

Sermon Title: "Jesus Has Come... So What?"

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Intro: Now What?

I came across an interesting quote from humourist Kin Hubbard (1868-1930) this week: "*Next to a circus there ain't nothing that packs up and tears out faster than the Christmas spirit.*"

When I was a kid, I never looked forward to the time after Christmas. It always felt like such a letdown. All of the hype, all of the anticipation... no sooner had the object of my longing come than it was gone!

All of the good food, the relatives I hadn't seen for a while, the opportunities to stay up way later than usual... gone. All of the presents that had been mysteriously calling my name for weeks... no longer mysterious.

By mid-January, the toys seemed commonplace and familiar. The Christmas cards were outdated and seemed only to be cluttering up the house. The newness and excitement was gone. The prospect of six more months of school and a cold prairie winter loomed on the horizon.

Christmas was gone, and the immediate future looked and felt somewhat dreary and commonplace.

My sentiments were expressed well in the opening lines of a poem called "For the Time Being" by W.H. Auden:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes – Some have got broken – and carrying them up to the attic. The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt, And the children got ready for school. There are enough Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -- Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot, Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully – To love all of our relatives, and in general Grossly overestimated our powers.

Well as I've gotten older I've discovered that a *lot* of people have trouble "coming back down to earth" after Christmas. Numerous studies show that depression, anxiety, and stress are more prevalent at this time of year than any other.

Why?

- Some have spent too much and there is a mountain of debt to climb out of.

- Some have to say goodbye to friends and family that they get to see far too rarely.
- For others, the fact that Christmas comes during the darkest time of the year adds to problems that come from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

For others, there isn't even a "Christmas high" to come down from.

Christmas, for them, was something to dread rather than look forward to. The malls are insanely busy, people are fighting over whether to say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays," and everyone's madly rushing around to the next thing in what seems like one giant superficial month-long obligation where everyone smiles and pretends to like each other.

Others don't like Christmas because they are lonely, and seeing everyone gather with family and friends for celebrations is simply one more reminder of what they're missing.

Still others are cynical, and think we have no business proclaiming our Christmas words of "peace on earth and goodwill to men" in a world where both peace and goodwill seem absent at least as often as not.

I'm not sure if any of this describes your experience of Christmas. But even if the Christmas season perfectly lived up to your expectations this year, and it was a glorious time of celebrating all that is good and right about the holidays, Christmas always ends, and we always have to go back to our regular, everyday lives.

So perhaps one of the questions that occurs to us as we sift through the credit card bills and the wrapping paper and the boxes to recycle and as we look ahead to another year is, "what was all *that* about?"

Well on one level, the answers are familiar enough. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Yesterday my kids decided they were going to sing happy birthday to Jesus. When they were done, my wife Naomi asked them "why is Jesus' birthday important?" There were a few moments of silence, and then the familiar answer: "well, Jesus *came* to save us."

That's *good*, but words like these can become too familiar... sometimes they roll off the tongue a bit *too* easily. What did Jesus save us *from*? What did he save us *for*?

These are important questions to think about at *any* point in the year, but I often find myself thinking about them in the days following Christmas.

So, with Christmas beginning to move into the rearview mirror, I thought today might be a good day for a kind of post-Christmas “what was that all about” sermon.

The title of my sermon is “Jesus Has Come... So What?” But it might be a bit of a different sermon than you’re used to, so I’m going to ask for your patience in advance.

Rather than begin with a specific text of Scripture and then move on to what it means and how we should apply it, I’m going to tell some stories and weave various Scriptures throughout. This might seem different, but I’m hopeful that it can still work.

I am a parent of twin nine-year-olds, over the course of the last number of years, I have found my children to be one of the most delightful and reliable sources of theological insight/inspiration God has seen fit to give me.

So often, they have a way of saying something or doing something or asking a question in a particular way that communicates truth to me. Kids seem to have a unique way of understanding, processing, and verbalizing some of the most profound truths that face us.

So I’m going to invite you to listen in on four conversations I have had with my kids over the last few years.

Christmas is about kids, after all, so why not let them help tell the story? Children have an innocence and a profound understanding of important things that sometimes come out in the most natural and matter-of-fact ways. God spoke through a child two thousand years ago, and I think he still speaks through the questions and insights of children.

