



December 1-2, 2018
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Reel Christmas: The Joy of Jesus

John 1:1-5

How many like Elf? How many have never seen Elf? You might think Elf clips is an odd way to kick off Advent...which means coming; the coming of Jesus. But one of the things I love about that show is how Buddy finds such joy in ordinary things. Like used gum...or a spinning hotel door. (By the way, we were in Asheville, North Carolina last week visiting our daughter for Thanksgiving...and Cyndi tried running around in one of those revolving doors. It's harder than it looks...but I was proud of her for trying!) It is so easy to take Christmas for granted. We sing "Joy to the World"...but it becomes ordinary. This Advent, we want to look at familiar things with new joy-filled eyes.

If you are visiting with us, we are really glad you are here! We've been practicing at being better hosts as a church so I hope you experience a REALLY warm welcome this evening/morning. Fair warning, though...some of us are still learning how to do the hug thing...and might not be very good at it. It might even look like this. So, if someone tries to greet you with a too-enthusiastic hug...be nicer than that, would you?

Even though we will have some movie fun in the coming weeks, we will also do what we do every weekend together: look at what the Bible has to say to us. For this Advent, we are going to focus on the first chapter of the gospel of John. Which might be surprising since John doesn't even have a Christmas story. No Bethlehem, no angels, no wise men...nada.

It's like after reading what his friends Matthew and Luke had written about the birth of Jesus, John decided to go back further in the story...WAY back. To the beginning of time. When WE read the opening words of John's gospel, they might seem unusual to us. But those who read these words for the very first time would have been shocked by them. The first-century Jews would have been shocked. The non-Jews (called Gentiles) would have been shocked. So I want you to see if you can discover the shocking parts as you listen to the first verses of John's version of the Christmas story. (And by the way, John even uses a mysterious nickname for Jesus...which is ALSO shocking.)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

OK...did you spot anything that might have shocked first-century readers? Let's start with Jesus' nickname. What was it? "Word." In Greek, it is "Logos." It's strange to us but in first century Greek philosophy, "logos" was thought to be a powerful, impersonal force in the universe. Logos was like the cosmic glue that held everything together and made everything work. When they said "Logos" it was like Luke Skywalker saying "The Force be with you." But John borrows this philosophical idea-- "logos"...and turns it into a person; not just a force. "In the beginning was the Word..." That would have been shocking for every Gentile reader.

But there was a shocker for the Jews, too. Did you see it? "In the beginning..." Why? Because every Jew would recognize those words. Genesis 1:1. The very first words of the Bible which describe how God created

the universe. "In the beginning..." A Jewish reader would have been shocked to hear those words borrowed in this new way.

"In the beginning...Logos..." What was John doing opening his gospel this way? The same thing we are trying to do by opening a service with a movie clip: trying to say, "I want you to pay attention because I'm going to tell you something that will blow your mind." John is about to take that Greek idea, "logos," turn it into the most incredible person that ever lived.

Did you hear all the shocking things John tells us about "Logos." We learn that "logos" is eternal; he was already there when time began. Did you know that time itself is a creation of God? "In the beginning WAS the Word..." Further, we learn that Logos was divine. "...the word was with God and the word WAS God." That's a shocker.

And John's just getting warmed up. This divine Logos was the creator. "All things were made through him..." And not only did Logos create everything...he is the one who breathed life into all things. "In him was life..." John writes, and that life was so powerful it was like the life-giving properties of the sun. "In him was life and that life was the light of men." That life that was in him...is now in us! Amazing!

These are audacious claims. This person named "Logos" is eternal, he is God, he is creator, he is life-giver. And here comes another bombshell: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." Suddenly, John shifts to present tense. He's not just talking about what happened millions of years ago. No, John says this powerful, divine, creative, life-giving person...is shinING...right now...and all of the spiritual powers of darkness that seek to snuff out that light...are powerless to do so. The shining, life-giving light of the logos is inextinguishable.

Right here...is John's first Christmas hint. In a few verses, John's gonna come clean and tell us that "logos" is, in fact, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the eternal, divine, creator of the universe. And that person...has put on human skin and come a callin'. That Jesus...who stepped out of eternity and into time, stepped out of heaven and onto the earth, stepped out of the brilliance of God's presence and into the darkness of sin...that Jesus is the light that crushes the darkness and offers hope to every human being. The life-giving creator of the universe has come...in person... to set his creation right...and nothing ...no one...no force...can stop him. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it!"

And when we discover that that magnificent, eternal, divine, creator Jesus actually loves us...personally...actually wants to have a relationship with us...personally... that is the most wonderful news ever. Remember how the angel Gabriel described it to the shepherds? "Behold, I bring you GOOD news of GREAT JOY!" Advent is JOY!

We chose Elf to kick off our Advent series because I cannot think of another Christmas movie that better depicts pure joy. Even though the elves are toymakers, the movie isn't about presents and gift-giving. It's about love. In fact, here is my favorite moment in the show. Buddy, who has travelled from the North Pole to New York to find his father, is told that Santa is coming to visit Gimbel's the next day. Do you remember this?

Why is Buddy so excited about the news of Santa's arrival? Because he KNOWS him. Santa isn't just an idea or a legend. Santa is a friend. A personal friend. And the thought of being reunited with his friend is a source of irrepressible joy.

This ...is the heart of Christmas. Christmas is not about decorations, or presents, trees or feasts...not even about religious stories; Christmas is about Jesus. The life-giving, inextinguishable light ...who wants to be our friend! THAT is the reason to celebrate. If you are new to the faith you may never have heard this before. If you are old to the faith, you may have heard it so often you've become numb to it.

But Christmas is the reminder that the eternal Son of God....who created every single thing, including you....who breathed life into you... whose light chases out every dark shadow...that person invaded history 2000 years ago. And if we let him, he will invade our hearts too with a light that destroys darkness and fills us with joy.

Tuesday night we had the most spectacular lightning storm I can remember. Looking out our window, I watched lightning strikes that just decimated the darkness. It was awesome and irresistible. You could not have shrouded that light if you wanted to. And THAT...is the light that Jesus brings. And for those who know him personally...that is the light that lives within us! "that life is the light of men." Why would we ever hide it?

Last week a friend of mine went to McDonalds for breakfast and noticed a homeless woman seated in the corner. He felt prompted to be a light in that woman's life. So, he bought a gift card and, on the way out, handed it to her. But as he continued to his car, he realized God wanted him to shine a little more. So...he turned around, walked back, sat down and introduced himself. And they talked for an hour! He went in for an Egg McMuffin. But his act of kindness became a flash of light that chased away the darkness in that moment. That's the sort of thing that happens when the light of Jesus lives in us.

This meal is a reminder of our personal relationship with the eternal, divine, creator of the universe...named Jesus. This meal is our way of saying, "Jesus...I know him...I know him...I know him! And HE KNOWS ME!" If that doesn't stir up a little joy in your heart...I'm not sure what will.