

BELPRES CHURCH

Greater Joy

Speaker: Dr. Dudley

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Well, welcome here. My name is Scott. I am the lead pastor here. I'm also five for the gospel preacher tonight. We are so glad that you are here. Those of you online in our other venues, as well as in this room, Merry Christmas. If you go to this church, this is my favorite night of the year, and I will start looking forward to next year about midnight tonight. So glad that you are here. Jesus, as we look at your word, help us understand Christmas a little bit more in a way that changes us to be more like you.

Pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen. Well, recently a friend of mine took his kids to get a picture with Santa Claus, only his youngest wasn't quite ready for that yet. Take a look. I love that. She's running away from Santa Claus like get me out of here. She is clearly a little bit disturbed and in need of some comfort. I wonder, do you ever feel that way sometimes about Christmas? Maybe because of the busyness or the pressure of the season?

Maybe you were dragged here tonight by somebody against your will and that's how you feel about being in this service, like get me out of here. If that's you, I just want to say thank you for coming and we're glad that you're here. Or maybe you're dealing with a little family drama this holiday season. That happens sometimes. Things like, oh, you're spending Christmas with your wife's parents? No, no, that's fine, your mother and I will just eat a can of cold ravioli and watch Wheel of Fortune.

We're used to being ignored by our children. Or maybe things in life are going pretty good, but you always hoped it would be a little bit more and a little more adventure and a little more exciting, and maybe you're feeling like you want a bigger life. Or maybe this year all the Christmas cheer just seems hollow because you are facing a very painful work or financial or health situation, relationship situation. Where are you, like in that picture of that little girl, a little disturbed and in need of some comfort?

Because of it, maybe all the shiny Christmas that's all around you, maybe you're dissatisfied with that. If you are, please stay dissatisfied with that version of Christmas. Because that first Christmas shows us Jesus offers something so much bigger. He didn't come to make us religious or just fix our problems, though he does help us with that. But he came to free us and make us part of a grand adventure with him that is so much bigger than ourselves.

In fact, what Christmas shows us is that one of the things Jesus does is he disturbs the comfortable and he comforts the disturbed because he loves us. The Bible says, when the Roman Empire's puppet, King Herod heard that Jesus had been born, it said he was disturbed and all of Jerusalem with him. Jesus disturbs the comfortable. For starters, he disturbs our sense of self-sufficiency. The angels say to the shepherds, "To you is born this day in the city of David a savior."

Savior is a word that disturbs me. It disturbs me because I like to think that I don't need a savior. That I am competent to save myself. This fall, my wife and I were in Mexico City. When I was 15, I lived there with a very poor family as part of a poverty immersion program and I became competent in Spanish. But since then I've studied French, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and now it just all blends together. When we were there, I kept starting my sentences in Spanish, but then I would finish them in French.

Over and over my [foreign language 00:03:53] became [foreign language 00:03:53] and [foreign language 00:03:55] became [foreign language 00:03:56]. My wife said "So much for your competence in Spanish." I was like "[foreign language 00:04:04]." One night we were at a theater and neither of us could find a bathroom. I knew the moment I had prepared for my entire life had arrived. I walked up to an usher and confidently said, [foreign language 00:04:19]. Nailed it. Now, I didn't understand what he said to me afterwards, but that's not the point.

I spoke Spanish and I could have asked where the library was if I needed that. I wasn't as competent as I had hoped I would be. We aren't as competent as we think. We need a savior. Part of what I need saving from is guilt and shame. I like to think of myself as a good person and I am. I'm a pretty good person. I'm a pastor. That's got to count for something, right? But deep down, I know my anger issues hurt others. Often the people I'm closest to.

I know how I can subtly spin the truth to manage my image and deceive others. How indifferent I can be to other people's pain and needs, how selfish. The Bible calls things like that, sin. Jesus frees me from the guilt and shame that I feel over those things by dying on the cross to pay the price for my sins that I know needs to be paid. Because a God

that overlooks the way my sin hurts others is neither loving nor just. Jesus is our savior who assures us that we are forgiven if we know him and that he loves us no matter what.

He gives us supernatural power to become the people he created us to be. If our deepest need was for different laws, God would've sent a politician. If our deepest need was for advice, he would've sent an advisor. Those things are helpful, but they're not our deepest need. Our deepest need is for healing and forgiveness so God sent us a savior. But that disturbs my comfortable assumptions that I am competent to save myself.