I hope that you can enter into these conversations and hear something of the message of Christmas in the reflections that accompany them.

Conversation One: December 6, 2008

The scene: Yesterday was an insanely busy day. Claire had gymnastics, Nicky had hockey and these activities were spread throughout a day that also included a practice for the kids’ Christmas concert at church, a birthday party, and a dinner invitation at the home of some family friends. So, needless to say, there was a lot of driving around for me yesterday. And one of the things I’m learning the longer I’m a dad is that some interesting questions emerge from the backseat from time to time. Yesterday was a prime example...

12:00 pm, on the way to hockey.

Nicky: *Dad, God was the first person that ever touched me right?*

Dad (*trying desperately to make it through a yellow light*): *Um, I'm not sure. What do you mean by that?*

Nicky: *You know, God made us.*

Dad (*now driving at a more acceptable speed*): *Yes, Nicky, God did make us.*

Nicky: *And when God makes stuff he has to touch it – you know, use his hands.*

Dad (*wondering how best to tackle this*): *Okaaaay... But, you know that the Bible says that nobody has ever seen God. Nobody really knows what he looks like – if he has hands, legs, or hair. He didn't exactly "touch" you like your mom and I or your sister might touch you.*

Nicky: *So how did God make us?*

Dad (*growing a little unsure of exactly sure what kind of cosmological and theological depth to wade into here*): *Well, you know how babies are made right (we've read them a book – they've got the general idea)?*

Nicky: *Yeah.*

Dad: *Well, God kind of started the whole process off. He created us so that babies could be made through what people do.*

Nicky: *Okay*

Dad: *Does that make sense, Nicky?*

Nicky: *Yeah. But God still made everyone right, even if he doesn't touch them with hands?*

Dad: *Yes, Nicky. God still made everyone.*

Nicky's question (and our subsequent conversation) stuck with me throughout the rest of the day.

When you think about it, it's an obvious enough question. For *us* to make something, we have to touch it. If God made something, he must have been the first one to touch it.

Pretty airtight logic, right?

But I couldn't get Nicky's question out of my head, and I returned to it

throughout the day. In a sense, this is one of the most important questions we can ask, and it is a question that is addressed at Christmas, if in a roundabout way. For God does indeed “touch” us before anyone else.

In Acts 17:28, the apostle Paul is preaching a sermon in Athens, and describes God as the one in whom “we live, and move, and have our being.” What a great way to put it! In a sense, we cannot escape God’s touch because it’s all around us!

But at Christmas, we celebrate that God touches us in a very different way. At Christmas we celebrate God coming to us in Jesus—a real, flesh-and-blood human being who *touched* people the way that you and I do. People *felt* Jesus’ touch, they heard his voice, they saw his compassionate care for the poor and the sick, they walked with him, he broke bread with them.

In Mark 8:22-26 we see a particularly vivid example of this—Jesus heals a blind man by spitting on his eyes and places his hands on him. It might seem like a strange way to heal to us, but the point is that Jesus was right in there with the muck and the mire of everyday life.

He had hands and feet and hair and headaches and sore joints. ... and spit.

And from the manger to the cross and every stage in between, Jesus *touched* people. He demonstrated that he was not “God far above us,” “God unapproachable,” or “God unwilling to get his hands dirty” to rescue his people. He was Emmanuel. *God with us.*

Conversation Two: December 17, 2009

The Scene: There had been a memorial service at our church the previous day and, as is often the case at these events, one of the songs that rang out was “Amazing Grace.” It’s a song that people love to sing—a song that touches us on a deep and personal level. For a variety of reasons, it is a very appropriate song to sing during times of mourning and remembering.

It is also a song that my children know well. During kindergarten in Vancouver, their teacher had them learn “Amazing Grace” for a Remembrance Day ceremony.

The only thing was, there was a slight modification to the second line of the song. “That saved a *wretch* like me” was deemed unsuitable for five year-old consumption (and performance!) and was altered to say “that saved a *child* like me.” I had no problem with this alteration at the time and still don’t today. However, as far as our kids were concerned, that’s just how the song goes. It was the only version of the song they knew.

