

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Christmas Eve Service

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### Transcript:

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It is so good to see you here. Want to say hello to those of you who are online, those of you in the community center. Thank you for joining us. Thank you for being here. If you go to this church, you know what I'm going to say? I love this night. This is like my favorite night of the year. I look forward to it all year. Tough, not being able to be together last year, but it sure is good to be back together this year. So Merry Christmas. It's just great to see you. So a holy spirit in these next few minutes, as we come to a familiar story, for many of us help us to see new things in it, and a way that leaves us closer to you and more courageous. Ask this in your name Jesus. Amen.

Well, there's a series of posts I've seen on social media about a graphic artist who works from home, but his wife goes away to work at her office. And so he watches the baby all day and he got tired of her texting him constantly asking if the baby is okay. And so he started Photoshopping snarky responses to send to her like this baby, up there floating away. Or how about this one, little baby catch. I'm not sure she appreciated those responses and I'm pretty sure it did not increase her faith in her husband's ability to care for their child. If anything, it probably generated a little bit of fear about what was going on, but it does show that faith always involves some degree of fear. To take a leap of faith of any kind, whatever it is, like leave your baby with your snarky husband, or ask someone out on a date, or take a new job, or stand up for what's right at school or work always involves some kind of fear.

Faith and fear are related. If I ask that person out, are they going to say no? If I stand up for what's right, is that going to make me unpopular? Fear and faith are related, but they ask two different questions. Fear says, what if? Faith says, even if. Fear says, what if? Faith says,

even if. And we all have some kind of fear, all of us. What if I don't have enough money? What if I lose my job? What if I get that scary diagnosis? What if I don't get into that college I want? Fears of being insignificant or of something changing, fears about our kids. Whatever you ask what if about is your fear. Fear says, what if? Faith says, even if. Even if a bad thing happens, even if a terrible thing happens, God is with me and he will use everything, no matter how hard it is for my good. And that matters because the fear keeps us from doing big things, important things, adventurous things whereas faith will lead us sometimes to a harder life for sure. Faith will leave us sometimes to a harder life, but also bigger, richer, deeper, better. And neither fear or faith will determine our decisions. We're going to be guided by one of those.

And there was plenty to ask what if about that first Christmas. When God told Mary that even though she was an unmarried virgin, she would miraculously conceive a son who would save the world. A lot of what ifs Mary could have asked. What if that means I'm ostracized and disgraced for being pregnant and unmarried as was the case back then. What if I go into labor on our way to Bethlehem to pay taxes to a foreign colonial power that we can't afford to pay? What if I give birth in a barn? Because there's no room in the inn. What if king Herod finds out that a king has been born and he's so afraid of losing power, that he kills all the boy babies in Bethlehem. What if we have to become refugees in Egypt to escape that? What if, what if, what if. And all of those things happened to Mary and Joseph, all of them, but all the heroes in this story did not ask what if. They said, even if, because Christmas is an even if kind of event in two ways.

First, Christmas shows that even if it is the worst possible moment, God will give you an opportunity in it. I mean, clearly this is not a great time to have a baby. Israel is being oppressed by the Roman empire. Mary gives birth into a barn. I don't know any woman whose dream scenario for having their first child is in a barn. Like nobody's imagining that, gosh, wouldn't it be great if we could have our first kid in a barn? Nobody says that, nobody. It's the worst possible time and yet out of the at time comes Jesus, who is God himself in human form coming so that we can know him. It is a huge blessing coming out of a terrible moment.

Few weeks after I turned 15, I went to live in a small town in Southern Mexico for the summer on an exchange program. Only I didn't really pay attention to what was going on because I sort of thought, well, like I'll be on the beach or something, right? It's Mexico.

Actually, what it was, was a poverty immersion program where you lived with a very poor family in Mexico for a whole summer to learn what poverty really feels like. And it was designed for people in their mid 20s, early 30s. Everyone else was in their mid 20s, early 30s and there's me, right, just turned 15. And I was assigned to live with a very poor family in a very poor neighborhood where some people didn't even live in houses. They lived in caves that were dug into the side of the hill.

