

DAWSON SHIELDS

Well, hey, everybody. Welcome to Valley Creek. It is so good to be with you today. Hey, welcome in, whatever campus you're at. Let's go ahead and welcome all of our campuses in. It's so good to be together. Hey, we hope you and your family and friends had a wonderful Thanksgiving. Me and my family did. It was a whole lot of fun. But Thanksgiving, it's over. It's time for Christmas. You see, I love Christmas. I'm the guy that puts up all the decorations. Not before Thanksgiving, well before Thanksgiving. And I know you're either that person or you're not. Yes, there's some boos. That's a heated debate. But you see, Christmas is my favorite holiday. I love everything that comes with it. I love the celebration. I love people telling me their travel plans. I love it when we sing Christmas songs that are about Jesus in church. It's so much fun. I love everything that has to do with Christmas. The lights, the decorations, the hot chocolate. I love stepping on a crunchy leaf when I'm outside and a cool breeze hitting me in the face, a chilly breeze hitting me in the face. But it's great. Everything about Christmas is amazing. But what is Christmas really about? Come on, we know this. It's not about the decorations and the lights and the trees. It's not just about the presents that we give to people or the presents we get. It's not just about a church service in a building. Christmas is all about Jesus. In fact, in the story of Christmas in Luke, it kicks things off with this. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. Christmas is all about Jesus, all about our Savior, who came and made His dwelling place among us for you and for me to save us. And it's a wonderful story of hope, and we get reminded of it year after year after year. And I love it so much because it just lifts my eyes up to Jesus. But that wonderful story of hope, this celebration that we now get to experience every single year, it gets kind of lost in the holidays. You know what I'm talking about? The whole world is celebrating Christmas, the entire world, but the whole world is missing the whole story of Christmas. Christmas has kind of become this thing where it's about materialism and plans and grandma demanding, demanding, "You must show up for Christmas because it's Christmas. And you can't miss Christmas at my house." You know what I'm talking about? And so, we've kind of missed this whole thing. This beautiful story has gotten lost in the holiday season. And it would be really easy for me to get up here and say in a really grumpy voice, "Jesus is the reason for the season, you all." And "don't take the Christ out of my Christmas." You know what I'm talking about? It'd be really easy to get up here and point out how the whole world has missed it, right? But that's not what we want to do. You see, this Christmas, all we want to do is just lift up your eyes to Jesus, to make Him our main focus, because that's what this season is all about. And so, here's what's going to happen. Today, myself, and two other communicators, we're just going to share one thing that's been placed on our hearts for this Christmas. Not Christmas in the past, not Christmas in the future, something God has placed on our heart for this Christmas. One thing, because of Jesus, we now get to experience, celebrate, and receive.

And so, this Christmas, because of Jesus, may you be filled with joy. May you be filled with joy. Some of us are like, "Check, got it." Christmas joy, it's locked down, man. The lights are up, the presents are wrapped, the whole family is coming in. There are no scrooges in my house.

Don't grinch my Christmas. You guys are my people, we got that down. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the joy of the Lord. Not the joy that comes from presents, but the joy that comes from Jesus. And here's the thing, you see, if this verse right here, if this is true, and we all know it, then why then, for some of us, maybe not all of us, why then is Christmas such a hard season? Why is it a season to get through? A season of pain, of hurt, of loss, of frustration, of chaos? Why? Why have we missed this great big story? Are we missing something special? Because you see, there's joy to experience. There's joy available for you and for me. And in the Christmas story, God declares that the Savior is coming, and He does it through an angel. And he says it to shepherds who are out tending their flocks in the field, and the angel says, "Do not be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." Okay, great joy for all the people. You see, this is one of the most profound verses in the Bible. Why? Because of the audience of the angel, because of who the angel is talking to. The angel's talking to shepherds, and he says, "Hey, I'm telling you the Savior's coming." Not the religious leaders of the time, not the political elite, not the rich, not to set apart, not the best of the best. No, he comes to shepherds. Why is this important? Well, you see, I think shepherds are really cool. David and Moses, my childhood heroes, those guys are shepherds, and they're cool. So, shepherds are cool. But in the time of Jesus, shepherds are not cool. They're actually kind of lame. They are the bottom of society. They are the outcasts. They're often untrustworthy. Literally sent out into a field to be forgotten. Like, "Don't be around us." But God chooses them, the guys who have no hope, no future, no joy, and says, "Joy for you is on the way." And it says, for all the people. All people. Not some people, all people of different backgrounds, from different places, different upbringings, different stories. And God's declaring, "No matter who you are or what your story is, joy is now available for you." And this, this right here can be hard to believe based on your circumstances. Joy for me doesn't feel like it. You see, we think that joy is being happy all the time when everything is great, but that's not joy. Joy is a sense of well-being, that all is well. And when Jesus shows up, all is well. In Psalms, it says, "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence." In the presence of Jesus, we're filled with joy. Before Jesus, there was no joy. In fact, before Jesus, your circumstances did determine your joy. Praise God, that's not the truth anymore. Now, that the truth is no matter what my circumstances are, I can just go to Jesus and be filled with His joy. No matter what's happening in life, maybe everything is great, maybe everything is wrong, joy is available for me. That's the truth, guys. And hear me, I'm not trying to pretend that circumstances aren't real. I'm not trying to dismiss how anybody feels. You see, I get what Christmas feels like to be the joy-taker instead of the joy-giver. For a long time, for me, Christmas was just this reminder of who's not here anymore. Every celebration, every holiday moment, every time we ate together as a family or opened up presents, it was always left with this feeling like, "Man, that person's supposed to be here right now."

