

BELPRES CHURCH

Christmas Eve Sermon

Dr. Scott Dudley

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Transcript:

Thank you, Sharice, and all the volunteers who have made tonight possible. My name is Scott. I'm the lead pastor here at BelPres preaching to you from my home. From my home to your home, thank you so much for joining us and being part of our Christmas Eve. We are thrilled to have you here, and it's great to be able to worship together online from our various homes. Let's start with prayer. Jesus, I ask that you would be here in just these next few minutes as we think about the Christmas story and ask that you help us know why it matters. And Lord help us be different people because of it and know you better. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen. Well, one of the things that my family and I have done during this lockdown is we've rewatched entire movie series'.

So, for instance, we watched all the Star Wars films, because I'd actually never seen Star Wars ever, any of them. I know, right? How can I call myself an American? We rewatched all the Marvel movies in chronological order. And we rewatched Lord of the Rings, which are incredibly good movies and one of the rare examples of how the movie is actually better than the book. And I know right now some of you Tolkien purists, you're rolling your eyes, going, "No, no, no, no," but in your heart you know I'm right. That book was just a little too long and needed editing, and be honest, you did not read every word of all of those songs and genealogies and Elfish and all that. Don't lie. You did not. You did not. And there's this one scene where Frodo and Sam are halfway through their journey to Mordor to destroy the evil ring and Frodo reaches a breaking point, and he says, "I can't do this."

And his good friend, Sam, puts courage back into him and he says, "I know, right? This is hard. But it's like the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, but those were the stories that stayed with you, that meant something. And folks in those stories had lots of chances of giving up, but they kept going because they were holding onto the hope that there's good in this world and it's worth fighting for. Full of darkness and danger they were, but those were the stories that mattered, that meant something." And so often darkness and danger and stories that matter go hand in hand. And I think that, that describes that first Christmas 2000 years ago and in some ways describes the year we've just lived through, 2020.

Now, if you've gone to this church for a long time, you know I love Christmas Eve at BelPres. I love the music. I love the crowds. I love the parking lot. And as soon as we're done with the last service, I start looking forward to the next service because I love it so much. And, so for me tonight, as maybe for some of you, there's some grief. There's some grief that we're not there. We're all worshipping at home together. And I'm preaching to you from my home, which I think for Christmas Eve feels a little warmer than an empty sanctuary. But we want to be together in that sanctuary, many of us. So there's grief. However, the thing I love most about Christmas Eve cannot be canceled by COVID, and that is how dark and brutal this story is, which paradoxically gives me hope.

And some of you have heard me make this comment before, we sentimentalize it, but that first Christmas is a dark brutal story about a teenage mother under all kinds of shame, public shame, for being pregnant before she was married and no one was believing her that it was a miracle, giving birth to her son in the equivalent of an alley in a country under the brutal oppression of Roman colonialism, while a local warlord named King Herod launches a genocide against all the baby boys, because he's heard a king has been born and he's threatened. So Mary Joseph and Jesus have to flee and become refugees in Egypt. I mean, you can Bing Crosby, White Christmas that thing all you want, but it is a difficult, hard story full of darkness and danger it was. And because of that, a story that matters still 2000 years later, because as dark as it was, in that dark street shineth the everlasting light, the hopes and the fears of all the years were met in that stable that night.

And this is definitely not the kind of story you would make up about a savior coming to the world, especially back then. Great people were always born in great places to grand people, so if you were going to make up a story about a savior come into the world, they would have been born in Rome, not some podunk village. They would have been born to royalty, not to peasants. But it's the very darkness and difficulty of the story, that makes it a story that matters. Because one of the things a good story needs, a story that matters needs, that means something, one of the things that story needs is conflict, obstacles, challenges to overcome. No conflict, no story. If Frodo and Sam had simply walked into Mordor unopposed that would be a very short, very boring movie. Bored of the Rings, not Lord of the Rings. But as Boromir so eloquently says in the film, "One does not simply walk into Mordor."

