

THE COST OF CHRISTMAS

Magical (Part 5) | Matthew 2:13-21; Philippians 2:5-11

The Cost of Our Christmas

Good morning, dear friends. It is a special delight to be finishing up the Christmas week and on the cusp of an exciting New Year together. This is my second Sunday in a row in this space but --- even when I'm coming to you via video or ministering in another part of Christ Church – this congregation is always in my heart.

Today, you're hearing from THREE Christ Church pastors. You've already had Charlie speaking with you. You're being required to endure ME right now. And happily, you will also be hearing from Steve Noble, our Pastor of Family Ministry, who contributed some of the best material in this sermon. If you end up liking the message, drop a thank you to Steve! If you aren't helped by it, bother me!

Let me just begin by saying that I hope you had a good Christmas. Christmas can be a wonderful time, especially when you are a kid. Let me ask the kids here: ***Do you like Christmas? Yes or No?*** I get that. When you are a kid, Christmas is like this Santa's-Bag-of-Blessings that just gets poured out upon you. When I was a child, our house at Christmas always looked amazing. It was decorated outside and inside with lights and greens and all kinds of ribbons and bows. There were steaming bowls of delicious food and mouth-watering treats. On Christmas morning, my dad would cut the string that tied closed the double doors to our living room and my brothers and sister and I would tumble into the room like puppies climbing over each other. In the hearth there'd be a woodfire blazing. Over the stereo system, the sound of Christmas carols would be playing. There before us would be these piles of beautifully wrapped presents. It was, in a word, MAGICAL.

It wasn't until Amy and I had our own kids that I fully realized how much WORK was behind all this MAGIC. Those fabulous decorations... that incredible food... the crackling fire... the beautiful music... those carefully wrapped presents – many put together by exhausted hands into the wee hours of the morning -- were the gift of someone willing to pay the price to give us all those magical moments. Until I was responsible for helping to put the holiday on for others, I never really thought much about THE COST OF CHRISTMAS.

I'm going to pause here... I want to invite you to turn to the people around you and reflect on the special moments you experienced this holiday week, or maybe when you were young. ***Turn to someone around you and share - what were some of the prices you and the loved ones in your life paid to make the Christmas holiday special? Why were you (or someone else) willing to pay that price?***

The Cost of the First Christmas

I asked you to consider the reason you or your loved ones were willing to cover the cost of making the Christmas holiday special for others. How many of you said the reason was **LOVE**? Why do we sacrifice our energy, time, and money to care for the people in our lives? Because we love them. I invite you to picture the faces of some of the people who, in any season, have spent themselves and sacrificed for you, not because you were necessarily perfect or because you were giving so much back to them but simply because of the magical reality that they loved you.

In the Gospel stories we associate with Christmas, there are many shining examples of characters who do this. They sacrifice for the sake of their love for God or for another human being. A teenage girl named Mary sacrifices her freedom and bodily comfort to bear an unplanned pregnancy. She does it to honor God's purposes, saying: **I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled. (Luke 1:38).**

Her fiancé, Joseph, pays a huge price, too. Mary's pregnancy is humiliating to him. It likely makes him a laughingstock in his community and may have even jeopardized his ability to earn a living. But out of love for Mary and God, Joseph doesn't check out or run away. He takes Mary to be his wife and protects her until it comes time for the child to be born. And then, later, to protect this child from those who would kill him, Mary and Joseph both pay the price of leaving their home and living as refugees in Egypt.

The Magi (or wise men) we've been studying so closely this past month are further examples of sacrifice based on devotion to someone. Believing that the child born in Bethlehem was someone truly special and worthy of worship, the Magi leave their families and jobs. Following a star, they embark upon a long, difficult, and dangerous road trip through hot sands and cold nights. They carry with them heavy and expensive gifts, all for the purpose of lavishing them on a mere child. And when they run into a megalomaniacal (bad dude) king named Herod who wants them to tell him where he can find this child who is said to be the future King of the Jews, the Magi sacrifice the financial pay-off they might have gotten by doing that. They sacrifice their bodily safety by ignoring Herod's wishes and return to their homes by another route.