You see, Christmas by itself is awesome, it's great. I told you, it's my favorite holiday. But what Christmas couldn't do was fill that hole inside of me. It couldn't give me a sense of well-being. It could make me happy for a minute, could distract me, could make me forget about things for a moment, but it couldn't give me that sense of well-being that I was looking for. And just like

those shepherds out in the field, I didn't feel like there was joy for me. But then, I got my attention off of my circumstances and I put it back onto Jesus, and that's where my sense of well-being has come from. And my circumstances, they haven't really changed, but my joy has changed, and Jesus is filling me with it. And maybe you can relate to that. Maybe you're like, "That kind of sounds like me this Christmas. Like, I don't have joy." Well, there's a verse in the Old Testament, I just want to share it with you. It brings me a lot of hope. I hope it does for you, too. It says, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God, my Savior." That is a sense of well-being, that all is well even when everything is wrong because I have Jesus, because He's my Savior, and He's with me this Christmas. And so, maybe this Christmas, you're the student with the divorced family, and Christmas is this big frustration about where you're spending the holidays. Maybe you're a young adult and you're the only single friend. You know what I'm talking about? I was once that friend, I get it. You're the only single friend, and all your friends are spending holidays with a spouse, and that's what you want more than anything. Maybe you're an adult and you're just tired of it. Tired of the busy, chaotic, materialistic Christmas year after year after year. Maybe you're like me and you have lost in your life, and Christmas is just a reminder of who's not here anymore. Maybe you got all the Christmas joy in the world, but you're not sure about kingdom joy. Can I just share with you, man? I have a great news. Jesus is here. And He's come to your house this Christmas and He's spending it with you. And no matter what's going on, maybe everything is great or maybe everything is wrong, He has brought joy with Him, joy for you. So, this Christmas, because of Jesus, may you be filled with joy.

KARRIE JOHNSTON

So good. Well, hey, I just want to say I am super thankful to be here with all of you this morning. I love Valley Creek. I love this family. And today, I am excited to say that this Christmas, because of Jesus, be amazed. Be amazed. Can I ask you? When is the last time that you were truly amazed? And I'm talking about amazement of that of a little kid on Christmas morning, right? Because I'm convinced that there's almost no bigger or better feeling than that of the awe and wonder and amazement than that of a little kid when they wake up on a Christmas morning, right? For me, I can picture it back when I was little. I'm lying in my bed and I'm just picturing everything that's waiting for me downstairs, right? Every gift and the tree and the lights and whatever Santa left in the stockings and my Mom's homemade cinnamon rolls that I know are also waiting for me, still to this day when I come downstairs. It is the best, it's amazing. So, do you remember that feeling? That hope? No matter how fleeting of a season that may have been for you in your life, do you remember that feeling, that hope of just whenever you come downstairs, that hope that that mysterious guy who comes to your house in the middle of the night and then just magically leaves you every present that you happen to tell your parents about that month?

