

INTRODUCTION

SLIDE 1

Good morning, everyone.

It's great to see all of you.

For those of you don't know me, my name is Joe Gavin. As some of you know, I'm a missionary and pastor to college students at UVM.

My family and I have also been members of Church of the Rock for a number of years now, and this is an aside, but we are so grateful to be part of such a generous and giving community that has loved us and our kids so well.

I am also grateful for Advent. I love Advent. It's one of my favorite times of the year, and I am so glad to be part of a church that celebrates this season.

A number of years ago my wife and I made the decision to observe and celebrate Advent as a family.

We have an Advent wreath at our dinner table. We light the candles and do special readings each night.

But this year, Advent has been a bit more challenging for us.

Because Costco decided to torture parents by installing a Christmas aisle back in August, this year we made it a rule that our three kids could not talk about Christmas, talk about what they want for Christmas, or decorate for Christmas until Advent started.

And so as of December 1st, the first Sunday of Advent, our home has been a little coo-coo for Christmas. Sometimes it feels as if Christmas Day could not come soon enough.

So if your family is like mine, I've got good news for you this morning: It's the Second Sunday of Advent. That means we're one-quarter of the way to Christmas!

One week down, three to go.

And then all of the Christmas "coo-coo-ness?" - "the coo-cosity?" - the Christmas craziness will soon be over!

Anyway, would you please bow your head with me and pray before we dive into the Scriptures?

PRAY.

I HEARD THE BELLS

SLIDE 2

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, seen in the photo behind me, is considered one of the great American poets.

He was born in Portland, ME, in 1807. He graduated from Bowdoin College at the age of 18 and later became a professor at Harvard University. In other words, he was smart.

He was also a man of deep Christian faith, and he was an early abolitionist who wrote against slavery.

Longfellow became one of the most popular poets of his day, but despite his success as a poet, his life was marked by tragedy.

Longfellow's first wife, Mary Potter, died after a miscarriage at the young age of 22.

Years later, he fell madly in love and courted a woman named Fanny Appleton for seven years - seven years he pursued her! - before she agreed to marry him.

And then once they married they got right to work and had six children. (By the way, just in case you're wondering, that's not what I meant when I said his life was marked by tragedy...)

The real tragedy would happen on July 9, 1861.

Fanny, his wife, was putting locks of her children's hair into an envelope while Longfellow napped.

And while attempting to seal the envelope with hot wax, her dress caught on fire.

Longfellow was awakened by her screams and rushed to save his wife by wrapping a rug around her. When that did not work, he used his own body to extinguish the flames.

Fanny, however, was too badly burned and died the next morning.

Longfellow, himself, was so disfigured by the flames that he grew out his now trademark beard to cover up the scarring.

Longfellow would later write that in his grief he was "inwardly bleeding to death."

But Longfellow was not done facing tragedy.

Less than two years after Fanny died, his oldest son, Charles Appleton Longfellow - the oldest of Longfellow's six children - boarded a train in Boston and left for Washington, DC. He had decided to enlist in Lincoln's Union army.

On December 1, 1863, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow received a telegram informing him that his oldest son had been gravely wounded at the Battle of Mine Run in Virginia. He had been shot through the shoulder, and the bullet grazed his spine. Doctors were afraid that he would be paralyzed for life.

On so on Christmas Day, Longfellow, a 57-year-old widowed father of six children, the oldest of which was facing paralysis after fighting for his country in a war against itself - Longfellow wrote a poem that tried to capture the dissonance and the pain in his heart - and the brokenness of the world around him.

SLIDE 3

It's called, "Christmas Bells," and this is how his poem begins:

**I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

**And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

SLIDE 4

**Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

**Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

SLIDE 5

**It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**

**And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"**

This poem captures something that was far too true for Longfellow.

While every year Christmas carols and candlelight church services and even the church bells on Christmas morning told of joy and peace, Longfellow's life was marked by anything but joy and peace.

Two of his wives had tragically died. His eldest son was gravely injured in war...

...A war that tore apart the country he loved, as men spilled each other's blood over the question of whether or not one human being could own another human being.

It's easy to see why, for Longfellow, the carols and the church bells seemed just a bit out of touch with reality!

I love this poem because, as I look at the world around us even today, it **still** rings true - ***pun intended.*** (*The poem "rings true" - like the bells? Get it?!*)

In all seriousness, though, we live in a nation where mass shootings seem to happen almost weekly. Innocent men, women, and even children are gunned down, and our kids have practice drills in school so they know what to do if there's an active shooter on campus.

