



# Central Peninsula Church

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Mark Mitchell  
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## Christmas in Jerusalem

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

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One of the challenges of being a pastor is deciding what to preach on days like this. For most preachers, it's a source of some tension that these holidays are relentless in happening each and every year. So this year, as I was racking my brain about some new twist I might be able to put on the old story of Christmas, someone suggested that I just stick with the series that we've been in for several weeks now, which is on the book of Acts. They thought that since we have a lot of guests here on a day like this maybe it would be good for them to see what a normal message is like here. At first I thought that wasn't such a good idea; I mean, Christmas is special and it deserves a special message. Last time I looked the book of Acts said nothing about Mary and Joseph and Magi and shepherds.

But then I got to thinking about this story in Acts 3. We began to look at it last week. It's the story of the miraculous healing of a 40-year-old man who had been lame from birth. You may recall how the apostle Peter passed him as he was begging for alms by one of the main gates into the Jerusalem temple, and said to him, "In the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene—walk!" We saw how the man immediately leaped up and began to walk, following Peter and John into the Temple, and then as they came out a huge crowd began to gather in what was called the portico of Solomon, amazed at what they had seen. They knew this guy. They saw him every day begging in the same place. And now he was leaping and walking and praising God. So as the crowd is gathered around, Peter explains to them what just happened; what God had done.

As I thought about all of this and as I looked at Peter's message, it struck me that this is just like Christmas in a number of ways. Christmas is about God doing something in history; something amazing, something we have to respond to. Christianity is not a theory. It can't be reduced to some kind of moral teaching or philosophy. The teaching part, the theory part, comes only to explain what God has done. If you look at all the major religions of the world you'll see that this is what sets the Christian faith apart. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and so on—these are all basically just philosophy. They don't claim to be anything else. They tell us how to live and what to believe and so forth but they're not tied to anything God has done in history. But the Christian faith is different. It's about something that is first done by God in history and the teaching part comes in to explain it.

And it hit me—that's what we have going on in this story in Acts, and that's what we have going on in the Christmas story. God first does something in history. A carpenter has a dream. A virgin is with child. Angels announce his birth. Magi follow a star. God does these things, and then and only then is it all explained. And when it's explained, it's all about Jesus Christ, the Nazarene; it's all about WHO this child is and why he was sent. In Acts, Peter wants them to know that it was not by his own power or piety that this man was healed, but by faith in the name of Jesus Christ that he was healed. Christmas is about the birth of this same Jesus. Why is he so special? What was God doing when he sent this Jesus into the world? The old carol says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Is that true? Are all your hopes and all your fears met in him? In his message there on the portico of Solomon, Peter tells us why.

### **The lame man was healed by faith in the name of Jesus.**

1. *First of all, Jesus is God's "servant."* Peter says, **"But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, 'Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him'"** (vv. 12-13). When Peter calls Jesus God's "servant" he uses a term every Jew in that audience would have understood. They would have thought back to the prophet Isaiah. Five hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah devoted a great deal of his time writing about one who was to come, called **"the servant of God"** (Is.42-53). He would be chosen by the Lord, endowed with the Spirit, and unlike Israel obedient to God in every way. His mission would be to bring the rebellious Jewish nation back to God. And he would be a light to all the nations of the earth. He was also to suffer. Isaiah described him as "despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." Yet he said that God would also greatly exalt him. This is Jesus. This is what Peter says about him right here. He says even though you delivered him up and disowned him when Pilate was ready to release him, God glorified him; God highly exalted him.

Just this past year many so-called servants of God

have disappointed us. We've seen the moral collapse of religious and political leaders. People who were supposed to serve have ended up serving only themselves. We wonder at times who we can trust. We see in ourselves the same flightiness we loathe in others, and we wonder, "Is there anyone we can trust? Is there anyone who is truly God's servant?" Well, I am here to tell you that Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, was the embodiment of what it means to be a servant of God. He was humble. He was strong. He was compassionate. He was true.

2. *Second, Jesus is "the Holy and Righteous One."* Peter says in v.14, "**But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you,...**". When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce her pregnancy he said, "*the holy child* shall be called the Son of God." Thirty years later, at the very beginning of Jesus ministry, he was confronted by a man with a demon, who cried out when he saw him, "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—*the Holy One* of God." He was righteous and just. Not the kind of self-righteousness we all loathe, but an attractive, winsome kind of righteousness. Peter, who had lived with him for three years said, "He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth." Imagine living with someone for three years and never hearing one single unkind or untrue word come from their mouth! But Peter was his friend. How about his enemies? On one occasion he asked those who would later deliver him over to death, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" None of them could come up with a single thing. So at his trial, they had to trump up charges. He himself said, "I always do the things that please the Father." The thief on the cross agreed and said, "this man has done nothing wrong." Even Pilate said, "I find no guilt in him." Jesus Christ, the Nazarene is the Holy and Righteous One, yet, Peter says "you asked for a murderer to be released instead."

