was that they would have more than the nations around them that worked seven days a week. That's what happened.

But soon, the Sabbath became broken. In the hundreds of years that followed, sometimes Sabbath-keeping became just an option. People didn't take the breaks that God had built into His law for them. After the exile in Babylon, Sabbath-keeping became a big deal, but it was still broken. Rabbis argued how best to keep it. They created a host of things you couldn't do on the Sabbath because they might be considered work. Yet they also created a ton of loopholes so the rich could pretty much do what they wanted on the Sabbath while the poor were chastised and punished when they did the same things.

God gave Israel festivals to celebrate together in order that they would remember the promises He had kept over time and to point them to their need for a Savior. God gave them the pattern of sacrifices that they were to offer in order to appease Him for their constant disobedience. It's not as if patterns and cycles themselves are bad; after all, God gave us the seasons, and sometimes in Michigan, we get them all in one day! But the patterns and cycles weren't the ultimate solution. They pointed to something greater. The festivals didn't exist for themselves; they had a purpose, and that purpose was for them to know God's love for them and to look forward to the day when God would be with them in His Messiah.

As we heard from the New Testament book of Hebrews today, the pattern of sacrifices didn't solve anything. The best way to think of the sacrifices were as a changing a dressing on a wound sin made until the Doctor arrived. The priests made annual sacrifices for the sins of the nation as a whole; they made daily sacrifices for the people themselves. But the pattern was never-ending. One priest would die and another would take his place; generation after generation of priests would come and go.

But the problem of sin still remained. The pattern solved nothing. As God would later say in the book of Amos, "I hate, I despise your religious feasts and I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them." God didn't want the pattern of sacrifices. He wanted His people to be holy and righteous, to be just, to love mercy, to show compassion. The pattern that was meant to bring people to God in repentance for sin became an excuse for sin – "hey, we'll take our offering next week to the temple, so what does sin matter today?"

Jesus came to break all these broken cycles. As Hebrews 10 also said, "But when this priest – Jesus – had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

Because He was born of the Holy Spirit and Mary, because He lived a perfect life, because He died not for His own sins but the sins of all who would come to Him, His sacrifice on the cross was a once-for-all proposition. He doesn't have to go back and do this again someday. Never again will Christ come as a servant.

When He comes again, He'll come as a king to reign, and we who have trusted in Him will stand beside Him, made clean by His blood and made fit for God's presence by the Holy Spirit. He is the Great Physician who permanently heals the wound that was just bandaged by the old system of sacrifices. The old cycle is gone. We may still make sacrifices that show our thankfulness to God – we give our money and our time, we participate in the life of the church – but the pattern of sacrifice for sin is over and done with forever through Jesus' sacrifice of Himself.

There are other cycles Jesus broke and refined. The one consistent complaint the Pharisees had against Jesus was that He did good works on the Sabbath, and He allowed His disciples to do things like pick heads of grain from a field on the Sabbath. But Jesus said it was perfectly within the law to do good on the Sabbath. "The Sabbath was made for man," Jesus said, "not man for the Sabbath." Christians don't celebrate the Jewish Sabbath at all. Instead, we meet on the day Jesus was resurrected, on Sunday, in celebration of that event. Every Sunday is meant to be a reminder of Easter.

Having to follow the pattern of festivals and rituals and all of that died with Christ because they pointed us to our need for Christ. And Christians have a permanent reminder of Him with them at all times in the form of the Holy Spirit. Whatever calendar patterns we choose to follow, we are not obligated to them by God.

As Paul says to the church in Colossi when they were debating the issue of what they had to do to be right with God, "God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Jesus even breaks the pattern that Ecclesiastes said would never be broken. Solomon wrote, "Is there anything of which one might say, 'See this, it is new'?" The birth of Jesus is truly something never before seen. God comes to us in human form – and not fully grown like the mythological characters, but as a baby, from the moment of His conception a servant to us, like us in every way except for sin. Jesus' releasing us from the stain and consequences of sin is something new. His grace is something new. Jesus promising us heaven, promising us a place in His eternal Kingdom, is new. When Jesus comes, He introduces the gloriously new into this world where it's all been seen and done before.

So where does this leave us? What does this matter for us? Here's the big deal for us – we are free in Christ. We no longer have to be stuck in sin that so often becomes a pattern for us. (We'll deal with that more next week.) We do not have to conform to the world's patterns. We don't have to celebrate its ways. What patterns we do adopt have one purpose – to act as regular reminders and refreshers of God's loving grace towards us and our appropriate response to that grace. We come together each week not because a law says we must, but because we desire to be around other people who remind us that God is good and He's working in all of us here. The celebrations we have, we celebrate to say “thank you” to God for all He is and all He does.

Here's the thing: do you love Christmas? Have you already started your movie marathon on the Hallmark Channel? Do you have Christmas carols already in your head? Is your tree already up and your home decorated? *Most importantly, is it bringing to mind daily the goodness of your Savior who came for you?* If so, rejoice in it! That's awesome. Enjoy the season. Do what you can to help others find God's grace during the season too.

But if Christmas is difficult or painful for you, and you feel like a Grinch? If you want to feel something good about Christmas but you can't? Just if you aren't feeling Christmas doesn't mean Jesus didn't come for you. Jesus came to heal the brokenhearted – which we'll talk about more in the coming weeks. Do you know that there are no established holy days in the New Testament that Christians have to follow? Mark and John don't even mention the birth of Jesus at all. The first recorded celebration of Christmas in the church was in 336 A.D., not in early church history. In fact, in the Presbyterian tradition we have, there's a history of only celebrating Easter. If events in your past or chaos in your present makes Christmas a hard holiday, don't let it get you down. We don't have to make a huge deal of Jesus' birth in the past; instead, our focus is on Him saving us in our present and future.

This Christmastime, know that because you have the Holy Spirit, you can celebrate the joy of Jesus at any time and any place. When Charles Dickens, himself a Christian, wrote *A Christmas Carol*, he put on the lips of a reformed Ebenezer Scrooge, “I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.” He had the right idea. The spirit of Christmas – the kindness we show, the generosity, the joy, the peace, the self-giving – that's actually not the spirit of a particular day. That's the Spirit of Christ Himself. May we live in the grace and love of His Spirit every day, as well as this holiday season.