

Carols by Candlelight 2024

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[0 : 00] The kids read for us tonight parts of the story of Christmas, the very famous story of the birth of Jesus Christ from the Gospels, from the New Testament in the Bible.

And then the very last thing that we read tonight was from 1 John chapter 1. That is a letter that one of Jesus Christ's dearest friends wrote. Jesus referred to him as his beloved disciple, John, the apostle in the first century.

And John used in that letter some of the language that you actually see throughout the other Gospels that were written in the Bible. And he says things like this, I bear witness to what I saw. He uses this sense of a courtroom oath to say, I testify to you. I swear an oath before you of what I saw. And so he says that he heard, he saw, he touched the word of life.

And that's his special way of talking about Jesus. And so John is making some very, very big claims there. He is saying that he heard the Son of God, he saw God, and he touched him.

[1 : 09] And so let me just offer to you tonight two things that John says there. The first thing he tells you, and I really hope tonight from whatever background you may come from that you'll really think about this and consider it.

He says that Christmas is real, it's historical, and that Christmas has power for you. And so the first thing he says here is that Christmas is real, it's historical.

So we are people in the year of our Lord, 2024. We're very modern people. And where do modern people put their trust? We put our trust in the weight of empirical evidence.

So we want to believe in things that are verified. We want objective facts. We want to know that our scientists and our historians search for things that are invention versus reliability.

We want it to be reliable. We want it to be verified. And that means that many of us maybe, we're trained, you know, no matter what you believe in, we are trained by the modern world, the culture we live in, to look at things like religion, Christianity, what we might think of as traditional religion, and think, you know, that is old-fashioned, pre-modern, and we now know, we know, we know better.

[2 : 23] And this has been exposed, this mindset of our contemporary modern culture, and it's been called the myth of chronological snobbery, the myth of chronological snobbery.

And it's that we intuitively think, based on our experiences in the world around us, to think that people that lived in centuries before us, pre-modern people, ancient people, were far more gullible than we are.

And that the things they wrote were far more mythological than the things we write about today. Anyway, that's been called the myth of chronological snobbery. And it's important to know, all I want to say about that tonight is, it's important, I want you to know that the best scholarship, the best scholars in a place like the United Kingdom, where we have so much good scholarship, on what happened in the first century in the Greco-Roman and Jewish context into which Jesus was born is overwhelming.

And it says one very important thing, no one, no one in the first century believed that resurrection was possible. Nobody. One very important scholar at St. Andrews today, he writes this, the idea of an individual being resurrected in the middle of history was inconceivable to the first century person. If you said to a first century Greco-Roman or Jewish person, so-and-so was resurrected from the dead, the response would be, how could that be? Has disease and death now ended? If you read the gospel stories, Mary and Joseph could not in the beginning believe the claim that Jesus, the boy that was to be born to them, his earthly parents, was to be the son of God, God himself.

[4 : 00] They couldn't believe it. And you see that the barriers that pre-modern people, ancient people faced in belief is the very same barriers we face today. They're no different.

No one in the first century believed that the resurrection was possible until they saw, they heard, they touched. And I just want to ask you, have you considered in your life ever the way the Bible makes its claims?

Have you read it? Have you considered it at all? The shepherds reported, we're told in Luke's gospel, all that they heard and saw when they saw the baby. And then Luke writes this, one of the gospel writers, he says, I've carefully investigated everything from the beginning of the story of Jesus to give an orderly testimony, an account.

And a well-investigated, a well-researched account of the historical evidence. And then we read from John, 1 John here, and he uses sense perception. He puts it in the form of a court oath, and he says, I testify, I bear witness as if I'm in the dock being asked questions by the legal team that I really did see and touch and heard God himself, that he really was in the flesh before me.

And so what's unique about Christianity from all the other world religions is that the history of Jesus Christ is the best reason to believe in Christianity. Jesus himself.

[5 : 27] If you read the gospels, the unexpected Messiah, the unexpected Savior, the unexpected one. Nobody believed in the first century that a man could rise from the dead. And the unexpected reality of Jesus is that so many people within a year, within months, within decades of his life were giving their lives away, were giving their lives away to death to say, I saw, I touched, I heard.

C.S. Lewis once responded, the great writer in the middle of the 20th century, he wrote books like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, some of the stories we now love today here. He responded once to a quote by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1961.

Khrushchev had said this, Our cosmonauts, our astronauts, the Russian astronauts, went to space, but they did not find God there. And C.S. Lewis responded like this.

He said, Looking for God by exploring space is like reading or seeing all of Shakespeare's plays in the hope that you would find Shakespeare. Shakespeare is in one sense present in every moment of the play, but he is never present in the same way as Lady Macbeth.

No, he's not diffused in the play like some gas. Finding God is not like a man on the first floor walking upstairs to the second floor. My point is this, is that if God exists, he is related to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to another.

[7 : 02] And you see, Bertrand Russell, a very famous atheist in the early 20th century, he said that when I die, if I find out that God actually does exist, I'm going to say, God, there's not enough evidence. There wasn't enough evidence. But it's a category mistake.