Over the last few years, genocide has occurred in Myanmar.

Chemical weapons have been used against children in Syria.

Last week, pedestrians were stabbed on a London bridge in a terror attack.

The United Nations estimates there are nearly 70 million refugees in the world - people who have been displaced by war, violence, terrorism, ethnic cleansing...

Some flee their homes only to drown crossing oceans or to have their babies ripped from their arms at borders.

We could talk about catastrophic climate change, the opioid crisis...

But we don't even have to look to the news headlines. In our own families we lose loved ones to disease and addiction...

And if I'm honest, if I take a close look at my own life, my own sin, my own selfishness, my own greed - I contribute my fair share to the chaos and brokenness of this world.

Is there really "peace on earth and goodwill towards men?" Put me in traffic in Burlington on a Friday afternoon, and there certainly isn't a whole lot of goodwill towards men in *my* heart!

I don't know about you, but at one level the Hallmark Christmas movies and the Lexus commercials where spouses wake up on Christmas morning to a new car in their driveway with a big red bow...

...the lights and decorations and Michael Buble carols on the radio...

...at one level they just don't cut it.

If Christmas is really just about warm feelings and nice meals and rom-coms starring Candace Cameron and Thomas Kinkade Christmas cards, then, like Longfellow, we should all bow our heads in despair.

Because it doesn't change anything at all.

This kind of Christmas doesn't meet our real needs - our deepest needs - the greatest needs of our world.

The rockstar Bono sums it up in the U2 song, *Peace On Earth*.

SLIDE 6

**Peace on earth
Hear it every Christmas time, but hope and history won't rhyme
So what's it worth?
This peace on earth**

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Israelites of the first century - at the time of Jesus's birth - they would have identified with Longfellow's pain and despair as well.

As Pastor Roland shared last week, the entire nation was living under Roman occupation.

Families had been kicked off their ancestral lands.

Roman taxes and corrupt Jewish tax collectors were crushing people financially.

Roman spies and soldiers were everywhere, and people lived under the constant threat of a crackdown - and of crucifixion for those who got out of line.

The Israelites of the first century needed more than greeting cards and pretty lights; they needed their world to be turned upside down.

They needed something far more **disruptive** to the current world order.

And the story that Luke tells us is, if nothing else, **disruptive**.

READ LUKE 1:26-38

SLIDE 7

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

SLIDE 8

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Luke describes an angel appearing to a young girl. Mary is probably no more than 14 or 15 years old.

And the angel announces to Mary that she will supernaturally conceive a child before she even marries the man she’s betrothed to.

Now, I know Mary lived in a pre-scientific world. She didn’t know what we know today about the human body.

Mary and her contemporaries had never seen a zygote or human embryo under a microscope.

But people in the first century knew how babies were made, and they knew it usually involves more than one person.

Luke uses words like troubled and afraid to describe Mary’s response, and it’s no wonder that she’s troubled and afraid.

We live in a society where people conceive children out of wedlock quite regularly.

But in a small, close-knit Jewish village, this was not good news for a young girl.

The penalty for a woman who was betrothed to a man and became pregnant was death by stoning.

You can imagine the kinds of questions in Mary’s mind right now. The anxiety. The fear. The sense of not knowing how this will all turn out.

She asks the angel, “How will this happen? After all, I’m a virgin!”

And the angel says that the Holy Spirit, just like He did when He created the world - when the author of the book of Genesis tells us the Holy Spirit hovered over the chaos and birthed our *world* into existence...

...The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary and overshadow her - hover over her - and bring about a *new* creation - a child.

But this will be no ordinary child. He will be called Son of the Most High. He will be a King who sits on the throne of David.

A King who reigns over a kingdom that will never end.

Let me say that again:

A King who reigns over a kingdom that will never end.

Mary knows exactly what is being announced here.

And it's no Hallmark movie. This is not a promise that one day all families will know the joy of having matching Christmas pajamas.

You see, Mary had a dream. It was a dream shared by every Israelite. It was a dream that the prophets said would one day come true.

That all nations would be blessed through Abraham's family.

That the powers that keep our world in bondage and in slavery would be toppled.

That the bullies and power-brokers and forces of evil in this world would be defeated.

That Rome would be overthrown, and that Israel and all nations would once again know the peace - the shalom - of God.

Gabriel's announcement to Mary connects with the deepest longings of her heart and of her people and of her nation.