And my first night with my host family, there was gunfire outside. And they said, that's because of you. They hate Americans. Okay. I had just, just turned 15. I was a glorified 14 year old who had never been further from my home than 60 miles from my home in Eastern Washington. But not to worry. I had one whole year of middle school, Spanish under my belt. Oh yeah. I could say *yo trabajo en la biblioteca*, which means I work in the library, which I didn't, but I could say it if I needed to. And that's the point. Two days into this, I figured out how to get a bus to the town square, figured out how to make a collect call from this small town to my parents. And when my mom answered the phone, I burst into tears said, this is not the beach. This is not Mazatlan. There's guns. They're really poor. They're really, really, really poor.

And my mom said, do you want to come home? Yes. Why do you think I'm calling you? And in a moment of parenting brilliance, my mom said, you can't. You made a commitment and you need to see this through at least for a couple of weeks. If it's still terrible, give me a call, but this is going to be the making of you. You are going to grow up. See, my mom understood the such of situation better than I did. I was with a family that had been vetted by this program. I had protection. I was scared, but I was reasonably safe. And my mom was right. I stayed the whole time. And in so many ways it was the making of me. It gave me confidence.

A few years later when my parents couldn't afford to help me with college at all, I said, no problem. I'll get as many jobs as I need and I'll pay my way through, which is what I did. I got that confidence from that trip. It gave me compassion for people in poverty because I experienced it for a whole summer. And what's really interesting and I've looked back on this ever since, what's really interesting is my mom like borderline overprotective mother. So it was really odd for her to say that. And I believe it was Jesus that prompted her to say that because it was out of character for her. I believe Jesus prompted her to say that. And Jesus

certainly used it as an amazing opportunity that was in so many ways I don't think I'd be able to lead a church if it hadn't been for that.

What difficult moment are you in right now? Relationship, health, school, work problem, a pandemic that doesn't seem to go away. Whatever it is Jesus coming into our world means that even if it's a terrible time, God will give you an opportunity in it so look for it, be waiting for it because that's what hope is, waiting for the opportunity God's going to give you. The second thing Christmas means is that even if we can't see it yet, God is still working for our good.

Sometimes when you lose a job, God works through that to bring you to a better job that's a better fit for you. Sometimes when that person you had your heart set on says no to you, God uses that to shape you and turn you into a person that is going to be right for the person you end up with. And I don't think God causes all the painful things in our life, but I do believe that God is working in them even if we can't see it yet, which means that we can be bold and take risks and move in faith not in fear. Knowing that God is working for our good, even if we can't see it yet. Because see, fear is playing not to lose, but faith is playing to win.

And Jesus gives us the courage to do that. When the angel appears to the shepherds that first Christmas, it says they were terrified, understandably so. These glowy ETs just show up in the sky. You would be scared too, right? And in the original Greek it says they feared a great fear. So the angel says fear not for I bring you tidings of great joy. Great fear is matched by great joy in the same sentence because God was working even though they couldn't see it quite yet. And it's the same with us. Health problems, relationship problems, financial problems, pandemic that won't go away. Oh my goodness. I saw a meme this week that was sort of a parody on the line from the Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings. The parody said, every time a bell rings, a variant gets its name, right?

Like it's just like this thing. It's the, COVID the gift that keeps on giving. Right. And seriously you had to have a new variant, right? And you couldn't have waited until January. No, it had to be Christmas. Right. We got problems all over the place, work problems, school problem. We got problems everywhere. Faith doesn't deny that problems exist. It denies them a place of influence so that our problems don't tell us what to do God does. Because

you see what ifs are the enemies of what can be, what ifs are the enemies of what can be if we can set those what ifs aside and see what Jesus is going to do with them. That's what Joseph and Mary did. They set their what ifs aside and in some ways it made their lives harder for sure. But on the other hand, like, wow, they got to hear angels singing their newborn son to sleep. They got to hold God himself in human form in their arms. And I know they never regretted for a minute setting aside all their what ifs for the what can be's in Jesus.

When I was growing up, my parents had a very difficult marriage. They both grew up with very mean fathers who abandoned the family. So they didn't really have a great model of marriage going into it. On top of that, they were really different people. My dad was an extrovert with a capital E. He always wanted lots of people around and he wanted to travel the world. And my mom craved quiet and being alone. So there was a lot of arguing. There was a lot of tension. My growing up years, lots of tension and arguing and it all reached a crisis on their 25th wedding anniversary. And they said to my siblings and me do not plan a party because there is not going to be a 26th anniversary.

