

The Unique Christ: Why Christmas Matters
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 145:13-19, 2 Peter 1:2-8, Matthew 12:15-21

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Matthew 12:15-21. May God open our hearts and minds to His holy, precious, and perfect Word. “Aware of the Pharisees’ plot, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.””

If you’re watching this on Sunday morning, it’s December 27th. A couple of you might have already started taking your decorations down. I’m kinda hoping that some of us might keep them up later this year, light up the darkness a little while longer, but I get it. In America, at least, we have a huge buildup to Christmas, the Christmas season starts up mid-November, we’re buying Christmas presents the day after Thanksgiving, we’re buying peppermint mocha at Tim Horton’s before December even gets here.

But on December 26th, the radio is back to playing the greatest hits of the 80s and 90s, the stores start their post-Christmas sales and hurry to get out their Valentine’s Day décor, and Tim Horton’s puts away their peppermint and starts advertising heart shaped donuts. As our dear Katie Katie used to say once the presents were opened, “Christmas come and gone.” On to the next thing, the next headline, the next distraction. For many, Christmas Day is not a paid holiday, let alone the days surrounding it. We get done with Christmas Day and feel let down because of all the anticipation, all the gift wrapping, all the cooking, and it’s done in a moment.

Even if you celebrate Advent, like a fair number of churches like ours do, even if you’ve been thinking about the coming of Christ, reciting liturgy that remembers His first arrival, hearing the stories from Matthew and Luke, it still feels like it hits and it’s over. Baby Jesus is here, hurray! Now let’s move on to New Years and put the creche and the nativity back in the box for next year.

Part of this comes from our American rush. Part of it comes from wanting to move on to the next thing. Part of it comes from our Protestant roots and pushing back against a church calendar filled every day with the celebration of this or that saint. But we’ve lost something important in the meantime, I think. There’s a reason that, for the better part of 1,000 years, the universal church celebrated the birth of Jesus for 12 days, traditionally the date the wise men arrived. Many churches still do. Some churches celebrate the Christmas season for forty days, until the baby Jesus would have been presented at the temple.

Scripture teaches that Mary, having heard the report of the shepherds and their vision of angels, treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. I believe that Mary is a guide to us here. She had only the barest details of who her child was and who He would become. But she thought about what she had been told, contemplated it, turned it over and over again in her mind. It is my hope that we too might take the time over the next two weeks to mull over why Christmas really matters. Because if Christmas is just gifts and lights and eggnog, it doesn't really matter; it's just kind of fun. But if Christmas does really matter, then we'll join with the transformed Ebenezer Scrooge in saying, "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year."

So why does Christmas matter? I'm going to suggest a lot of things, but I'm going to start with this: *Christmas proves God keeps His promises.* Unlike all those who lived in the Old Testament era of history, we get to see the promises of God fulfilled. For literally thousands of years, God-fearing men and women longed to see God fulfill His promise of a Savior. They died with that hope still on their hearts and their lips. As Hebrews 11 describes the saints of old, "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth."

Christmas is the proof that God has not forgotten or forsaken us. In the midst of the hardship of this life, God has not abandoned us. He makes a way forward, a way into eternal life, a way better than what had come before. As the psalm we heard this morning said, "He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them." When Christ comes to Earth, we know that God keeps His Word. We are blessed to be on this side of history, the side where our hope is not found in the promise of Jesus but in Jesus Himself.

It's the difference between believing that you might get a gift you've been waiting for all year and seeing it sitting under the tree. It's the difference between hoping for a car at sweet 16 and taking it out for a test drive after finding it in your driveway. Jesus coming took the hopes of the centuries and made them real.

There is still a promise to come, of course, a promise that is not yet completely fulfilled, the promise of eternal life. And yet God, who has come through on His promise of a Messiah, surely will come through on the promise of what that Messiah has purchased for us through His own blood. And when we walk in His ways, when we follow in His teachings, when we talk with Him on a daily basis, we find that the eternal life we've been promised has already begun. The closeness with God has started. The promise has already begun to be proven true.