All of these characters in this great story take on immense personal cost. Why? For the same reason we gave earlier... LOVE. They are willing to pay a price out of love for God and reverence for Jesus. They continue to worship God amidst great hardship and threat. They honor the work God is doing even when they don't understand all of it. They keep putting their hope in the promise that as bad as things look in this moment, God is in the process of making all things new. But the faith of all God's people will be tested even more greatly. In a maniacal quest to kill the child who is a threat to his throne, King Herod orders a genocide. The end of the Christmas story, as the gospel-writer Matthew tells it, is filled with both tears and worship, as the people of God mourn the horror of what evil does, and worship God for the hope of what He is still doing.

It's a bit like a scene in the Old Testament Book of Ezra where the people of God have finally returned from a long agonizing exile and completed the building of a new temple. As the last bricks are set in place, many in the crowd rejoice in hope for the future as elders in the community weep in heartache over all that had been lost in the past. Ezra reports that: **No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise (Ezra 3:13).**

This story, the Christmas story, and probably our own stories are a mysterious, magical confluence of hope and heartache, worship and tears. We appropriately mourn lives lost in the great struggle of good versus evil and all the pain and questions each of us and those we love must carry through this life. At the same time, we celebrate all that God has done and is going to do. We rejoice that He is in the business of remaking the world. For his light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

As the band comes to play and the ushers come forward to receive our final offering of 2023, I invite you to truthfully acknowledge the place of tears in your own life and that of our world. But, in view of the Great Light that has come into this world, may we, like the characters we've examined today, continue to sing to the God who is worthy of our sacrifice and worthy of our song. **[OFFERTORY: WORTHY OF MY SONG]**

The Cost Christ Paid

As we consider the price paid by Mary, Joseph, the Magi, and the innocent children of Israel and Palestine, we'd be missing the most important message of the Christmas narrative if we overlooked the immense sacrifice of the central figure in the story. In all our sentimental fascination with the manger, we sometimes forget that this wooden box is only a stop on the way to a much less hospitable wooden structure.

In the second chapter of his Letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul quotes the words of what many scholars believe to be the earliest piece of writing in the New Testament – the words of a hymn or song that had become an anthem of the early church. The hymn was passed along – first just by oral tradition and then captured by St. Paul – to remind early followers of Christ what their life with and for Jesus should be about.

In your relationships with [other people] have the same mindset as Christ 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” (Philippians 2:5-8). The words of this hymn methodically track the descending steps that Jesus walked on his way to the cross – to the place where out of love for you and me, Christ gave his body as a living sacrifice – the only sacrifice sufficient to pay the price needed to set us free from guilt for our sin and fear of our death.

Philippians 2 links the manger and the cross – the incarnation and the crucifixion – and it raises this huge question: If Christ himself didn't use his divinity to his advantage, but humbled himself, taking on the appearance of a man and then a servant and then a sacrificial lamb... How should I live? What should I do with my advantages? How low should I be willing to stoop as an expression of love? German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that celebrating Christmas properly involves sitting with Christ in what theologians call his *kenosis*, literally, his "self-emptying." Bonhoeffer writes: "*Who of us would want to celebrate Christmas correctly? Who will finally lay at the manger all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all pride, and all selfishness? Who is content to be lowly and to let God alone be high?*"¹

Herod wasn't willing to do this. He properly understood that Christmas is bad news for selfish, inwardly turned people! It is a summon to radical reorientation and change. Sometimes, we hold on to our current condition because we worry that if we sacrificed it we'd lose status or significance. This is why reading further in Scripture matters. You see, I read to you only the first half of the ancient Christian hymn that Paul quotes in Philippians 2. But just as the poem feels like its bottoming out, describing Christ's death on the cross, it begins to rise again, like someone emerging from a wintry grave to the warm sun of spring: **Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"** (Philippians 2:9-11).

