

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Midweek Advent 1
December 6, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Let go of Christmas . . . and hold onto Jesus!

Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD.
Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow.
Though they are as red as crimson, they will be like wool.

—Isaiah 1:18

What would it take to make your Christmas the very best it could be? What would it take to have the *perfect* Christmas?

Does the perfect Christmas come when all the Christmas decorations are carefully placed, when the house is beautifully adorned for the holidays, and the spirit of the season is in the air? Will it be the very best possible Christmas come when the shopping is all done, the Christmas cards are all sent out, the baking is finished, and all the presents are wrapped up in pretty paper and bows and spilling out from under the tree, when the moment comes when you can relax and breathe a heavy sigh and sit down with a cup of hot cocoa and say, “Now I can enjoy the season!” Will Christmas be awesome when every gift you unwrap is exactly what you wanted and asked for, when you have your hands the hottest new item that everyone at school wants, and now it is yours? Is the perfect Christmas celebrated when all the family, scattered far and wide across the country and around the world is together again around the Christmas tree? Is the very best Christmas a *white* Christmas, warm and cozy around the fire, dreaming with nostalgia of a memorable Christmas past? (In this part of Arizona maybe don’t hold your breath waiting for a white Christmas!)

You know where I’m going with this. You know I’m going to say that none of those things are what make Christmas special, none of those things are at the heart of Christmas. So I won’t bother saying what you already know. The question does illustrate, though, just how many things we attach to our celebration of Christmas. Decorating and shopping and baking and cards and family and relaxing and fond memories. Some of us do more of those things, others less. But all of them combine to make our Christmas special and meaningful and memorable. None of them are in and of themselves sinful. We don’t need to feel guilty or ashamed because we love the decorations and the gift exchanges and all the trappings of the holidays. Revel in the season! Enjoy the lights! Take in the parties! Enjoy the camaraderie with friends, with family! Savor the eggnog! Drink a toast! The things we attach to Christmas are good things . . . until they become our idol. Until they become our reason for the season. Until we say, “It just doesn’t feel like Christmas because (this or that condition has not been met).” “I’m just not in the holiday mood because . . .”

Now something good becomes sinful and a snare. It takes our eyes off Jesus. Be ready to set those things aside. Push the presents out of the picture, look past the Christmas decorations, focus beyond the gatherings, the parties, and the family time, and rest your heart on what is the heart of Christmas: a baby in a manger, God in the flesh, a gift to you of God’s immeasurable love, our Savior from our sins. Let go of everything we have made Christmas to be. Don’t throw it all out . . . just loosen your grip on it. And hold on more tightly to what God has made Christmas to be. Hold onto Jesus.

Whenever I read the Old Testament prophets, and I take a close look at the culture those men of God preached to, I’m always struck by how closely the society they lived in was similar to our own today. No, they didn’t have electric automobiles and computers and smartphones and the latest cool technology, but people are people. Technology changes, but people don’t change. People then and people now are sinful, and we make sinful choices, we do wicked things, we rebel and run away from God, we despise and mistreat our neighbor. You can see it. It’s all around you today. It makes you cringe. I can see it. I find it inside my own heart, and you can find it in yours, and it makes us cringe. Our iniquities have separated us from our God. As we heard on Sunday, all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

The nature and character of human beings is no different now than it was almost 2,800 years ago when Isaiah spoke in God’s name to the people of Judah. Scripture says that God looked down on his people—and mind you, these were his *chosen* people, the people he had chosen for his inheritance, that they might declare his praise—and he was appalled by what he saw. Human wickedness rose like a stench in his nostrils. People went through the motions of religious ritual without thinking about what they were doing. “These people honor me with their lips,” God said, “but their hearts are far from me.” Evil ruled their hearts, and scarlet blood dripped from their hands. Their wickedness flowed through the land like crimson blood in the streets.

How is this problem going to be fixed? God could have just swept the wicked people away like he did in the days of Noah, when the flood scrubbed the earth. He could have destroyed the earth by fire and ended it all. He could have

waited for human beings to get their act together, to put aside wickedness, to aspire to virtue, but we all know that was never going to happen. We human beings cannot fix the problem of our sin and our guilt and the punishment we have deserved. The problem could not be fixed by man. The problem had to be fixed by God. This is what God says: "Come, let us reason together . . ." Let's sit down and come to an understanding. Let's make a deal. But God says, "I will be the one who will dictate the terms of the deal." Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." I'm going to declare that your sins are forgiven. Just like that. Red sins gone, and in their place the pure white of snow and wool. God says, "I will justify you; I will call you 'not guilty.' Even though you have sinned, and your sins run like blood in the streets, I will regard you as righteous and pure." But how can God do that, forgive sins and make blood-red wickedness disappear?

That's where Christmas comes in. Not the Christmas the world has contrived, with all its trappings and trimmings. But the Christmas prophesied by Isaiah. "A virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call him Emmanuel." God's solution is found in the quiet coming of the baby Jesus, conceived of a virgin, born in a stable, and laid in a manger. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders. And his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, almighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." God celebrated Christmas, with a gift from his love, the gift of his greatest Treasure, the gift of his Son to be our Savior from sin. Isaiah goes on: "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Jesus was covered with the guilt of our crimson stains, so that our guilt is taken away, and we are covered with the holiness of Jesus, and in Jesus we are found to be white as wool and as pure as the driven snow.

You've heard the sayings: "Jesus is the Reason for the season!" "Keep *Christ* in Christmas!" Say "Merry Christmas!" not some generic "Happy Holidays!" Because it is all about Jesus. This child is coming for one reason: not to be served but to serve. He's coming to serve you and to give you what you need more than anything else. He's coming to save us from our sins. He's coming to rescue us from hell. What would it take to make your Christmas the best it could be? What would it take to make the perfect Christmas? When your mind is racing, and your thoughts are consumed by all the things you still have to get done, and the spirit of the season seems to be missing, just stop, ponder, and reflect on a baby, a tiny infant, your Savior Jesus. And be caught up in the wonder and revel in amazement that the almighty God became your brother, to suffer and die for you, so that though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. And as you reflect on Jesus, your servant and your Savior, listen as he whispers to you from his manger cradle: "Your sins are forgiven!" And the peace of God that transcends all understanding guard your heart and your mind through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.