

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 29, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PSALM 40:3

“He put a new song in my mouth”

MAKING CHRISTMAS LAST

I read a statistic recently that said that between Thanksgiving and the New Year the average American will gain six pounds in weight! I also came across “The Official Holiday Guide to Dieting.” Listen closely; here are the guidelines:

- . 1 If you eat something and no one sees you eat it, it has no calories.
2. If you drink a diet soda with a candy bar, the calories in the candy bar are cancelled by the diet soda.
3. When you eat with someone else, calories don't count if you don't eat more than they do.
4. If you fatten up everyone else around you, then you look thinner.
5. Cookie pieces contain no calories. The process of baking causes calorie leakage.
6. Things licked off knives or spoons have no calories if you are in the process of preparing something else, like ice cream on a spoon when you're making a sundae.
7. Foods with the same color have the same calories, like spinach and pistachio ice cream; or white bread and white chocolate.
8. Note carefully that chocolate is a universal color and can be safely substituted for any other color.

Well, now you know how to plan your holiday eating schedule!

Christmas time is a magic kind of time, isn't it? Everybody seems to smile more. People at least make an effort to be friendlier. Yet, one of the most amazing things to me is what happens approximately 24 hours after Christmas is past and gone. We go into a slump; it's a monumental letdown. We move from celebration to desperation - “Oh no; another year has passed!” We move from revelry to routine. And the atmosphere changes from “Ho, Ho, Ho!” to “Ho-hum.” What causes that? Why doesn't Christmas last?

I think there are a lot of factors involved. Relatives go home, decorations come down, diets

begin, and we're back to "old clothes and porridge," as they say in Ireland. But I think there is one factor that many people miss. They wonder why the spirit of Christmas doesn't last; and the answer is – the music stops. If you want to sustain the spirit of Christmas in your life during 1992, here's my message in a sentence — carry the songs of Christmas in your heart all year.

You see, for the last 30 days our world has been bombarded with music about Jesus Christ. You couldn't go anywhere without hearing Christmas music. You go to a shopping center and hear modern pagans humming "Christ the Savior is born." The music goes on in supermarkets; and in homes across the nation everybody is playing Christmas albums, even if it's stuff like "All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth"; or, "I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus." You turn on the radio, and even those "hard rock" stations will be playing Christmas music on Christmas Day. Offices play carols over the intercom; and they tell me that you can even go into a bar, and at the counter, well-oiled patrons will be burping out, "We three kings of Orient are."

Did you ever realize that there's only one time in the year when it's socially acceptable for you to say to your friends, "Let's go outside at night, walk down the street, and sing outside houses of strangers"? You can get away with that at Christmas time. It's called "caroling."

But the problem is that within about 24 hours after Christmas Day comes to a close, for most people the music will stop; and the albums and tapes are stored away for another 12 months. And what I really want to say to you this morning is this: if you want to make the spirit of Christmas last throughout 1992, then carry the message of its music in your heart all year. That's it.

Now at the very first Christmas season there were songs. There are four of them recorded in Luke chapters 1 and 2. Mary sang a song; and so did Zechariah, and the angels, and finally old Simeon sang a song; and these ancient hymns bear the beautiful Latin names — the "Magnificat"; the "Benedictus"; the "Gloria in excelsis Deo"; and the "Nunc Dimittis."

1. MARY'S SONG: "AMAZING GRACE!" (Luke 1:46-55). Mary was a young peasant girl, a teenager, and she was poor; and of all the women God could have chosen to be the instrument by which He would come into the world, He chose Mary. And Mary's response to that awesome challenge was to sing! We find her song, the "Magnificat" in Luke 1:46-55 (Phillips) - "My heart is overflowing with praise of my Lord; my soul is full of joy...for He has taken notice of His humble servant girl" (46-48a). "... people will call me happy because of the great things the mighty God has done for me... He shows mercy to those who reverence Him..." (48b, 49, 50b, Good News Bible).

I call this song "Amazing Grace" because Mary, in this song, gives us four pillars of grace. Do you want to know what "grace" is? It's here in this song. Mary says four things about God. She says, "God has been so good to me."

- a. He knows me. She says, "He has taken notice of little old me!"
- b. He loves me. "He has done great things for me."

- c. He forgives me. “He is a God of mercy.”
- d. He wants to use me. “I’m just His humble servant girl, but He wants to use me.”

Now if you don’t get anything else I say today, get this: if you want to keep the spirit of Christmas in your heart all year, remember and reflect on these four truths that Mary sings about in her song: God knows me; God loves me; God forgives me; and God wants to use me. That will keep Christmas going in your life all year long.

a. God knows me. He “notices” me. God knows every single thing about your life — the good, the bad, the ugly. He knows the heartaches, the stresses, the problems, the pain, the joys and the sorrows. He knows it all. Today, to get noticed in our society, you either have to be weird, or a cad, or a criminal, or do something unusual and really special. What about the average person who’s decent, and just trying to do the right thing in life? Does anyone notice that person? God does! God knows you. Not only that —

b. He loves me. Christmas says that you were worth coming to earth for. And if there’s anything I want to say to you this morning, it’s this - you matter to God. You really do.

c. He forgives me. When I blow it, He wants to help me out. When I sin and embarrass myself and others, He says, “I’ll help you get started again. My mercy is always available.”

d. And He wants to use you. God used Mary who was just a poor, humble peasant girl, a teenager. God uses teenagers in the most remarkable ways. And if God could use Mary, He can use you!