Full of darkness and danger it is, and that's why it's a story that matters. That's why it's a good story. And it's the same in your life. And it's the same in mine. You can't have a testimony without a test. So every challenge, every hardship we face in life is just a chance to have a story that matters. Every hardship in life is a chance to have a story that matters. And I believe, if we stick with Jesus, Jesus will use everything we've gone through this year for a story that matters, and we'll have good memories. Remember that Christmas Eve when we couldn't be at church and the pastor preached from his home? Remember the pandemic and how God used it to bring us closer together as families or as friends? And stories that matter do a couple of things, because of the difficulty, not in spite of, because of the hardship. And first, stories that matter bring hope out of hopelessness.

The Christmas story in Luke, it starts out this way. "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was Governor of Syria," just so you know, "and everyone went to their own town to register." And that's why Joseph and Mary are in Bethlehem. While Emperor, Caesar was the most powerful person in the world. In fact, he was called the Savior of the World. But a peasant baby born in a village he'd never heard of was God in human form, the real savior of the world, come to start a revolution that would eventually undo all the brutality that Caesar's Rome stood for. And 2000 years later, we are celebrating not because of Caesar, and certainly not because of Quirinius, whoever he is, but because that baby, that peasant baby, was the real savior.

God himself coming in human form who would later die on a cross to pay the penalty for our sins that deep down we know needs to be paid or there's no justice in the world to reconcile us to God and then rise from the dead three days later. And if we know him and follow him, we too will rise from the dead. But even more than that, even more than that, the cross, the death and resurrection of Jesus, show that it is in God's nature, it is in God's character, to bring good out of bad. Hope out of hopelessness. It's just what he does, just like he did by using Jesus' death on the cross for good to forgive us of our sins. And if Jesus had been born a rich, powerful ruler, this story wouldn't matter as much, because rich, powerful rulers doing historic things, that's a normal story. That's what you expect. But good stories, good stories often have some kind of twist that you don't expect, some kind of reveal.

And the reveal of Christmas is that poverty and obscurity and suffering are no match for the power of God. He conquered death, he can conquer all those things as well. And God, the one person, the one being in the universe who could have chosen for himself an easy story deliberately chose for himself a hard story, full of darkness and danger it was, to come in the person of Jesus, born into poverty and suffering to show he can overcome all of those things and bring good out any situation. And, again, if the story wasn't so dark, the hope would be feeble. I mean, if the story was easy, it would tell us that God works through easy circumstances. Great, that doesn't help anybody. But because it's so dark, it gives us hope that God works in all circumstances, even in hardship for our good.

Before she died in April, my mom had Alzheimer's and no longer could remember me or my siblings, but she never lost her sense of humor, which really matters, because in my family, the ability to find humor even in the most painful things is a deep value for us. It's part of how we cope. And right before COVID, my sister was visiting my mom and my mom asked about her sister, in other words, my aunt. And my sister said, "Well, she got married and had kids and lives in Dayton, Washington, where you grew up, mom." And it's also where my dad grew up, so my parents knew each their whole lives. And my mom said, "Oh, she got married. That's nice. I wish that had happened to me." And my sister said, "Well, it did. You did get married, and you had three kids and I'm your daughter. And you have two sons, Scott and Bruce." And my mom said, "I got married? To who?" And my sister said, "Gene Dudley." And my mom said, "Gene Dudley, that would have been a train wreck." And my sister started to laugh and my mom laughed.

My mom forgot her story, which is part of what is so painful about Alzheimer's. But in that dark street shineth a little bit of hope and a little bit of joy. And in the middle of my mom forgetting her story, God was writing new stories that my siblings and I could find hope in and comfort in and a little bit of joy and humor in. Stories that matter bring hope out of hopelessness. Second, stories that matter help other people. When a recovering alcoholic can tell another alcoholic the story of their recovery it gives hope that it's doable. When one person who's found God's supernatural presence and peace in the middle of cancer can tell that story to another cancer patient it brings hope to that cancer patient. And, again, it's precisely because of the darkness of the story that it brings hope. If you say to someone suffering, "I don't know, I've never suffered, I've had an easy life," it brings no hope.

