

Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to those on whom His favor rests. Go ahead and find your seats for me. Let me just say, again, welcome to Valley Creek. Merry Christmas, and we love Christmas. We love it. We love the lights and the fun and the parties. We love being together. We love worshipping together and we love Christmas because it reminds us. It reminds us that Jesus moved into our neighborhood. He came down full of grace and truth.

Christmas is when Jesus brought His light into our darkness. Christmas is when love came down and hope rose up. Every year for Christmas, we just ask the Lord and we try to seek Him on what our experiences should look like. That is, we just pray about it and we ask the Lord what it should look like and then we just do that. Like a novel idea. Ask God what He wants to do, and then just do that. This year, we felt like we really clearly heard Him say, "It's supposed to be a really simple Christmas." Just simple, just being together, just looking to Jesus, and that's really been the theme all year long. In a world of bigger and faster and more, we're supposed to just enjoy the simple. The story of Jesus - how and why He came.

Here's what we're going to do. For about the next 8 minutes, we're going to read you the Christmas story. You ever had somebody just read you a story? Nothing required of you, just freely listening and receiving. I want to invite you to do that. To rid yourself of any distraction or whatever is going on around you, and just listen in. Kids and students, we especially, want to invite you to listen to this. In fact we just -- we built this whole thing, so that you could hear the real story of Christmas. It's the greatest story that's ever been told. We're going to read it out of Scripture, the Bible, God's Word; because God's Word is living and active. It cuts to the heart of things. Every word that God speaks, it's spirit and it's truth. God's Word - it's a lamp into our feet and a light into our path. That is, God's Word makes a way for us when it feels dark.

God's Word is his breath. It's His very breath. After a long year, wouldn't it be just so good to take a breath of fresh air? This is the story of Jesus, the real story of Christmas. It's the most important story that's ever been told, so here it is - the story of Christmas according to Scripture.

In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made.

Without Him, nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. When the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her, and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored, the Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be, but the angel said to her, "Do not be

afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus."

"He will be great and He will be called the son of the most high. The Lord, God, will give Him the throne of his father, David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you, so the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God, for nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered, "May it be to me as you have said." Then, the angel left her. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother, Mary, was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

Because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because He will save His people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel which means 'God with us.'" When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded, and took Mary home as his wife, but he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name Jesus.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world, and everyone went to his own town to register. Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him.

He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory - the glory of the one and only who came from the Father full of grace and truth. Who being in very nature, God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing. Taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man. He humbled Himself. For unto us a child is born. To us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders, and He will be called wonderful, counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace, there will be no end. He will

reign on David's throne and over His Kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ, the Lord. This will be assigned to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the Highest and on Earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem. "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and we have come to worship Him." They went on their way and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with His mother Mary and they bowed down and worshiped Him. They opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. This is how God showed His love among us. He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love. Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

So, that's the story of Christmas - really simple, incredibly profound. While we were lost in sin and hurting and broken and in the darkness, Jesus came, but not as like royalty in a palace, as a baby in a manger. Not as a conquering ruler, as a lowly servant. Jesus came to bring healing to our hearts and hope to our hopelessness and light to our darkness. Can I just ask you, where is there darkness in your life? Like, where does it feel especially dark? Any place that feels hurting or lost or broken, any place where you've lost hope, any place where maybe you've lost vision; where does it feel dark in your life? We've talked to so many people in this season that have had just an especially hard season.

I've talked to people that have had, like, heartbreaking health diagnoses, and whose kids are struggling, whose jobs are putting incredible strain on the family, whose depression feels like a

blanket, like it just feels like it's weighing them down. I've talked to people who've lost loved ones and they don't know what the next season is going to hold. I've talked to people that just feel numb. Can I ask you, like, are you tired? Are you worn out? Do you feel like you're barely keeping your head above water? Because, if so, we felt like we especially needed to say this. Because of Jesus, it's going to be okay. Because of Jesus, you are going to be okay. In fact, because of Jesus, you're going to be more than okay. Because Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world. Whoever believes in me, will never walk in darkness."

That is, no matter how dark it feels out there or how dark it feels in here, the light of Jesus can illuminate everything everywhere. The light of Jesus can illuminate even the darkest, loneliest, saddest places. Where does it feel dark right now in your life? Because Jesus can bring light to our darkness. The story of Christmas really matters because it reminds us of that, that Jesus brought His light to our darkness. You have to understand, Jesus is not scared of the dark. He's not scared of your dark. He's not scared of your past. He's not scared of your present. He's not scared of your future. In fact, He's come to redeem your past, and for those that are in Jesus, He holds all things in the present for your good and His glory and He's holding your future in His hands.

Your unknown is actually very much known to Jesus, that is if you've let Him in. Can I just ask you, and this is just for you to answer. Christmas is when the light of Jesus came here, like down here. Has the light of Jesus ever come in here, in your heart, in your life? Like, has a baby who was born in a manger become a Savior that rules your life? Has the light that shines on the darkness become a light that actually guides your life? Because the Christmas story, it remains just that. It's just a story until I choose to make Jesus the author of my story. Once again, where is the darkness in your life? Because even now Jesus is saying, "If you would just let me in, I would bring light right there, right there to that darkness."

See, Christmas is when Jesus came to bring His light to our darkness and that is why we love candles during Christmas, because they remind us of that truth. Go ahead and grab your candle for me. In just a moment, we're going to light our candles and we're going to pass that light around the room. You have to understand how profound this is. You see, the light of Jesus comes to one person at a time and each person has to make a decision whether or not they're going to receive that for themselves. When it comes your turn to receive the light, here's what you'll do. You'll take your candle and you'll tip it to the candle that's lit. The one that's lit, will stay up like this, and you'll tip your candle like this and even that's symbolic. Because what it says is the light of Jesus, it doesn't bow to us, we bow to the light.

King Jesus doesn't bow to us, we bow to King Jesus. We'll pass that light around and one by one, we'll watch as the light fills the space and pushes out the darkness and we'll be reminded of the simple truth of Christmas. I just want to take a moment and encourage you. Now, listen to this; in just a second, we're going to sing Away in a Manger and Silent Night. Normally, I would come and we'd blow out the candles in 1, 2, 3 and we'd all blow them out at once, but

this year is going to be a little bit different. This year, we want you to experience it by faith. Towards the end of Silent Night, when you feel, when you sense, when you believe, by faith, that the light of Jesus has gone from here to in here, I want you to blow out your candle. Towards the end of the second song, towards the end of Silent Night, when you believe by faith the light of Jesus is now in you, I want to invite you to blow out your candle. If you don't know when, you'll see people blowing out their candles and you can do it then.

But you're going to have a chance to experience it by faith. It's really important because, without Jesus, all we have is darkness. Without Jesus, all the world has is darkness. Without Jesus, all our lives have is darkness. But Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world. Whoever believes in Me will never walk in darkness but will have in them the light of life." Christmas is when Jesus came to bring His light to our darkness, so may each of us experience His light and His life even now.