And look how she responds:

She responds with absolute obedience and submission: "I am the Lord's servant. (or literally "slave-girl" - I am the Lord's slave-girl.) May your word to me be fulfilled."

Unlike the wise, old priest Zechariah, whose muddled and questioning response left him mute, this young teenager responds with faith and obedience.

Mary is the first person to accept Jesus on his own terms, regardless of the personal cost.

You know, people often want to debate the virgin birth. Could this have really happened? Is it made up?

But as one theologian points out, maybe all the fuss about whether Mary could have conceived Jesus without a human father is because, deep down, we don't want to think that there might be a king who could claim this sort of absolute allegiance.

We'd rather debate theology than bend our knee and pledge our allegiance.

Mary then goes and visits Elizabeth, and the joy bubbles over into a song of praise, a song that celebrates God's coming great reversal...

...the toppling of the proud and wicked.

...the overthrow of beastly kings and kingdoms.

...the humble being lifted up, and the poor and hungry having all of their needs met.

Mary sings:

SLIDE 9

**“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.**

SLIDE 10

**He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”**

For some, the Christmas story is Good News! It means a reversal of fortune. It means justice.

But for others, the Christmas story is deeply troubling. It means a reversal of fortune. It means justice.

Application:

For me the Christmas story - this story that Luke tells us - it's both deeply unsettling and deeply comforting.

And this morning I want to encourage you to allow it to be both unsettling and comforting to you, as well.

Over the next few weeks, chances are you'll attend holiday parties and indulge in a few too many Christmas treats.

You'll enjoy nice meals with family. You'll give and receive presents. You'll hear and sing along to carols on the radio.

And all of this is wonderful. Enjoy it.

(Even the Christmas aisle at Costco has its redeeming qualities.)

But in the midst of all of your holiday cheer, will you let the Christmas story disrupt **your** life a little?

Because at the center of this story is the news that a new King has arrived.

And that King wants to sit on the throne of your heart and your life.

Maybe Jesus can disrupt how you use your time this Advent season.

Maybe you can turn off the Hallmark movies or the football game, and spend some time reading through the **real** Christmas story, and, like Mary, allow your heart to respond with worship.

Is there any better way to celebrate Christmas than to draw close to Jesus, to catch a fresh glimpse of his heart and face, to come away from Christmas this year knowing that we have grown and deepened our friendship with Him?

Maybe Jesus wants to disrupt how you use your money this Christmas season.

Maybe He wants to be King of your wallet. And rather than exhausting your resources and piling up debt in order to meet the expectations of a consumeristic culture, maybe this Christmas could include a little more generosity toward the humble and the hungry of our world.

Maybe it's a relationship that needs healing, and you've been hanging on to resentment and bitterness for far too long.

Maybe it's a habit or an addiction that requires repentance.

Whatever the case, will you allow Jesus to disrupt your life a little this Christmas? Will you respond to Him, as Mary did, with submission and obedience?

"Let your word to me be fulfilled."

But the Christmas story can also give you great hope.

For some of us, this time of the year is full of pain.

It's a time of mourning over loved ones we've lost.

It's a time where we remember family members we're estranged from.

Christmas is a reminder of what we've lost in this life.

Or while others celebrate by buying and feasting, we look at our own cupboard and our own bank account, and we're reminded of what we lack.

For others of us, we struggle to reconcile our faith with the reality of our world - the pain, the abuse, the violence... the list could go on and on.

For you, the Christmas story is good news.

It's not just about Lexuses in the driveway or leaving your job in the big city to fall in love with your old high school sweetheart from the small town in Vermont where you grew up because you're forced to help throw the annual Christmas pageant in the middle of town... (but, really, I've never watched the Hallmark channel)

The Christmas story is so much more!

It's a promise: There is a new king.

And while there's still far too much pain and violence in our world, this king's kingdom is eternal.

And one day there will be comfort and justice and an end to pain.

One day there will be no more mourning. No more suffering.

No more death.

God has begun something new in Jesus. And He will complete it.

Invite Musicians Up

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem of mourning on that Christmas Day in 1963. In the middle of the Civil War, he mourned the death of his wives and the fear of losing his oldest son.

**And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"**

But he then reminded himself just how disruptive the Christmas story really is.

This is how his poem ends:

SLIDE 11

**Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead nor doth he sleep!
The wrong shall fail,
The right prevail
With peace on earth, good-will to men."**