2. ZECHARIAH’S SONG: “AMAZING GIFT!” (Luke 1:67-79). Now, there’s a second song, and that is the Song of Zechariah. Zechariah was an old man, almost 80 years of age. He was the father of John the Baptist. And when he heard that Jesus was going to be born, listen to what he sang - “Let us praise the Lord... He has come to the help of His people and has set them free. He has provided a mighty Savior for us” (Luke 1:68,69, Good News Bible). I call Zechariah’s song “Amazing Gift,” because he talks about the fact that the very first Christmas gift, the whole idea of giving Christmas gifts, came because God gave a gift to us -- His own dear Son, Jesus Christ!

Notice, it says, “He came to the help of His people.” God is not only with us; He’s for us! And that’s great news. He says, “(Jesus) came to set us free.” To set us free from what? - from worry, from guilt, from fear, from bitterness, from resentment, from meaninglessness in life, and from the fear of death. He came to set me free! And Zechariah says, “What an amazing gift!”

I read recently about some letters to Santa Claus. One of them said, Dear Santa,

You didn’t bring me any good thing last year. You didn’t bring me anything good the year before. This is your last chance.

(Signed) Albert !

I love this one:

Dear Santa,

There are three little boys in my house - there's Jeffrey; he's two. There's David; he is four. And there is Norman; he is seven. Jeffrey is good some of the time. David is good some of the time. Norman is good all of the time. I am Norman.

The fact is, folks, we aren't Normans! I'm not, and neither are you. None of us does good all the time. Not one of us. So we all need help. We all need a Savior. And His name is Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

Again Zechariah sang, "(God)...will bring the rising Sun to visit us, to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78,79, Jerusalem Bible). Circle that word "visit." God has come to visit us. He came down to earth. The Infinite became the Definite. He became like us so that we might become like Him. All history is divided into B.C. and A.D., because one day God decided to come to earth. Why? To show us what He is like! If God had wanted to communicate with birds, He could have become a bird. But He wanted to communicate with human beings, so He became one of us. And His name was Jesus Christ.

I heard about a Hindu man who said, "I could never worship a God Who would humble Himself and become so low as to become a human being and be born, a baby in a barn." And one day this man saw an ant hill, and he noticed that his shadow scattered the ants. When his shadow passed, they all came out again. He said, "I realized that if I wanted to talk to ants, I'd have to become an ant myself."

God became a human being so that He could talk to us, and so that we could see what He is like. That's what Christmas is all about.

There was once a European king who several times a year would take off his royal clothing, put on a peasant outfit, and go out and mingle with his people. And his reasoning was, "I can't know how to rule my people if I do not know how they live." God became one of us, and He knows what you're going through. He knows the problems you're facing right now!

What did Jesus come to do? Look what it says, "God will bring the rising Sun to visit us, to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide us in the way of peace.

God sent Jesus for two reasons:

- a. to light up your life; and

- b. to guide your life -- to direct your life.

He said, "I am the Light of the world." If you don't have Christ in your life, you're living in the darkness; you're missing out on so much that God has in store for you. And you may think you're living, when you're just existing -get up in the morning, go to work, come home, eat, watch TV, go to bed, go to a party at the weekend, retire, and die! Is that life? Jesus said, "I came to light up your life!" And it's as if He turns on a light in your life, and all of a sudden, things take on meaning and significance, and you say, "Now I realize why I'm here on this earth!" And Jesus says, "I came to guide you and direct your life." When things are confusing, and you don't know which way to go, and you're discouraged and depressed, and everything seems as dark as a moonless night, He says, "I'll guide you!"

So, remember God's amazing grace, and His amazing Gift.

3. THE ANGELS' SONG: "AMAZING GLORY!" (Luke 2:8-14). If you want Christmas to last, there's a third song you need to keep in your heart, and that's the angels' song. Luke 2:13,14, New English Bible, says, "All at once there was with the angel a great company of the heavenly host singing...'Glory to God in highest heaven, and on earth His peace for men on whom His favor rests.'"

I call this song "Amazing Glory." Heaven and earth were brought together. God came down, and the angels could see the whole plan of salvation unfolding. Jesus Christ came to earth to give peace to those whose hearts were open to Him. "Peace on earth" is a phrase we use a lot these days, and yet, there isn't a whole lot of peace on the earth. Every year the trouble spots change, but there's always some conflict going on somewhere.