But after the funeral, my wife Naomi was singing the song to herself around

suppertime and came to that line. The kids were in the room and were singing along. They sang “child” where Naomi sang “wretch” and the stage was set for an interesting conversation.

Naomi: Nicky, did you know the original version of the song says “wretch” instead of “child.”

Nicky: What’s a wretch?

Naomi: It’s means something like a “sinner.”

Nicky: Oh.

Naomi: Do you think you’re a wretch?

Nicky and Claire (in unison): No!

Ryan: How come?

Nicky: Because I believe in God.

Ryan: Well believing in God doesn’t mean that we stop sinning does it?

Nicky (after a brief pause): No. I sin when I tease Claire (there had just been an episode).

Dad: So who’s a sinner?

Claire (pointing at herself): I am.

Mom: And?

Nicky (pointing at himself): I am.

Dad: And?

Nicky and Claire (pointing at mom and dad, with noticeable delight): You are!

Naomi: That’s right. We’re all sinners. That’s why Jesus came.

Nicky: Yeah. To “un-sin” us.

Sin—whether on the personal or corporate level—affects us all in more ways

than we can probably even articulate.

We are people who sin and are sinned against. We live in a world where our sin leaves trails of wreckage and destruction and where the effects of sins we know little about and contribute nothing to continue to trickle down to our little stories and big stories, leaving their mark on us and those we care about.

From the little sins that plague our individual consciences to the reality of cosmic evil, sin is an enormous problem. In many ways, it is *the* problem of our world and of our own lives.

We are a people who need to be “unsinned.”

There are many different ways to think about the significance of Christmas, but Nicky’s little phrase reminded me that Christmas is, fundamentally, the story of God, in Christ, coming to “un-sin” his world.

The coming of Jesus—his birth, life, teaching, death, resurrection, ascension, current reign, and eventual return... the whole package—is about signaling the beginning of the end for sin. Sin is still real, obviously. We still sin and sin still affects us. But Christmas reminds us that the grace of God is stronger and deeper and wider than our sin.

A bit later in the story, we know that it is human sin that puts Jesus on a Roman cross. And we know that this is God’s plan for how you and I get “unsinned.”

Romans 5:8:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Christmas can often be a very sentimental and mushy time of year, but my conversation with Nicky reminded me that Christmas was necessary not because the world needed a nice Hallmark moment, but because of the sin that infects God’s world and makes it so much less than God intended it to be.

Conversation Three: September 3, 2007

Background: This was back when our family was living in Vancouver where I was attending graduate school, and the kids still shared a bedroom. Towards the end of our time there, the circus at bedtime got to be a bit much, so we would sometimes put one of them to bed in our room until they fell asleep, and then move them back into their own beds. This conversation took place the night before they started grade one.

Dad: *OK guys, bedtime. One of you in our room and one of you in your room.*

Claire and Nicky: *We won't goof around tonight, just let us stay together.*

Dad: *No. You guys have your first day of school tomorrow, and I don't want you goofing around until 10:30 at night.*

Claire and Nicky *(after a hushed private consultation): Dad, we have a promise for you. We promise that we won't talk or goof around tonight. We'll just lie still and go to sleep.*

Dad: *Well, OK. But if I hear anything from either one of you, I'm splitting you up and one of you will go to sleep on our bed. You have ONE chance tonight. No warnings.*

Nicky: *Give us two chances Dad.*

Dad: *No! One chance.*

Nicky *(as Dad is walking out the door): Dad, God gives second chances....*

God knows we are a people who do need second chances. And Christmas is all about second chances, about a great light coming to people who were without hope walking in a land of darkness.

Isaiah 63:7-9 is one of those wonderful passages from the prophets, and as I read it I'd like you to listen through the ears of a nation who had been exiled for their disobedience, who had failed their God and were in need of a second chance:

*⁷ I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD,
the deeds for which he is to be praised,
according to all the LORD has done for us –
yes, the many good things
he has done for Israel,
according to his compassion and many kindnesses.
⁸ He said, "Surely they are my people,
children who will be true to me";
and so he became their Savior.
⁹ In all their distress he too was distressed,
and the angel of his presence saved them
In his love and mercy he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them
all the days of old.*

Just as Israel was looking for a second chance, we, also, are a people who need the hope and the promise that our God is bigger than our sin, bigger than our disappointments, bigger than our failures. That he can lift *us* up and carry us beyond our inability to follow him as we should.