Why else does Christmas matter? *Christmas is the beginning of our union with Christ.* We don't always hear about this much. We think about Jesus as our Savior. We might think of Him as the gateway to eternal life, as He describes Himself. He is our rescuer, our redeemer, our Lord. But Christmas signals something more, at an even deeper level. As theologian J. P. Baker put it, "In Christ God becomes one with us in order to make us one with him; he stooped to take our nature, in order that we might be restored to become partakers of his nature." And this is what we heard in 2 Peter today: "God has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature."

What does this mean exactly, participating in the divine nature, having union with Christ? It means several things at once. It means that we are actually united to Him. As we saw in Revelation this year, we, the members of Christ's church, are united to Christ like a bride and bridegroom. We are meant to be closer than husband and wife in the sense that He stands for us, protects us, guards us, indeed, He gave His life for us. When we sin, His righteousness covers us and protects us from the punishment we are due. In our union with Him, we are considered holy by the Father not because of our own holiness but because of Christ's holiness – and not only that, we start to genuinely become holy and righteous as His perfection begin to be built up in us!

Peter encouraged us to take on more of the traits of Christ which He shares with us as we are united to Him. But it is not our striving in God's power that gives us those holy traits. Jesus Himself is our abundance, our righteousness, our holiness. We take hold of what is already ours in that union with Christ. When we belong to Jesus in faith, Jesus is ours, and all His traits are ours too, to grow in, to train in, that we might not just be called righteous because we are united to Him, but that we would be transformed into His likeness more and more.

God loves us so much that His goal is not just to bring His people into His Kingdom, not just to make us sons and daughters, princes and princesses of the world to come, not just to save us from hell, but to unite us to Himself. That closeness, that rich fellowship, that intimacy, is God's design for us. That closeness and fellowship and intimacy is shown to us at Christmas, at the birth of Jesus, who draws near to us, who is God with us.

Without Christmas, union with God cannot happen. Our sins are too great, our disobedience too condemning; God will not unite with those who despise Him. Even in the Old Testament, God's Holy Spirit comes to rest on His people for a time, yet union with God, to be like God in His very being, not in His divinity but in His righteousness and love and grace, it was a dream that would only be fulfilled in the far future.

But Christmas signals that God is on the move! At Christmas, Jesus comes and signals the end of the dark times. At Christmas, we see the march already beginning toward Easter. At Christmas, we see God, close to us, real to us, personal, preparing the way that His creation that He loves can be where He is forever. Once Jesus becomes incarnate at Christmas, the means to make us whole and holy is in motion. When Jesus takes on flesh, we can finally unite to Him rather than to Adam. When Jesus becomes the God-man, all who would trust in Him in faith have not just heaven in their sights but closeness to the one who created heaven.

This union with Christ is so important because we must remember what heaven is, and what the promise of the New Heaven and the New Earth is. Heaven is the place where God dwells. The New Heaven and the New Earth is where God's people live near Him, where we are His people and He is our God, dwelling among us. I think that heaven and hell's architecture may be similar. I imagine that the New Jerusalem and the pits of the abyss may mirror one another. The key difference, the difference between heaven and hell, is the presence of God's favor and the presence of God's wrath. Turning back again to the story of *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge lived in a hell of his own making though he was rich, and Bob Cratchit lived a blessed life despite having nothing but the love of God and his family. Union with Christ means that, in this world or the next, we are blessed no matter our external circumstances.

Why else does Christmas matter? *Christmas provides us not with the Savior we want, but the Savior we need.* We tend to think we need a little help to get to heaven, and Jesus gives us that nudge. A recent survey found a desperate state of affairs – over 40% of those in Protestant churches and over 66% of those in Catholic churches believe that good works will get you into heaven. That doesn't include all the people who don't go to church at all. That would spike the numbers even higher.

Most people think of the afterlife a bit like Clark Griswold thinks about his bonus in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. For those of you who haven't seen it, Clark is so excited about his Christmas bonus that he makes a payment on an in-ground pool, confident in what will be coming. After all sorts of Christmas shenanigans, Clark receives his long-awaited bonus on Christmas Eve, only to find out that this year it's a membership in the Jelly of the Month Club. Clark, who's held it together all Christmas season, loses it. His cousin Eddie goes and kidnaps his boss for ruining Christmas. Eventually the police arrive, the boss is berated for his lack of Christmas spirit, and he winds up giving Clark and everyone in the office double last year's Christmas bonus. All is well with the Griswolds.