But at their 50th, my siblings and I all gave a speech and we all said a version of the same thing. Thank you. Thank you that you didn't give up. Thank you that you showed us that even if, even if, even if it's hard, it doesn't mean that it's impossible. Thank you that you showed us what Jesus can do with hard situations because see the game changer for my parents really was Jesus. Shortly after their 25th one by one, we all became followers of Jesus and he just went to town on their marriage and my parents. My dad began volunteering in his church, leading Bible studies in jail, helping prisoners graduate from high school, humanitarian trips around the world, all of which he found great meaning, and purpose, and joy, and adventure in. I'll often say that the first half of my dad's life was a bit rough, but the back nine was a thing of beauty because of Jesus. And they began to see why Jesus had put them together in the first place.

My dad once said to me, your mom anchors me. And for years I resented her for that. But without her, I would've dissipated my life in a thousand different places with a thousand different people, forming no deep connection with anyone. She anchors me and I need an anchor. And then it was a few months after that my mom kind of out of the blue, said, your dad, he always wants lots of people around and he wants to travel all over the place and I hated it. But I have to say, I have more people in my life and I've seen more of the world

because he expanded my life. They appreciated each other. But their best work together was as grandparents, special trips with each grand kid, endless emails and cards to encourage them. Went to every swim meet, track meet, dance recital they possibly could so that their grandkids knew, that they knew, that they knew deep in their bones how very loved they were.

And their marriage was never perfect. They bickered and they argued like a lot of couples do, but it was good because of how Jesus had shaped them once they turned their lives over to him. And they were glad that all their what if did not cancel all the what can be's in Jesus. And in the end, when they were declining and in a home for senior adults in separate rooms, because logistically it was just easier to care for them that way. Almost every night, my dad would leave his room, go into my mom's room, crawl into the single little bed that she was in and push her up against the wall until finally the staff just gave in and put a cot in the room for my dad to sleep in next to my mom.

And I suppose that you could say what a shame that it took them 25 years to start to have a better marriage. Or you could say it just goes to show that it's never too late. I choose the latter. Even if they face difficult times, even if they couldn't see it, for years Jesus was working to bring them to a better place. And I know that not all difficult marriages get turned around. My own first marriage ended in divorce, but even then, even then, even then God used it to give me more compassion and understand his love better.

And to convince me, there's a lot of mysteries about God, but the one thing I know for sure that God does is that God is an even if God who will take the hardest things in our lives and he will turn him around for good. And I know that through that divorce. He's an even if God. And this just isn't just about marriage. It's about any problem that we can face, what Jesus can do with any hard thing, work problem, school problem, relationship problem, finance problem, health problem and yes, this stupid pandemic that we're all sick of. However big it is, it is not bigger than our even if savior.

In some ways the person who had the most to fear that first Christmas was God. Had to leave the perfection of heaven to be born poor and oppressed, die on a cross to pay the price for our sins and be raised from the dead. But that's why Jesus is our hope. That's why Jesus is our only hope because only Jesus brings life out of death. So that even in if, even if

we die, if we know Jesus, we will be raised to new life just like he was. Even if I screw up in a cataclysmic way, he still loves me, and he forgives me, and he is making me new. So what fears are holding you back? Whether you know Jesus or not, and if you don't know Jesus, I would encourage you to get to know Jesus. Give him your what ifs and watch the what can be's that he's going to do in your life. Even if the diagnosis is scary, even if you don't get into that college, even if you lose your job, even if there is a pandemic fear not for I bring you tidings of great joy, which will be for all people. For unto you is born in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord who's even if power brings a light that overcomes darkness, redemption bigger than all of our failures, courage that overcomes our fears, and love so strong it outlasts governments, it overcomes oppression, and it can outrun any prodigal and brings joy to the world. Fear not the Lord is here.

So Jesus, thank you so much. That you are an even if God. Even if the worst happens, you are with us, you guide us, and you will use it eventually for our good, even if we don't see it yet. Thank you, Lord. Help that truth to be more real to us so that we can live in courage the way that you were brave. Lord, thank you so much for all that you've given us. We pray this in your name Jesus. Amen.

**Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's questions & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Questions:**

- **Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?**

**Scripture Reflection Questions:**

- **What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this sermon?**
- **What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?**

**Closing Question and Application:**

- **Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?**
- **Who might you share this with?**

**Closing Group Prayer:**

- **Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.**
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