It's a category mistake because, see, if we're going to find God, it's not as if we can investigate God like he's some object. No. God is the author. He is the one who wrote the play.

And, oh, boy, you can't find him through the empirical way. But Luke and John come tonight and say, oh, but yes, you can. Yes, you can. Because in Jesus Christ, in this baby, God has written himself into the drama.

He's written himself into the story. I just want to ask you, would you be willing to consider that claim tonight? Would you be willing to read the Gospels if you never have? It is, let me suggest this, that the reason the nativity, the story of Jesus, is a great story, is the greatest story, is because it is a true story.

Secondly, finally, in just a couple minutes, it's not just that it's history. It's also got power for you. That's the big second claim that John makes.

[8 : 08] And he wraps up the whole of the Christmas story in one word. He says, I want you to know that I saw, I heard, and I touched Jesus, God himself, so that you would be able to find fellowship with God.

So he uses this word. This is a word that means table fellowship. He very literally means so that you could one day find yourself seated with God. In a relationship, in a friendship, that's the kind of thing he's talking about.

Matthew sums up Christmas in one word. He says, Emmanuel, this older word, God with us, God is with us, God is for us. And so the overwhelming meaning and power of Christmas is that every single human being, the Christian claim, was made to be friends with God, was made to find a relationship with God, was made to be in the presence of God.

And we've run away from that. And in Jesus Christ, God has said, I've come to find you. That's the meaning, the power of Christmas tonight. You might have heard before of the word gospel.

We use it in Christianity all the time. Gospel means good news. And what's at the core of Christianity, unlike all the other world religions or philosophies, is that the gospel is more like opening the morning newspaper than it is anything else.

[9 : 23] It's not like going to a counselor or therapist or psychologist, which is very good and helpful sometimes. We need that. But actually, the gospel is more like opening the newspaper and reading the headline. The gospel is the pronouncement of a history that is for you.

It's good news. It's not advice. It's not a call to fix yourself. It's not a call to have better behavior in your life. No, not at all. It is the pronouncement that God has come to rescue you while you are running away.

And I think as long as I've been able to do this role that I'm in here and be a pastor, it's not been that long, but as long as I've been able to do it, one of the things that I've come to see more and more in the opportunities I have to get to talk to people from all different walks of life, backgrounds, religions, we see a lot of people here in this church because we're on the Royal Mile from different backgrounds and belief systems.

One thing I've seen is I think there's a religious consciousness, a deep sense in the soul of religion. What do I mean by that? I mean something like I think everybody knows, everybody knows that they ought to be something that they're not.

Everybody has a sense, you know, I should be just. I should be kind. I should be humble. And I'm not. I think we all feel the lack, some sense of guilt in our lives from that.

[10 : 40] And I think everybody also, the religious consciousness, has some sense of an appetite, a hunger, a longing. I want to know God. I want to know if he's there. And so, so many people in a great city like this wonderful city, Edinburgh, a city we deeply love here at St. Columbus, we say that we're spiritual.

We're searching for something. We're searching for something we have not found. Christmas says to you tonight, God loves you. God knows you to your depths, when really nobody else in your life can know you all the way to the bottom of the soul.

God does. And he has come for you because he loves you anyway. He loves you so much. That's what Christmas says. And in other words, it says, the spiritual search is over. In other words, it says, stop searching for God because God has come to look for you.

God has come to find you. God made the first move. God came to speak to you. And so, I'll wrap up with this. One writer, to go back to our first point, says it like this.

Everything in the Hebrew worldview, the first century worldview that Jesus was born into, militated against the idea that a human being could ever be God. They would not even pronounce God's name.

[11 : 55] And yet, Jesus Christ convinced by his life, death, and his resurrection, so many people, that he was not just a prophet, but that he was God himself in the flesh.

You know, it's one thing to look for God and say, I expect God to come in a whirlwind. I expect God to come in a cloud and thunder. I expect God to come in a booming voice. I expect God to sound like Charlton Heston did in the Ten Commandments movie.

You know, it's a very different thing to say that God became a vulnerable little baby that put his head on the shoulder of mom and dad, that wept at night, that had to be fed.

And you see, he came and identified himself so much with you that he became a human. He came to die for you. He loves you so much. That's the claim of Christianity. Christmas says you can have peace with God even if you've been running away your whole life.

And so I want to ask you this question. Walk away with this question tonight. You might have a thousand questions. Maybe you're seriously considering the claims of Christianity.

[12 : 59] You might have a thousand questions. And that's important. But one question I want to ask you is, ask yourself, am I this Christmas season moving toward God or away from God right now?

Because Christmas is all about the claim that God has come to get near to you. And so are you moving toward God or away from God in this Christmas season? And here's an invitation.

Maybe you've never done this before. Maybe you've done this so many years ago. Would you consider praying to God and saying, I might not know everything that the claims mean.

I might not completely understand it. But I do want to know. I do want to confess that I know I'm not who I want to be. I want to be rescued. That's an invitation for you.

Let me pray. Father, we ask, Lord, that you would help us all to see the meaning of Christmas, the power of Christmas, based on the history of Christmas. And so we ask, Lord, that you would speak. And we pray that in Jesus' name.
[13 : 59] Amen.