

Christmas Eve

1 John 3:8

December 24, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

**The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.**

In his best-selling novel, "Executive Decisions," author Tom Clancy describes how terrorists could try to shut down the United States. An agent had a cannister, the size of a large thermos, filled with a deadly virus. He dropped the cannister behind some plastic bushes inside the Atlanta, GA, airport – one of the largest and busiest airports in the world. As people walked past that plastic bush, they were exposed to the deadly virus. Then they got on their plane and travelled to different places across the country. Within a week or two, the virus had spread throughout most of the country. People everywhere were sick and dying.

That's what happened in our first reading tonight from Genesis 3. Adam & Eve listened to the devil's lies, disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit. At that moment, they infected the world with a deadly virus called sin. Now, people around the world are sick and dying. We live in a fallen and broken world. Every day, violence erupts in the streets of our major cities. In Ukraine and Syria the air is filled with the smoke of burning buildings. Here in WI, a teenager is able to illegally get a gun and shoot up a school. Our national election is over but politicians continue to clash and fight.

The suffering and sorrow that is all over the world gets very personal as I look at you tonight. My heart breaks as I think of the sadness that has invaded your lives. Everyone here tonight has something you wish you could change in your life, something that makes you gloomy. Having been the pastor here for over 20 years, it breaks my heart to see my friends get older and slower as more and more health issues afflict you. I wish I could get rid of the cancer, the pain, the hearing loss, the weak eyes, the aching joints, the weariness, the financial stress, the anxiety, the depression that sucks the emotions out of you, the sense of frustration because your life is not what you would like it to be, the heartache for a loved one who is not with you this Christmas. I wish I could change your relatives so they were all kind and loving and walking with the Lord.

To be honest, I wish I could change other things, too. I wish I could get her to come to church more and read devotions at home. I wish I could get him to break his drug habit. I wish I could get her to stop drinking so much. I wish I could get him to let go of that macho man attitude which

makes him so nasty to his family and others. I wish I could get those children to be more responsible and respectful. I wish I could get families to get along together better. I wish I could get him to be more loving toward his wife. I wish I could get her to be more patient with her husband. I wish I could get him to get more involved in church activities. I wish I could get her to take other people's words and actions in the kindest possible way instead of thinking the worst. I wish I could get him to stop looking at pornography. I wish I could get her to let go of that grudge which is turning her into such a bitter person. I wish I could get him to simply swallow his pride, admit he was wrong and say sorry.

What's especially frustrating to me is that I wish I could get the guy in the mirror to worry less and rejoice in the Lord more, to celebrate the wonderful blessings bestowed on this congregation instead of stressing out about what could go wrong or what more we can do. It seems like the more I try to keep my mind pure, the more it wanders to places it shouldn't go. All of us infected with the virus of sin. It robs us of joy and is killing us. I cry to think of dear members who once sat in the pews you are in but are now gone. My heart is heavy as I think of loved ones who are not here on earth any more. I get troubled when I think of loved ones who are aging and not well and could die soon.

Sgt. Joseph Serna was a Special Forces soldier. He served four combat tours in Afghanistan. He was almost killed three times. He has three Purple Hearts and post-traumatic stress disorder, which led to struggles with alcohol. A few years ago, he was charged with driving under the influence in Fayetteville, NC, and entered a treatment program where he had to report to a Judge Olivera. At one visit, Joe admitted he lied about a urine test. He broke the rules and Judge Olivera had to follow the law. He sentenced Serna to a day in jail. Joe was put in a cell. He barely had time to sit down when the cell opened again and the judge walked in. The judge, who had served in the Gulf War, was concerned that leaving Joe in isolation would trigger his PTSD. So the judge sat with the criminal the whole time. You have a God who judges you and announces that you are guilty of sin. Sin had locked us in a cell with no chance for escape. We can not stop ourselves from sinning and we can not stop ourselves from getting older and dying. But then your Lord crawled into your cell with you. Jesus left heaven behind to become fully human and be born into this sin-infected world.

All of the problems and suffering in our world are because people are not in a good relationship with God. That relationship was ruined when

Adam & Eve introduced the virus of sin into our world. God is love, but we are not like him. Our hearts are not always focused on showing loving kindness. So many people and preachers say nice things about Jesus and talk about the joy and peace he brings, but they miss the main point. They end up pointing to Jesus as just an example. Jesus was peaceful and joyful, so you should be peaceful and joyful too. We can't do that by ourselves because we are infected with sin. Jesus came into this world to get to the heart of the matter, to touch your hearts with his love. No matter who you are or what you have done, Jesus loves you. He loved you so much that he dedicated his life to you. Christmas celebrates God stepping down into our broken world to live among us. He didn't come to visit or be an example. He came to bring salvation.

Jesus was born as a baby and lived a full life on this earth so that he could do for us what we could not do for ourselves. God and heaven are perfect and if we hope to be with God in heaven, we need to be perfect. Since we are not perfect, Jesus was perfect for us. Through faith, simple trust in the heart, Jesus gives you credit for his perfect life. He declares you "not guilty" of any sin. You do not have to be "good enough." You do not need to earn his favor. You do not need to be better than others or good most of the time. The pressure is off. Jesus already loved you to death. Jesus took all of the sins the whole world – including your sins and mine – and put them on his shoulders. The weight was so much that he fell down while carrying your cross to Calvary. It was your cross and mine that he was nailed to. He stepped into your place and served as your substitute. He suffered what we deserved. Jesus knew what was going to happen when he came into this world and he came anyway. What love! He paid the penalty for your sins so that you don't have to pay the penalty. Your sins are forgiven. Your guilt is gone. You are guaranteed eternal life in heaven.

Perfect peace can not be found in a sin-infected world. Politician's promises and government programs are not going to fix our society. Our sincerest New Year's resolutions to be better are not going to make us perfect. Negotiations and conversations are not going to appease terrorists. Treaties and arms reductions will not bring peace to the world. More laws will not stop crime or change people's hearts. Christmas refocuses our attention on true peace, peace with God through Jesus. Jesus brings true peace to our troubled hearts right now – through forgiveness and salvation. Knowing that we are going to one day leave this sin-infected world and live in the perfect happiness of heaven that will never end fills

us with peace, joy, and comfort, no matter what other issues we are facing in life.

What is your favorite Christmas movie? There are lots. Movies like It's A Wonderful Life, Miracle on 34th Street, A Christmas Carol, Home Alone, and others suggest that nothing goes together with Christmas like miracles and wonder. Think of how many Christmas movies involve *miracles*: unexpected twists, people reunited, hearts softened, and wishes granted. These stories are meant to inspire and uplift. Yet even the most moving Christmas films miss the wonder of the real miracle of Christmas. Jesus is your Savior who destroyed the work of the devil. The devil brought sin into the world. Jesus took away the sins of the world. The devil brought death into the world. Jesus turned death into a doorway to eternal happiness. Christmas movies may warm our hearts, but their joy is fleeting, and their miracles soon fade. But God's Christmas miracle has no end. Christ's work fills our lives, giving us hope beyond this life, and peace beyond understanding. That's why Jesus left heaven behind and was born into this world. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work and give you eternal life in heaven. That's what this holiday is all about. Merry Christmas! Amen.