It's just there. That is amazing. But as I got older, that amazement kind of started to fade. For me, Christmas became way less about wonder and way more about work. It started to just feel like there were just so many things to do and just not enough time to do them. Instead of feeling amazement, I started feeling pressure, but the holiday kind. You know what I'm talking about? It's the holiday, so even though you're under more stress than you have been in under any other time of the year, it's Christmas. And you don't want Dawson to call you a Grinch. So, you're like, "Okay, I got to smile and I got to have a good time," and you just start to feel pressure. Maybe it's pressure to decorate the perfect house. Maybe it's pressure to buy the perfect gifts, to cook that perfect meal that perfectly accommodates everybody's preferences and their allergies and the other allergies that you're not sure that they're real allergies, but they say that they are. Maybe it's pressure to keep that good conversation going with that family member that you just don't want to talk to anymore. Pressure to plan, to perform, to keep everybody happy. See, for me, I didn't stop celebrating Christmas. I just stopped being amazed by it. And maybe you can relate to that. But then, see, I did this study and I noticed something in the Christmas story in Scripture that I had just honestly never really slowed down enough to notice before. In Luke 2, when Jesus was born and the shepherds go out and tell everybody all about it, this is what Scripture says happens. It says, "All who heard it were amazed." They were amazed. Amazement was the very first reaction to Jesus. Not fear, not performance, not religion, it's just amazement. Honestly, not even a true understanding of what had just happened for all of mankind. Those people that heard about it, they didn't know the whole story, they didn't have all the answers, but something, something inside of their hearts stirred and they were amazed. And what's really cool is that Jesus, He didn't stop amazing people as He got older. No, actually, He doesn't ask us to reserve all of our amazement just for the Christmas season, just when there was a miracle in a manger. No, Jesus amazed people His entire life over and over and over again. Every interaction that He had with people, people walked away amazed, because amazement didn't end when Jesus grew up. No, we see an example of it right here in Mark. It says, "People were overwhelmed with amazement." This is just after an interaction with Jesus. They weren't like, "Oh, yeah, that's pretty cool. That's awesome. That's amazing." No, no, they were overwhelmed with amazement because Jesus, oh, He was unlike any other person that anybody had ever met before. See, people were stunned when they had an interaction with Him because He did this thing all the time where He would notice the person that was forgotten. He talked to the outcast. He healed the sick. He forgave the unforgivable. He welcomed in the people that you and I look away from. Jesus amazed people. He amazed them by His kindness, by His compassion, by His healing, by the way He loved people. He amazed them not for what He did for them, but for who He was to them. And I think that being amazed is actually a very honest response to when something special happens. Truly, think about it. This is why a kid loves Christmas, because you go to sleep, no presents, you wake up, presents.

That is very special. That is amazing, and that is why every kid loves Christmas, and that's why every person that ever had an interaction with Jesus, they were amazed. And then, even better, there's this moment that kind of flips everything on its head. See, there's this story in Matthew

8, where this man, he comes up to Jesus and he's talking with Him and he starts telling Him about his servant who was sick. So, I can just picture it. Jesus is standing there listening to this man, and Jesus would look at him and be like, "All right, man, your servant is sick. Do you want me to come to your house? Do you want me to heal your servant?" That's actually what Jesus says. "Do you want me to heal your servant?" And the man looks at Him, and he says, "I don't even deserve to have you come under my roof, but if you say the word, I believe that my servant will be healed." And look what Jesus's response to the man was. "When Jesus heard this, He was amazed." Jesus was amazed. The one who amazed the entire world was amazed by a person. The Creator of heaven and earth, the Creator and Sustainer of life and life itself, the one who was holding everything together back then and still is today was amazed by a person, and not by his job, not by his grades at school, not by the way he decorates his house or the car he drives, the amount of money he spends on Christmas gifts or if he did anything right or if he got everything wrong that year. No, Jesus was amazed by his faith. He was amazed by his confidence in who Jesus was and ultimately by his heart. And so, if Jesus was amazed by people and people were amazed by Jesus's birth and by Him all throughout His life, then I think that maybe, maybe Christmas isn't just about us being amazed by Him. I think possibly, I think maybe Christmas is also about us realizing that Jesus is amazed by you. Jesus is amazed by you. And hear me, not by your performance, He's not amazed by your achievements, He's not amazed by how perfectly you do Christmas this year or the money that you spend or the things that you do, He is amazed when you look at Him. He is amazed when you come to Him, when you trust Him, when you let Him in. Jesus is amazed by your faith in Him, by your confidence in who He is, that He says He is, and He is amazed ultimately by your heart. Jesus is amazed by you because you are special. And you don't have to try and earn His amazement because in Jesus' name, you already have it. And so, can I ask you, when is the last time that you were amazed by Jesus? Not by the Christmas tradition of it all, those things are great, but amazed by Him? Him, the God of the universe? Be amazed that Jesus stepped out of heaven for the entire world. Be amazed by His compassion for all of mankind. That literally the Creator of the heavens and the earth, He looked at you and He called you special. That He moved into your neighborhood with grace and truth. That He took on all of humanity for you, that love got personal for Him, and that hope now has a name, and His name is Jesus. He is amazing. And so, hear me, the circumstances of all of it, of Christmas gifts and the lights and their traditions, those things are all very fun and they are amazing. And the amazement of those things pass as soon as the season does, but your amazement in Jesus doesn't have to end when the lights come down. And thankfully, Jesus' amazement in you doesn't change when the calendar does. So, what I'm learning is that even though the circumstances of my life have not magically gotten easier as I've just learned all this, my to-do list is still to-do listing, okay? There are things to do. I don't suddenly have a million presents waiting for me downstairs anymore, but somehow, somehow, I feel more amazement at Christmas than I ever did as a kid. Because I have learned to not find my amazement in the Christmas of it all, but now I find my amazement in Jesus and somehow He finds it in me. And so, can I just encourage you, no matter what life looks like for you this Christmas season, if it is loud and complicated or lonely and quiet, if you could answer the question or not of the last time you