Christmas celebrates the start of the turning of history – the moment when in the millennia-long battle of good and evil -- God landed on the decisive beachhead and began an invasion that will result in the utter redemption of this creation. Because we often think of power so differently, it's critical to note that this watershed was brought about not through force of will or strength of arms, but through staggering humility. Christ's self-emptying love is the power that can redeem life and you and I are invited to follow his pattern and join in his glory.

Why did Jesus assume the costs implied in his mission? Just like the other characters in the Christmas story, the answer is LOVE. John 3:16 says it like this: **For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son.** God sacrifices for us because of his great love for us. As he says in John 10:10: **I have come [you] may have life and have it to the full.** Or as he amplifies in Luke 4, I've come: **To proclaim good news to the poor... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.** We follow an ego-emptying, self-sacrificing, cost-paying God – a Supreme Being who calls us to be like him.

As a girl named Lucy quips in C.S. Lewis' THE LAST BATTLE: Once upon a time "*In our world... a stable had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.*" Think

about this as you hear this next song. One Holy Night in Bethlehem, this needy planet was invaded by a LOVE bigger than the whole world... Someone who holds YOU and ME. **[SONG: O HOLY NIGHT]**

The Cost We'll Bear in This New Year

The Great Story of the birth Christ (as well as the supporting stories of people like Mary, Joseph, and the Magi) are about the sacrificial lengths that LOVE will go for the sake of the beloved and the implications of that for you and me. You see, at the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus gave this charge to his followers and by extension to us: **Just as the Father sent me, so too I send you... then he breathed on them and said, "receive the Holy Spirit! (John 20:21-22)**. In the same way that Jesus came into the world, in the same way that he lived, we are invited to go out into the world. Loving and lifting others. This is what we practice in our families at Christmastime. We give of ourselves, we take on personal cost to bless those around us... motivated by LOVE. In small or large ways, we imitate the Lord who emptied himself for the sake of others.

So, as we walk into the new year, the question is: ***What sacrifices do I need to make or costs do I need to bear in order to advance God's purposes?*** Is there an opinion or attitude I need to alter to build a greater connection with someone around me? Is there a behavior or addiction I need to give up? Is there an advantage or privilege I could surrender to make life better for someone else? What do I need to walk away to follow the star that leads me closer to Jesus? In what relationship might Christ call me to stoop even lower to serve his purposes?

These are important questions as we wrap up the Advent season today and enter the New Year because, as Howard Thurman penned many years ago...

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.*

That's our calling: To carry Christmas with us every day and everywhere we go. Because if we do that, it will please God and make this world just a bit more MAGICAL.

Please pray with me...

Closing Prayer

*Lord, we confess that we sometimes get Christmas wrong. We admit that we sometimes regard it as mere spectators, as if only the people in the First Christmas Story were going to bear the Cost and Responsibility of Christmas. But, Lord, we remember today that the ripples of Christmas wash out into the future before us. As we enter 2024, help us to remember that **YOU became like US, so that WE might become like YOU. You sent your SON into the world to send US into the world as agents of your self-giving love.** So we rededicate ourselves to being people who are more willing to pay the price and bear the burden and share the ministry of **LIFTING** others toward their God-given potential. For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

The Doxology

In closing today I'd like to invite you to rise to your feet and join me in singing the doxology. For many years these words have been sung by the Church in moments of transition, as the old passes away and we look forward to God's work in the season to come. Let's sing together...

News of the Family

As you prepare to go forth today...

1. Pick up a **JANUARY CALENDAR CARD** for yourself
2. Grab a few invitation cards for others that describing the wonderful two-week series with which we'll start the New Year. It's called **HOW TO RAISE HUMANS IN A COMPLEX WORLD** (messages and workshops)
3. It'll be especially good to have you back here next Sunday as we'll be starting the year by including the Sacrament of **HOLY COMMUNION** in our service.
4. If you are new to the church, we hope you'll join us right up here in front after the service for **CHRIST CHURCH IN 5** – a very brief orientation to this church family and a chance for us to get to know YOU.
5. As always, a few of us will be available for **PRAYER**. Just let us know what's on your heart today.

Benediction

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from a 1933 Advent sermon.