Which may be the reason that of all the people Jesus disturbs, he loves to disturb religious people who don't think that they need a savior because they're better than everyone else. Jesus, you look in the Bible, religious people, he really disturbed religious people. Religious people have always been a problem for God. Jesus disturbs us because he loves us. To show us that we need a savior. The other way Jesus disturbs the comfortable is to call us out of the prison of our comfort.

To be part of his mission to heal this world. Where the poor get empowered and injustice gets corrected and the lonely are brought into community. Because he loves us, he nudges us out of the prison of our comfort to be part of that and that disturbs our comfort. But that is good for us because comfort is a prison. We even have a phrase for it, comfort zone. That's out of my comfort zone. The more comfortable we make our lives, the smaller and smaller and smaller that comfort zone gets until it's a prison cell.

Because he loves us, he calls us out of that into the adventure of being part of something so much bigger than ourselves. Which is why in this church we do things like work to eliminate ethnic violence in Congo and support racial justice and help refugees. We don't do that by ourselves. We do that together as a family, as a community. There's a woman I know who was a substitute teacher, and after she saw firsthand some of the obstacles that under-resourced kids have to getting a good education, God started disturbing her comfort.

She knew it was God because she didn't want to do it. To do something to help these kids. She rallied her community and her friends, and they all served as tutors to a classroom of under-resourced kids to help them out in school. But she didn't stop there, she went to her community and she raised enough money to send every kid in that classroom to college if they wanted to go, and many of them did go. All of that disturbed her comfort.

It took time that she didn't think she had. She was very uncomfortable asking people for money, even if it was for a good cause. But seeing those kids' lives change and being part of the community that did that in those relationships that were around her, it made her life so much bigger and it gave her so much joy. Oh, good job. You did better than

all the other services on that one. You are a joyful bunch. Because front rows really, oh yeah, joyful bunch. There you go.

Thank you for reminding me. Because Jesus loves us, he disturbs the comfortable, and at the same time, Jesus comforts the disturbed. That's part of why he came the way he came. He was God coming in human form. He was God. He could have come any way that he wanted to come. He could have been born into a rich family in a palace, but instead he chose to be born in a stable to a poor family, die on a cross in a very painful way to pay the price for our sins and be raised from the dead.

At Christmas, God did something that no other god in any other religion would do. God, the one being in the universe that could have exempted himself from suffering, willingly left the perfection of heaven to come to us in the person of Jesus under the harshest of circumstances. Christmas is a riches to rags story. He chose to come this way because he loves you and he loves me and he has been through everything we've been through. He's experienced it, which means he gets us.

He knows how we feel, and he is in it with us. When we experience his supernatural presence, it comforts us and it heals us. A man I know who had terminal cancer went to a prayer meeting one night at his church and got prayed for. As they were praying for him, he felt this heat going through his body. Then the next time he went to the doctor, the next appointment he had with the doctor, the cancer was gone. The doctors called it a medical anomaly, which is medical talk for a miracle.

Now, for those of us who are Westerners, post-enlightenment, all that stuff, we're a little uncomfortable with the idea of miracles, but sometimes they happen. Not always, but sometimes they happen. They've happened in this church. This isn't all there is. There is a spiritual world. Just because we can't see it doesn't mean it's not at work among us. There's a true story about a guy named Charlie Boswell who is blind, and he was the blind golf champion 16 years in a row. Blind golf champion for all of those years.

At one point Charlie got to meet Ben Hogan, who was the greatest golfer of his day. Charlie said to him, "I'd love to play golf with you." Ben Hogan said he'd be honored. Charlie said, "Let's play for money." Hogan said, "That wouldn't be fair. I can see, and you can't. That wouldn't be fair." But Charlie kept pressing and said, "Let's bet a thousand dollars." Hogan said, "That wouldn't be fair, you're blind." Charlie said, "What's wrong? Are you chicken?"

Finally, Hogan said, "Okay, okay, I'll play, but I'm going to do my best. What time do you want to start?" Charlie said, "Midnight." Sometimes our liabilities can be assets. Ben Hogan could only play in the light. Sometimes we think we can only have joy in the light. But what happens when the darkness of our boredom or the darkness of whatever

suffering we're going through is all around us? Jesus is still there even if we can't see it, giving us hope through his presence and through his power.