were amazed by Jesus, can I just remind you that Jesus is still amazing, and He is amazed by you? This Christmas, because of Jesus, be amazed.

JUSTIN LANHAM

So, this Christmas, because of Jesus, may you be filled with hope, may you be amazed. And this Christmas, because of Jesus, may you have faith. And not faith like you're going to somehow get everything you want on your wish list or faith like the Cowboys are going to somehow make the playoffs, but I'm talking about the kind of faith we see in our Christmas story. Because if you think about it, that's what the Christmas story really is. One big story of faith. It took faith for Mary to believe that she was going to become pregnant. It took faith for Joseph to believe that it was from the Lord. It took faith for shepherds to leave their sheep. It took faith for wise men to follow a star in the sky. And this Christmas, I just believe that there's an invitation for all of us to have faith. To have faith. And so, what is faith? Faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain about what you cannot see. That's what faith is. It's being sure of what you hope for, certain about what you cannot see. And so, what I want you to catch is faith is sure and faith is certain. I mean, think about it. The wise men had no way of knowing that Jesus was going to be where they were going, yet they were sure of it. Mary had no way of knowing that this baby she was pregnant with was actually the Messiah, but she was certain of it. Why? Because she had faith. They were certain of what they had hoped for, sure of what they could not see. And this Christmas, I believe there's the same invitation for us. But I think if we're honest, sometimes faith can be a little challenging. I know for me I have a much easier time being sure of what I have instead of what I don't have, certain about what I can see instead of what I can't see, but that's not what it means to have faith. And that's not the kind of faith we see in our Christmas story. And there's one component of our Christmas story, one story of faith that time and time again really captures my heart. One that always inspires me and that's the story of Anna and Simeon. You remember the story of Anna and Simeon? Some of you were like, "Never heard of them." Yeah, that's because they don't play this paramount role in our Christmas story. They're not as essential as Mary and Joseph or even an innkeeper for that matter. But I think part of the reason we see them in our Christmas story is to show us what it looks like to have faith, to literally demonstrate being sure of what you hope for and certain about what you do not see. And so, in Luke 2, we first get to meet Simeon. And Simeon's an ordinary priest, but unlike other priests, Simeon had been given a promise from God, that he would not die until he saw the Messiah. And so, we read that one day Simeon's moved and he's told to go to the temple courts. Apparently, he was off that day, but he needed to go to the temple. And when he goes to the temple, he runs into Mary and Joseph. Because during this time, it was custom, after a Jewish baby was born, to take them to the temple to be dedicated. And so, this is what Mary and Joseph are doing with Jesus. And here's where Mary and Joseph run into Simeon. And as a priest, I'm positive Simeon had to have dedicated hundreds of babies during his time, but for whatever reason when he saw this baby, he was sure that he had just seen the Messiah. And so, how does Simeon respond? "Sovereign

Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation. A.K.A., I'm good to die now because I just saw Jesus." And just when you feel like this can't get any more prophetic, someone named Anna approaches. And we read that Anna was someone who never left the temple. In fact, the Scripture tells us that she's an 84-year-old widow, who spent every single day there worshiping, praying, fasting, seeking God. And so, much like Simeon, I'm sure Anna saw a whole bunch of babies come through to be dedicated, but as soon as Anna sees this baby, she runs over, she gives thanks to God and declares, "This is the Messiah." And so, as amazing as all of that is, can I just tell you, this is the part that really gets me. Because if I'm Anna and Simeon and I've waited as long as they have to see the Messiah, by golly, I better see the Messiah. Conquering Jesus, King of kings, Lord of lords, Alpha and the Omega, Beginning and the End, Eyes of Fire, Resurrected, Seated on the Throne, Jesus. But that's not what they saw, was it? Instead, what Anna and Simeon saw was a baby, a helpless little baby born into a poor family with no influence, no authority, no reputation, just a baby. And just a baby is what most everyone else saw, but not Anna and Simeon. See, Anna and Simeon saw this baby for who He really was, the Savior of the world.

And so, how did Anna and Simeon see what no one else could see? They had faith. They had faith. They were sure of what they hoped for, certain about what everyone else couldn't see. Because that's what faith does. It teaches us how to fix our eyes not on what's seen, but on what's unseen. And so, what I need you to catch is that faith will allow you to see things your eyes never will. So, here's my question for you. This Christmas, what do you want to see? Do you want to see another Christmas? Do you want to see what most eyes see, like the presents, the trees, the time off, maybe a little colder weather in Jesus' name? No school? Amen, students. This Christmas, do you want to see what your eyes see, or this Christmas, do you want to see what faith sees? Do you want to see a healing? Do you want to see a breakthrough? You want to see years of bondage released in Jesus' name? You want to see signs and wonders? You want to see a miracle? This Christmas, do you want to see Jesus? Because there's nothing wrong with the presents and the time off and the no school, just like there's nothing wrong with a baby being dedicated in a temple. But this year, instead of just seeing another baby, what if you saw Jesus? What if you saw the Messiah, the Author and the Perfecter, the Prince of Peace? Because faith sees what eyes never will. And so, this year, I just believe there's an invitation for all of us to have faith like Anna and Simeon. To learn how to fix our eyes not on the circumstances, not on what's seen, but on what's unseen. Because when we do, we start to discover the gift of faith is, not just in our lives, but in the lives of others as well. And the reason I get so excited about this is because I'm actually someone who's gotten to experience this kind of faith from someone else. I'm talking Anna and Simeon kind of faith. Like the kind of faith that waits and is patient, the kind of faith that prays and perseveres, and this is the faith of my parents. See, all throughout high school and college, I didn't want anything to do with faith. I had turned my back on it. I'd walked away from it. And if I'm really honest with you guys, I was super difficult to be around. I had a Grinch spirit. I was Mr. Bah Humbug. But even in what I'm positive was a really difficult season for my parents, they had faith. Faith that this prodigal would come home, faith that I would encounter the love of the

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Father, faith that one day the scales would fall, Jesus would be Lord of my life, and everything would change. But much like Anna and Simeon, I'm sure for my parents, it was a lot of waiting, a lot of trusting and a whole lot of praying, but they never stopped. They had faith. And when everyone else just saw another young adult who was lost, they saw a young adult a son who was yet to be found. Because faith is being sure of what you hope for, certain about what you do not see yet. And so, this Christmas, I believe that there's an invitation for all of us to have faith. And so, this Christmas, what do you want to see? You want to see what your eyes see or you want to see what faith sees? In fact, in Jesus' name, I just declare that this Christmas one of you is going to see peace in your family. One of you is going to see joy in your relationships. One of you is going to see a healing in your body. One of you is going to see restoration in a relationship. This Christmas, would you have faith? Because when you do, you get to see Christmas for what it truly is. You get to see Jesus for who He truly is. And so, this Christmas, may you be filled with joy, may you be amazed and in Jesus' name, may you have faith and just watch what the Lord wants to do in your life.

So, Jesus, I just want to say thank You for the gift of Christmas. Thank You for the gift of Your life. Thank You for the gift of Your Son. Thank You for the gift of You. And so, this Christmas, may we be filled with joy. Like with the joy of the Lord, be our strength. Would we remind ourselves that there is fullness of joy in your presence? This Christmas, would we be amazed? Would we have a child-like faith? Would we have awe and wonder about the work that You're doing within us? And this Christmas, would we have faith, faith that You're going to move, faith in the miraculous, faith that we're going to see what faith sees, faith that God is good, Jesus has forgiven me, I am loved, and everything is possible? This Christmas, because of Jesus, would we be filled with joy? Would we be amazed? And in Jesus' name, would we have faith?