Human sin is what makes Christmas necessary, but Christmas is also a reminder that God offers second chances to his world and to you and me personally.

In coming to be born among us, to live for us, and to die for us, God assures us that he *has* done and *will* do what we cannot do for ourselves.

Salvation and hope are ours because we follow a God of second chances.

Scene Four: December 12, 2007

The scene: Claire and Nicky, sitting at the dining room table, dawdling over their breakfast as usual while mom and dad (well, mostly mom) scramble to get lunches, library books, shoes, jackets, gloves, etc ready for the journey to school.

Nicholas: *Claire, I know pretty much everything you know.*

Claire: *No you don't. You're a liar pants on fire.*

Nicholas: *No I'm not! I know everything!*

Claire: *Do you know how God made people?*

Nicholas *(after a brief pause): That's easy. He had a book with instructions in it.*

Dad *(barely suppressing a chuckle from the kitchen): Hey Nicky, who wrote the instruction book?*

Nicholas: *Huh?*

Dad: *Well, if God used an instruction book to make people, who wrote the instructions for him.*

Nicholas *(after another, somewhat longer pause): Jesus.*

Hmm—that's certainly some interesting theology at work. But as in our previous three conversations, I think that there is a profound Christmas message in this innocent little conversation as well. *In a sense, Jesus really did write the instruction book God used to make people—or at least to remake them.*

We need fixing—we know this in our bones. As human beings, we are immeasurably valuable and unique, we are capable of staggering beauty and goodness, we can soar to heights of self-sacrifice and courage.

But despite all of this, we know that something isn't quite right with us. We know that we cannot obtain the things that matter most to us on our own. We know that we sin, and we stumble, and we fall. We know that we need to be

remade.

And so God, in Christ, remakes us.

Jesus doesn't stay a baby. He teaches people, he forgives sin, he heals, he includes those who were outsiders and rejects, he exposed the hypocrisy of the high and mighty...

He demonstrates what a human being is supposed to be like.

And he gives us the strength to follow him today. He takes our stubborn hearts of stone, our frailty, our weakness, our pride, and he begins to transform us by his Spirit. He begins to make his image come alive in us more clearly.

To borrow the language of the famous "love chapter" in 1 Corinthians 13, he makes us patient, kind, and selfless; he helps us not to be easily angered and to rejoice in the truth; he helps us to protect, to trust, to hope, and to persevere in the knowledge that one day we will be fully remade and will reflect him just as we were intended to do.

And he begins this remaking in a little stable in Bethlehem, two thousand years ago.

In this little stable—right in there with the straw and the flies and the animals and the nasty smells and the bewildered participants—lies God's instruction book on how human beings will be made into what they were intended to be.

Conclusion

And so... Four conversations. Four windows into the Christmas story.

Through the first window we see that Christmas is about God's touch. God comes to us—to *us!*—in human flesh and bone, and the world has never been the same.

Through the second window we see that Christmas is a turning point in the story of God's "unsinning" of sinful human beings like you and me. Our world has huge problems. Our lives have huge problems. And at the heart of these problems is human sin and wickedness. Christmas is necessary because of sin.

Through the third window we see that Christmas is God's second chance for our world. In Revelation 21:5 Jesus is described on the throne, saying: "Behold! I make all things new!" Nothing symbolizes new beginnings like a baby, and Christmas is all about new beginnings and second chances.

Through the fourth window we see that Christmas contains the hope of a humanity and a world made new. We see that the baby who would become our Saviour is a blueprint—a “re-creation manual” for a world desperately in need of all things being made new.

I don't know about you, but I think these are pretty good answers to the “Jesus has come... so what?” question.

I hope that you've seen some of your own stories through these three windows, and I hope that you will be alive and awake to the voice of God as we head out from Christmas day and into a New Year, whatever it might hold.

My prayer for all of us, as we move out into 2011, is that we would be open to the touch of our God of second chances, that God's Christmas “instruction manual” would fill us with hope as we look forward to his Second Advent.

Amen.