All of us long to be holy and righteous. Yet we all know how short we fall. One of the most wonderful things about the gospel is that we get to exchange our sin for his holiness and righteousness. Did you know that? Galatians says that "**all those who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.**" (Gal. 3:27). So the holiness and righteousness of Jesus is God's gift to us and it covers us like clothing. When God sees us he doesn't see our sin, he sees HIS righteousness!

3. *Third, Jesus is the "Prince of Life."* Look at v.15. "**...but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.**" That word "Prince" means "author" or "originator." So, instead of one who gives

life they preferred a murderer who took away life. John called Jesus the Word made flesh and said "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being. In him was life and the life was the Light of men." This is what makes Christmas such a wondrous thing. This little baby, so vulnerable, a part of creation; he was the Creator; he was and is the author of Life! And the resurrection confirmed that. Death couldn't hold the author of life in its grip!

That's what we all want, isn't it? We all want life, not just a dreary existence, but life that's full and exciting. That's what he gives. And it's not just for here, it's for eternity. We've had several memorial services here this past week and will have another one on Thursday. It's such a tough time to lose a loved one. For some of you this is your first Christmas without a parent or a spouse who died this past year. So let this be a comfort to you. Jesus is the Prince of Life. Your believing loved one is with him. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life... I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am you may be also."

4. *Fourth, Jesus is the one who suffered in fulfillment of prophecy.* Up until this point, Peter has laid the guilt for the death of Jesus at the feet of his listeners. He said, "You delivered and disowned him...you asked for a murderer instead...you put to death the Prince of Life." But now he looks at this from another angle. In vv.17–19 he says, "**And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;...**". He's not excusing their sin. They knew that the Old Testament made distinctions between sins of ignorance and willful sin. Remember what Jesus said on the cross, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." They should have known, but they didn't know who Jesus was. But even though they didn't know what they were doing, God knew what he was doing. What happened to Jesus on the cross was fulfillment of ancient prophecy. It was part of his plan. But they still needed to repent. And if they repented and turned to God he would wipe away their sins and bring times of refreshing. You see, there was a purpose behind the cross. The cross was necessary. It's the only way our sin could be wiped away—to have Jesus pay for it.

J. Sidlow Baxter writes, "Separate Christmas Day from Good Friday, and Christmas is doomed—doomed to decay into a merely sentimental or superstitious or sensuous 'eat-drink-and-be-merry' festivity of December. Bethlehem and Golgotha, the Manger and the Cross, the birth and the death, must always be seen together, if the

real Christmas is to survive with all its profound inspirations; for 'the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve; and to give His life a ransom for many.'"

Anyone here need to have your sins wiped away? Anyone burdened by a load of shame and guilt? Anyone need to feel the relief and refreshment of knowing that God through Christ gives you a clean slate every day? I heard about a guy who was at the post office in the last days before Christmas. After helping him out, the postal clerk asked the standard question: "Is there anything else I can do for you?" The man just muttered, "Yeah, can you help me pay for Christmas?" Without missing a beat, she replied, "He already paid for it." When you think about it, it's true. Christ paid for Christmas. He may not pay your Visa bill, but all that you enjoy in terms of spiritual blessings, forgiveness, refreshment, hope—Christ paid for!

5. *Fifth, Jesus is the One who will come again and restore all things.* Look at vv.20–21. **"...and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time."** At Christmas, we celebrate the first coming of Christ, but we also look forward to his second coming as well. Christ was sent from heaven once, and he'll be sent once again. Peter describes this as "the period of restoration of all things." This will include the restoration of all creation. Scripture says sin has impacted creation and nature so that it groans. We see this in natural disasters and diseases and the depletion of our natural resources.

I went and saw Mel Gibson's new movie, *Apocalypto*. Warning: it's very gruesome and violent. But one of the things it does is depict so well the fallen state of all creation. These Mayans are dealing with vicious snakes, jaguars, quicksand, hornets, poisonous frogs, not to mention the human sacrifices. The whole point of the movie is how a society deteriorates from within before it's destroyed from without. That's what is happening even right here in America. A good argument could be made for the fact that we're destroying ourselves from within. But with the next coming of Jesus we look forward to the restoration of all things. Creation will be set free from its slavery. And we'll be given restored, glorified bodies that aren't subject to death and decay.

Michael Card writes, "All we could ever imagine, could ever hope for, He is. ... He is the Prince of Peace whose first coming has already transformed society but whose second coming will forever establish justice and righteousness. All this, and infinitely more, alive in an impoverished baby in a barn. That is what Christmas means--to find IN a place where you would least expect to find anything you want, everything you could ever want."

