

Sermon – New Hope Bible Fellowship Christmas Service – Dec 22nd, 2019

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One of my favorite things (and probably one of yours too) is watching babies grow up. Whenever little Nathaniel is with us he just lights up the room. This delight seems to be pretty universal; all people share the joy of birth, of bringing a new life into the world. You can see this in the blessings we pray over our children, our baby dedication ceremonies and birthday wishes. And most people, even selfish people, wish for happiness for their children. In addition to naming our children, we also name them. Sometimes to pay homage to someone important in our past (like naming a child after a parent or grandparent, or a famous celebrity) or in accordance with what our hopes and aspirations for this child will be. We have names to identify where we come from, to whom we belong, and the hope for our future life. And usually, we hope that the child will have a good and prosperous life.

We see this also with the birth of Jesus. As in Luke 1:31-33, where the most lavish and ambitious blessing is bestowed on him. He will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High. He will have a throne, a kingdom without end! To Luke's audience, this title would carry connotations of a claim to David's throne or Caesar's throne, depending if you were Jewish or Gentile. His name also gives us clues to his identity and destiny. Jesus is Yeshua, which is a form of Joshua, the name of Moses' successor who lead the Israelites into the promised land. The name can be translated as something like "he saves", so the blessing that the baby Jesus receives before he is even born is that he would be someone who saves his people as a king. This sounds like a great purpose in life right?

But as Jesus begins his public ministry, his life and destiny doesn't seem all that majestic, and furthermore he begins telling his closest followers that the real purpose of his life is to suffer and die. Wait, what? But we were told that Jesus will be a great king!

Imagine you were in his shoes. Or if you can't do that, then his disciples. Mark tells us what happened when Jesus started telling the disciples that he must be rejected, suffer and die. Peter rebuked him, and Jesus' response was severe and revealing. He tells Peter to "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mark 8:33) "Satan" means adversary of God. In other words, Peter's well-intentioned words actually puts him in opposition with God. What seems like a very natural human response gets the harshest critique from Jesus. And perhaps that very humanness of Peter's response is the problem, for Jesus tells him that he is not setting his mind on the things of God, but the things of man.

Elsewhere, we see that Jesus also makes clear that this suffering and death is the very purpose of his life. In John 12:27, just after Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the final time, he exclaims, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour." This purpose. The purpose of an agonizing death on a cross, shamed and rejected by the very people he came to save.

Can you imagine telling your child, that they reason you brought them into this world was so that they could suffer and die? Only the most callous and cruel parents could do such a thing. Could God do this? If He does, it is certainly not because he is cruel to Himself, God gains nothing from that. And our theologians tell us that this is not a single decision but a joint decision. The Son and the Father jointly agree to this unfathomable act.

So what could possibly lead them to choose such a thing?

Well, John 3:16. For God SO loved the world. For good reason is this possibly the most famous verse in all Scripture. God so loved us that he took it upon Himself to do all that was needed to save us. Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus, whatever you call Him, that is who he is, the God who loves and saves.

And this saving consists of nothing less than suffering and dying on our behalf for our sins. The very one who was perfect and sinless willingly chose to enter our world of sin and death and decay to deliver us from it.

Because as shocking as the suggestion of bringing a baby into the world so that it could suffer and die may sound; if we look around, that is indeed what our lives seem to be. Human life is a continual struggle against both the reality and the awareness of death. We can't escape it. And why? John tells us it's because the world has been cut off from its true source of life, the living Word of God, and lives in darkness because it does not want its evil ways to be exposed. Because we are ourselves sinful and we live in a sinful world, we are justly cut off from God and eternal life.

Although we are born into suffering and death, the good news is that God is both with us in our pain but also that in taking it upon Himself, we receive the eternal life that is in Him and which only He can give. How is it that in the body of Jesus we are saved from death and sin and given eternal life?

St. Athanasius explains it well: "he prepared for himself...the body as a temple...making himself known and dwelling in it. And thus, taking from ours that which is like [a body], since all we liable to the corruption of death, delivering it over to death on behalf of all...doing this in love for human beings, so that...with all dying in him the law...might be undone, and that...he might turn them again to incorruptibility and give them life from death, by making the body his own and by the grace of the resurrection." (On the Incarnation, p. 57)

Jesus comes and through his body restores humanity to its rightful and intended relationship with God, one of blessing and love. And He was willing to go through everything we go through, and even more, freely, out of His own love for us, in order that we could share in His eternal life.

This is the gift of Christmas, the true light, the true life, that came to us, lived with us, suffered with us, died with us and for us, and raised for us, so that we could also be raised.