How thrilled we have been with what has happened in Eastern Europe as the Warsaw Pact countries have jettisoned Communism and espoused freedom and democracy; and now the Soviet Union is no more. And a spiritual revival is taking place. The Church has sparked this revolution for free... and is alive and vibrant. Seventy years ago, Lenin said that God was a myth, and religion was the opiate of the people. Now, seventy years later, Mr. Gorbachev has said, "People of several religious confessions live in the Soviet Union and all of them have a right to satisfy their spiritual needs." Doesn't that blow your mind?

"Peace on earth." Where do you need peace on earth? "Glory to God in the highest." How do you glorify God? Jesus said, "By your relationships." Be a peacemaker. That brings glory to God. Treat other people the way Jesus would... Be kind and loving and patient. That brings glory to God. Peace comes to the earth when peace is in your heart. You see, when you make peace with God, then you get the peace of God in your life. And when you're at peace with God, then you can be at peace with other people, and you help build "peace on earth."

Sometimes that involves forgiveness. Whom do you need to forgive this Christmas? Is there a broken relationship that you need to restore? Maybe the offer of forgiveness could be the best Christmas gift you could give someone this year.

4. SIMEON'S SONG: "AMAZING GAIN." (Luke 2:28—32). Who was Simeon? He was

an old man, a resident of Jerusalem, very devout, and filled with the Holy Spirit: an old saint who had received a revelation from the Lord that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ, the promised Messiah. And the Holy Spirit impelled him to go to the Temple on the day and at the very hour when Joseph and Mary brought little Jesus to dedicate Him to the Lord. And when Simeon saw the Child he knew that God had been faithful to His promise; and taking the Child in his arms, he praised God and said, "Lord, now I can die content! For I have seen Him as You promised me I would. I have seen the Savior You have given to the world. He is the Light that will shine upon the nations, and He will be the glory of Your people Israel!" (Luke 2:29—32, Living Bible).

Simeon could die in peace because he had met his Savior! And let me tell you something, folks - I wouldn't want to rest my head on my dying pillow without having seen and acknowledged my Savior, and, trusted Him for time and for eternity! Without Him I would be a lost child wandering in the dark night of sin and despair and stumbling over the edge of the precipice into a lost eternity.

Over the years I have visited hundreds of Christians in their dying hours, and I have seen them breathe their last and go home to God in triumph. The Apostle Paul put it so well when he exclaimed, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). And that is why I call Simeon's song "Amazing Gain." For the Christian believer, death is indeed amazing gain. Listen again to the Apostle, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him' - but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9) just as He revealed it to old Simeon that day in the Temple.

"Death's cold stream hath lost its chill
Since Jesus crossed the river!"

Because He died, I need never die! Because He lives, I, too, will live with Him in Heaven for all eternity. Doesn't that blessed assurance keep the song in your heart all year long?!

Now let me wrap it all up. Let me give you four steps on how to make Christmas last, based on these four songs:

1. Remember God's grace. Remind yourself all year how good God is to you - God knows me; God loves me; God forgives me; God wants to work in my life. That's what Mary sang about. We say, "Have a merry Christmas!" I want you to have a "Mary" Christmas, by doing the things Mary did. - she thought about, she remembered the grace of God.

2. Receive God's gift. Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior if you've never done that. Can you imagine getting a Christmas gift and never opening it? How would it be if you bought me a present and I put it under the tree, and about a month later you come over and say, "Hey, Graham, how do you like my gift?" And I say, "Well, I'm sure I'm going to like it, but frankly, I just haven't had time to open it yet!" Does that make sense? And, yet, people let Christmas after Christmas pass, and never receive the Gift God sent them -- Jesus Christ. Why would anyone turn Jesus down? Invite Him into your life right now.

3. Reflect God's glory. For us, that's like trying to capture Niagara Falls in a teacup. Let me just ask you this - what did you give Jesus for His birthday? Can you imagine going to a birthday party where everybody receives gifts except the birthday boy? You say, "Jesus is God; He's got everything." You can give Him your life, because He doesn't have that unless you give it to Him. He gave His life for you; and the greatest gift you can give Him in gratitude for what He's done for you is to say, "Lord Jesus, I want to live every day of my life in 1992 for You. I want to be the kind of person You want me to be."

And here's another present you can give Jesus. Say to Him, "Lord, this year help me to bring at least one other person to know You." That would be a gift you could present to Jesus. "Lord, You've done so much for me — I want to bring at least one person into Your family in 1992."

4. Rejoice in your eternal gain, because you know that your eternal destiny is secure. You know that if you were to die tonight, you would go straight to Heaven because you have seen your Savior and have put your trust in Him alone to take you to Paradise. You can say, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain!"

Is Christmas going to last for you? For most people it won't. But if you will open your life to Christ, and remember His grace, receive His gift, reflect His glory, and rejoice in your gain, then you can make your life a perpetual song of praise to your Savior!!

AMEN.