6. *Sixth, Jesus is the "prophet" that Moses and others spoke of.* Look at vv.22–24. **"Moses said, 'THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE**

**ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN; TO HIM YOU SHALL GIVE HEED to everything He says to you. And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.' And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days."** Way back in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses warned his people against using magical practices to discover God's will, which is what so many of the nations around them did. Instead, he says that God would raise up a prophet for them like Moses. The idea is that he would have the ability to know and declare God's will. And God did that; he raised up many prophets throughout Israel's history, who helped them understand what God wanted them to do at various times. But they still looked forward to one final prophet, the greatest of all, who would declare God's will in kind of a final sense.

American culture has its prophets. In the fall of 2005, Oprah Winfrey entered her 20th season as the host of her own show. She's amassed over \$1.4 billion, assembled a U.S. television audience of more than 49 million viewers each week, and informed her viewers on matters ranging from genocide in Rwanda to the best-tasting oatmeal cookies. Oprah's influence has also entered the spiritual realm. By the late '90s, Winfrey's focus was Change Your Life TV. She preached, making the message of *her* life the substance of the show. Keep a personal journal, purchase self-indulgent gifts, take time for *you* because *you* deserve it. The notes rang true to millions of viewers. Going even further, the religion writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times* suggested that Oprah has become America's pastor. There is evidence to support this theory. A recent poll found that 33 percent of its 6,600 respondents said Winfrey has had "a more profound impact" on their spiritual lives than any clergy. With churches in decline, people are showing up at "The Church of Oprah" instead. In the eyes of some, Oprah is almost beyond human: Last fall, Jamie Foxx said to Oprah on the air, "What you have is something nobody can describe." Later he declared, "You're going to get to heaven and everyone's waiting on God and it's going to be Oprah Winfrey." Clair Zulkey, 26, an Oprah follower who has written about Winfrey on her blog, says, "I think that if this were the equivalent of the Middle Ages and we were to fast-forward 1,200 years, scholars would definitely think that this Oprah person was a deity, if not a canonized being."

People are desperate for truth. People want a prophet to tell them how to live. We want to know what God's will is. We want to stop depending on the shifting opinions of cultural experts. We live in a day when our politicians lie, our cultural heroes (sports, entertainment) lie. Who can we trust to tell us the truth?

Who can we trust to tell us God's will? Oprah or Jesus Christ?

It's an important choice. Peter says if you don't pay heed to this prophet you will be destroyed and cut off from God's people. The whole matter of who we listen to and who we pay heed to is a matter of life and death. Jesus said, **"If you continue in my word...you will know the truth and the truth will set you free"** (Jn.8:31-32). You and I need to pay heed to the prophet, Jesus. We need to listen to him.

7. *Finally, Jesus is the seed of Abraham who brings blessing to all.* Look at how Peter closes the sermon in vv.25–26. **"It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.' For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways."** The promise to Abraham, made several thousand years ago, was a promise that through his seed not just the Jews but all the nations of the earth would be blessed. And that seed was Jesus Christ "sent to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways." You might say the Jews had first "crack" at that blessing, for Jesus himself was a Jew. But that blessing is promised to each and every one of us. This is the message of Christmas: Jesus Christ, God's Son, was sent not to condemn us, not to judge us, but to bless us. And that's what we all want—God's blessing.

## CONCLUSION

I heard a story about Roaring Camp in nearby Felton. Back in the day, it was the meanest, toughest mining town in all of the West. More murders, more thefts—it was a terrible place inhabited entirely by men, and one woman who tried to serve them all. Her name was Cherokee Sal. She died while giving birth to a baby. Well, the men took the baby, and they put her in a box with some old rags under her. When they looked at her, they decided it didn't look right, so they sent one of the men 80 miles to buy a rosewood cradle. He brought it back, and they put the rags and the baby in the rosewood cradle. And the rags didn't look right there. So they sent another of their number to Sacramento, and he came back with some beautiful silk and lace blankets. And they put the baby, wrapped around with those blankets, in the rosewood cradle. It looked fine until someone happened to notice that the floor was filthy. So these hardened, tough men got down on their hands and knees, and with their hardened hands they scrubbed that floor until it was very clean. Of

course, what that did was to make the walls and the ceiling and the dirty windows without curtains look absolutely terrible. So they washed down the walls and the ceiling, and they put curtains at the windows. Now things were beginning to look as they thought they should look. But of course, they had to give up a lot of their fighting, because the baby slept a lot, and babies can't sleep during a brawl.

So the whole climate of Roaring Camp seemed to go down. They used to take her out and set her by the entrance to the mine in her rosewood cradle so they could see her when they came up. Then somebody noticed what a dirty place that was, so they planted flowers, and they made a very nice garden there. It looked quite beautiful. And they would bring her shiny little stones and things that they would find in the mine. But when they would put their hands down next to hers, their hands looked so dirty. Pretty soon the general store was all sold out of soap and shaving gear and perfume and those kinds of things. The baby changed everything.

Jesus changes everything. He was sent by God to bless us. All we have to do is repent and return and put our faith in him, so that your sins might be wiped away and times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

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