It's the darkness. It's the difficulties they overcame that give people a story strong enough to comfort someone in the exact same position. Which brings me to my last point, stories that matter help us find God in our midst. Christmas means you are not alone. Christmas means you are not abandoned. Our God entered human history himself in the person of Jesus and just as he enters our lives as well to help and to show us that he's there and to

help us live a story that matters, make our lives stories that matter. And if you don't know Jesus, I would encourage you to get to know Jesus. Even right now, if you just want to say, "Jesus, I want to know you" let someone know, let us know in the chat so that we can follow up with you. And right now we all need community, and so if you're visiting, if you're a guest with us tonight, I want to invite you to be part of our church family.

And one of the ways you could do that is to join us every Sunday morning online 8:45 for a traditional style worship service, and 10:15 for modern worship, so that all of us together can experience God in our midst, guiding us and helping us. God helped Mary and Joseph. He led them to an innkeeper that would at least let them use his stable. God warned them of Herod's genocide so that they could escape. And, again, it's the hardness of the story that makes it a story that matters. If they'd found a four-star hotel and faced no obstacles, that would not be a story we would be finding hope in 2000 years later. I mean, maybe a story like that is fine for people whose lives is always a four-star experience. But, again, that's nobody. The hope in this story depends on it being hard, because it shows that God works in the hard.

Now, you might want to ask the question, "Well, how come God doesn't help a little more to make our lives easier, our story's easier? I think it's because easy stories don't tend to be the stories that matter and that help others. And also because human character dies in ease and grows through difficulty and trial. It's like exercise. It's the strain of running that builds my cardiovascular system. And it's the same with our character, it's when we overcome obstacles and difficulties, that's how we grow, learn new skills, learn how to persevere. And it reminds us and it shows us that in the hard times God is always there working for our good and bringing good out of all things. Some of you have been involved in the Grocery Project at Jubilee Beach that's helping families hard hit by the lockdown have food and basic necessities.

Well, this fall, the refrigerator at Jubilee Beach was clearly about to die and it's important for the Grocery Project to keep things from spoiling. So they began to pray about replacing it, because that's a big expense for a nonprofit. The very next day after they started to pray, a couple was there to drop off some food and they said to Ken Carpenter, who oversees the project, they said, "By the way, how are you doing for refrigeration these days?" which, that's not a normal conversation. Normally, not what you say. "Hi, my name is Scott. How's your refrigerator?" That's not normal. And Ken said, "Well, since you asked, actually we need a new one." And the couple said, "Well, that's interesting, because we have some money and we've been praying about what to do with it. And every time we pray, we keep getting the idea it has something to do with refrigeration. So how much to replace it?"

And Ken told them and they gave the money, and Jubilee Beach ordered a new refrigerator and were told that it would be weeks and weeks until it could be delivered. Well, in the meantime, there was a need for milk so the call went out for milk on a Sunday morning to different churches. But there wouldn't be a place to store the milk on Monday because the refrigerator wasn't there yet. So they're trying to figure out what to do with that. But then on Monday morning, the new refrigerator magically showed up three weeks early, because that's what's been happening during this lockdown, things come early on time, right? No. So problem solved. Now, you could say all of that was just a coincidence, but really? Really, this couple just happened to keep getting the idea about refrigeration every time they prayed at the same time that Jubilee Beach just happened to need a new refrigerator? Seriously? How often are you praying and the word refrigerator pops into your head?

Our father, who art in heaven, refrigeration be thy name. That's not a thing. That's not a thing. So if you want to work that hard to explain it away, you go ahead, but you're working awfully hard. God stepped in and helped. God in our midst. Now, I know that story raises good questions. Why that miracle and not another? Why not cure someone's cancer? Why not make it so those families don't need the Grocery Project in the first place? And those are good questions. And I've answered some of those questions in other sermons, but just for tonight, just tonight, quiet those questions and just notice the fact that God stepped in to help, just like God stepped into our world 2000 years ago at Christmas, and just like God steps into your life and into my life to help. You are not alone. You are not abandoned. And sometimes God does do the big miraculous healing, and I've told you some of those stories before.