A number of years ago, a pastor friend of mine would sometimes take college students to downtown Seattle where teenagers who live and work on the streets hang out. He would say to these students, "Don't try to talk to them about God, just buy them a meal, listen to them. Connect them to resources that they might need and just show them that you love them." On one of these trips, there was a student who started talking to a teenage runaway who I'll call Danny.

Danny lived and worked on the streets in some really degrading ways for him. This student took Danny to a donut shop and he tried to obey the instructions not to talk about God, but Danny kept asking questions about God. What could this student do? Pretty soon, donut crumbs turned into symbols for broken lives and donut holes into analogies for empty life. Danny got really interested in Jesus who heals all of this stuff. Then as this was happening, this college student started to get some thoughts that he knew were from God that were really uncomfortable for him.

Saying to him, you can't leave Danny on the street. You need to take him home. He didn't know what to do because he couldn't take him back to his fraternity. That wasn't going to work. He called his parents who lived here in Bellevue, and he said, "I want to bring a friend of mine home." They said, "Any friend of yours is a friend of ours." He brought Danny home, which wasn't quite the friend they were expecting, but they were followers of Jesus so they told Danny, "You are welcome to stay with us."

Well, a day turned into a week and weeks turned into months. Danny had three meals a day for the first time in his life. He got to go to school, and the parents ended up really loving him. He became a part of their family. But then one night Danny woke up with a bad headache so they took him to the hospital and it turned out he had an inoperable aneurysm that at some point was going to rupture, could be a month, could be much longer.

When the parents found this out, they were just devastated and they were crying. But Danny said this interesting thing. He said, "This is scary and I don't want to die. But you know what? This last year I've had what I've never had before, a family that loves me. I have experienced Jesus' presence in my life, and I know that he's real. I know that even if I die, I'm going to be with him forever. You tell me that heaven is even better than Bellevue so I have hope."

Now, Danny eventually did die, but not before his heart and soul were healed. Not before he experienced genuine love from a family and a relationship with Jesus that's going to last until all of eternity. At the same time, this suburban couple got to expand

their family with someone they otherwise never would've met. Because they were willing to let Jesus disturb them out of their comfort zone, through them, Jesus comforted someone with a very difficult and disturbing life.

They experienced something much bigger than themselves. What the Bible calls the Kingdom of God right here in Bellevue. All of that gave them so much joy. Because they experienced something bigger. Where might you be a little needs some disturbing. Where is life feeling a little small? Where's that comfort zone getting a little too close and you want a bigger life? You want something more exciting. Ask Jesus where he would want you to be part of his mission to heal this world.

If you are disturbed and in need of comfort, ask Jesus to comfort you even if you don't believe in him. Read one of the gospels in the New Testament. Pray to Jesus even if you don't think that he's real, and see what he does. If we could be of help here in this church, we would love to have conversations with you about that. We'd be happy to talk with you. There is a God and he is moving towards you in the person of Jesus because he's loves you.

If what we want from Christmas is just a tame story, we've come to the wrong place. What we want to hear about at Christmas is how Jesus came to give us a nice day and make us comfortable, that's not the Jesus in the Bible. Because goodness that doesn't threaten complacency and evil isn't much good at all, is it? But if what we're hoping for is that the kind of people like shepherds who work third shifts doing stuff that none of us would really want to do are the kind of people that would attract the attention of an army of angels.

If we're hoping there's more to life than what we may be experiencing. If we came for adventure and bravery or because we're worried, hurried, hurting, hassled and depressed, needing a God who makes tyrants tremble and outcast feel loved. If we came to find the God who loves us way too much to leave us unchanged. Who loves you so much that he would do anything, anything, anything, even die on cross to be in relationship with you.

The God who rescues, redeems, restores, revive, transforms ordinary into the extraordinary. The God who makes all things new. If that's what you're looking for, if that's what you're longing for, then you came to the right place. His name is Jesus, and he is here for you. Jesus, thank you that you love us enough to disturb us when our life is getting smaller than the life you want to give us. Thank you that you love us enough to comfort us when that's what we need. Lord, where we are maybe feeling confined and life is too small, disturb us and enlarge our life and where we need comfort, please comfort us. Thank you Jesus, that you do what no one else does. You left the perfection of

heaven to be born into our world of pain so that we could be in relationship with you. There is no one like you Jesus. There is no one like you. In your name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

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

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures):

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

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.