Many people see the road to heaven as something like that. You work hard, you pay your taxes, you don't do anything too bad, and you deserve heaven. Yeah, it may be a bonus, but it's a bonus you deserve. For God not to give you the bonus of heaven is mean-spirited, just like Clark's boss. Sure, heaven isn't promised, but surely I've been good enough. For many Americans, God is simply a mystical Santa Claus who will bring every good girl and boy heaven, keeping out only those who've been truly naughty.

But if we only needed a nudge, if we only needed a little help, God would not have sent His Son to die on our behalf. If we just needed a push over the finish line, God would have found another way than to put Jesus through all He experienced in His earthly life. Christ would not have lived through the indignities of this life to save people if they really didn't need saving. There is no good news if all Jesus does is boost us over the wall of heaven. But that's the savior many people want.

The sad fact is that those 40% of Protestants and 66% of Catholics have fallen into the same trap as the Pharisees, who Jesus called sons of the devil. They believe they can be worthy on their own merits. But Scripture teaches us something completely different. It teaches us that we are spiritually dead. In Ephesians 2, God says that his listeners had once been dead in their sins and transgressions, just like everyone else in the world, pleasing their sinful natures. Not gasping for breath, not fighting to survive, but dead as a doornail dead. No bringing in the spiritual paramedics, no thinking that we are just spiritually unwell. We are dead and buried. That is the bad news.

The good news, the gospel itself, is that Jesus came to rescue sinners who were, being spiritually dead, totally unable to rescue themselves. Jesus is the Savior we need, the Savior who in His perfection can bring us back to life, not just body but spirit and soul. We don't need someone to give us a push in the right direction. We need someone who can bring us back from the dead. Christmas brings the hope of that resurrection to us.

And that's what Christmas points to: the spiritual and physical resurrection to come for all who turn to Christ. There are plenty of little "s" saviors in the world, people who can protect you from harm. But there is only one Savior who can save you from yourself, who can save you from the righteous wrath you are due for your sin. That's Jesus. That's the good news.

You don't have to be a good person who needs some helping out. Jesus saves the worst of us and unites us to Himself and makes us like Him, bringing us into the divine life and divine nature itself. Jesus promised paradise to the thief on the cross beside Him who not an hour before had been hurling insults at Him when the thief's heart changed and he believed Jesus. Jesus turned around a murderous Pharisee responsible for the deaths of His people, Paul, and made him into the apostle to the Gentiles. If He would save them, He would save us. Not because we deserve it, but because He loves us.

Last reason why Christmas matters: *Christmas brings God to the least, the last, and the lost.* There's a reason that Isaiah said the nations would put their hope in Jesus. Before Jesus, the nations had no hope. They had no true God, no lasting promise of salvation, no firm foundation on which to base their lives. The promises of God were only for Israel. But in Jesus, the least of the nations could find hope and rest and justice and peace. Every individual from every land could find themselves reflected in Jesus' love.

Christmas brings God near to us in a way we can understand. To the hurting and rejected, the broken and afflicted, the addicted and the wayward, God often seems so far away. It seems that we have chased God off with our wickedness or our brokenness or our painful losses that even our friends can't cope with. But something about the infant King draws us back. If the Son was willing to make Himself this vulnerable with us, maybe I can be vulnerable with Him. If He knew the pain of loss, maybe He understands my pain. He had dinner with tax collectors and breakfast with notorious sinners; maybe He will sit down with me and sort out my life too.

Christmas reminds the proud that they need a Savior, but Christmas teaches the humbled that God will lift them up. Christmas proves that our promise-keeping God has come through for us with truly good news. And perhaps greatest of all, Christmas shows us that God wants to be close to us, united to us, with us forevermore. Those truths are well worth pondering throughout the Christmas season and well into the new year.