And I don't know why he doesn't always make our lives easier the way that we would like him to. God's ways are more complex than my human brain can figure out. That's part of what makes him God. But I think it has something to do with stories that matter. And stories that matter always include some kind of challenge, some kind of hardship. Maybe the point here is that the community sees churches stepping up to provide for families in need and that helps people who don't know Jesus form a right opinion about Jesus. Maybe the point is that we get to be involved in the miracle by helping each other and that gets us out of our own problems and into a bigger world, and that brings hope. And I don't know how the story's going to end. That's part of what makes it a good story. No spoilers. God doesn't do spoilers. The question is, what's the story God's writing through you in 2020?

With all of its ups and downs, full of darkness and danger it is, but God wants to write a story that matters through you and through me. And our job is to cooperate, respond to those nudges he gives us to do certain things, just like that couple responded to the nudge to help out with the new refrigerator at Jubilee Beach, and have faith in all of it that God will use both the good and the hard to write a story that matters. A year ago last December, I quoted to you one of my favorite Christmas songs that was written a few years ago by Tracy Thorne. And it's about how we need the joy of Christmas to help us cope with all the difficult parts of life and all the things that the coming years, all the ways and things that could go wrong and hurt us in the coming years.

And the words are, "When someone very dear calls you with the words that everything's all clear, it's what you want to hear, but you know it might be different in the new year. That's why we hang the lights so high, joy. You loved it as a kid and now you need it more than you ever did. It's because of the dark, it's because of the dark that we see the beauty and the spark, and that's why, that's why the carols make you cry, joy. So light the winds of fire and watch as the flames grow higher, we'll gather up our fears and face down all the coming years and all that they destroy. And in their face, we throw our joy, joy, joy." And a year ago, when I quoted those words to you, we did not know all the 2020 would destroy. We did not know that we would live through the worst pandemic since 1918. We didn't know the coming year would bring civil unrest the likes of which we haven't seen in decades.

And there were personal things we didn't know were coming. Some of you received scary diagnoses this year. Others of you lost jobs and really hard things. Last December when I quoted those words to you, I did not know that my mother would die in the middle of COVID, and that because of the lockdown, my siblings and I would only get one hour to say goodbye to her, wearing gowns and masks and glove and hairnet and looking like space aliens. And then we had to leave and we couldn't be there for her when she died, praying over her as we were able to do for my dad. I didn't see that coming a year ago. I didn't know back then that my oldest daughter would graduate from college into a recession, making it really hard for her to find a job. Didn't know my son

would spend one of his four years of college back here at home in his room taking classes online. Didn't know that my youngest daughter's senior year of high school would be hijacked. Didn't see it coming.

But there were other things we didn't know were going to happen either. Good things, hopeful things, beautiful things. A year ago, I did not know that though I was just starting to mourn the fact that I was about to be an empty nester in a year or two, surprise suddenly the nest not so empty. And I get a little bit more time with my kids before they leave. I didn't know a year ago that though this has been one of the most challenging leadership seasons for the staff and for me, it has also been a rich privilege. I get the opportunity to lead a church through a year like this. That is not a privilege many people get, and I get it, a privilege I did not see coming a year ago. And I did not know that I was going to see the best of my church that I love so much, who gave and served and worshiped and doubled down on our vision to bring Jesus' healing wherever we live [inaudible 00:19:56]. So many things we didn't see coming, some of them hard, but some of them were beautiful and amazing and awesome.

And in all of it, God is writing a story that matters and the difficult parts of it are part of what makes the story matter. And we don't know what the next year will bring. We don't know. Some hard things probably, and some good and beautiful things as well. So BelPres, here's what we're going to do. Come what may, we're going to keep growing and serving and worshiping and making a difference in our world in the firm conviction that through it all, good and bad, God is writing a story through us, a story that matters, a story that means something. And we'll gather up our fears and our hopes and we'll face down all the coming years and all that they build and bring and all that they destroy. And in the face of it all, we will throw our joy, undefeatable, unstoppable, unrelenting, unsundering, joy, joy to you and joy to me and joy to the world.

Our Lord has come. Let earth receive her King. Merry Christmas, BelPres. Merry Christmas. So, Jesus, you are the one that brings good out of bad. And you work in all stories to make them stories that matter. So, Lord, here are our lives. Here are our lives, our years, we surrender them to you and ask, Lord, through us, write a story that matters, that means something, and we'll be grateful people. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.