

Christmas Eve: A Spacious Christmas: Jesus Is Here!

Luke 2:1-20

Pastor Jenny Smith

This time last year, 3 month-old Wesley was crying a bit in his crib. My almost 3 year old, Isabella tells me, "Mom, I'll go check on him." A few moments later, I hear this sweet little voice down the hallway say, "It's okay, Wesley. I'm with you. I'm with you. I'm with you."

Besides being a sweet moment between siblings (which will happen the rest of their lives, right?!) I thought later, **that's Christmas**. God saying to us, "I'm with you. I'm not some distant, far away ruler on a throne. I'm closer than you think. I'm with you."

Tonight, I want to share with you a couple thoughts on how God takes a risk to come to be with us in the life of Jesus and how we are invited to take a risk on others.

Has there been a time at work that you had a big project and you put everything you had into it? Really hoped it would work out. You were taking a risk.

Or think of a time you dropped your child off at school or college or watched them drive away with their new license still warm in their pocket. You took a risk. These people who have your heart walked away from you. I still remember rocking Isabella as a 4 day old baby, with tears streaming down my face, thinking about how evil this whole parenting/child thing was! How can God give us these beautiful babies and then they grow up and leave us?! It was then I realized all of parenting is letting go. Ugh.

Think of a time you were vulnerable with your spouse or a friend and shared how you really felt about something and they either drew close with compassion or they disagreed and you felt even more disconnected from them. You took a risk.

Because that's what love does.

God wanted to get closer to us. So God took a risk.

God could have made us love God. But we get the choice. What a risk on God's part. I'm not capable of what God did at Christmas. Giving my child away to people who get to choose whether to love him or not.

God looked at a world full of beauty, hope, violence and hate and said with arms out stretched, "**here's my son. I love him. He can help. Live and love like he does. He'll show you my world. It's all around you actually. Even now. He'll teach you how to see it.**"

Because God leaves the choice to us, it's the ultimate risk. God puts it all on the line and then waits for us to participate. **Because love isn't fully love until it's received.**

Do you have someone in your life who doesn't like to hug? (Show this with someone) When you hug someone who's stiff as a board, is it really a hug? But when someone truly receives your hug and you know they draw comfort from it, that's love. Which is always a risk.

It's tough to keep loving when we feel rejected. So we pull back, build a wall, and decide to figure it all out ourselves. Which isn't love. And eventually requires little risk.

I've got to tell you about a friend of mine, Erynne, who took a risk this month. She's had a rough year and decided instead of sending out a normal Christmas letter with all the great things that happened in 2015, she would post a blog about what really happened. Erynne shared that the word "divorce" came up, more than once. Panic attacks, loss of a job, growing bitterness over time away from her spouse as he had a long distance job, lots of tough parenting moments with two little ones. She shared some of the good stuff too.

Some of us would be terrified to write down the realities of our year and send it out for all to read. But something fascinating happens when other people take a risk, we all draw strength from their courage.

If you're ever in a season of life that feel boring, predictable or without purpose, find someone to love. I mean really love. Because it will require risk and growth and presence and you will change. And I'm not just talking about romantic love. I'm talking about that neighbor you avoid because of their weird behaviors or that acquaintance on Facebook who you've removed from your news feed because their politics is too different from yours. Take a risk and love someone you don't like.

And here's the biggest news of Christmas for some of us: **God took a risk for us so we could learn to love ourselves.** Sometimes, as hard as it is, it's easier to love a stranger than the chaos inside of ourselves. Jesus told us to "Love your neighbor as yourself." Some of us are longing to welcome Jesus in ourselves anew before we can love anyone else. We need Jesus to give us a new perspective on our body image - on how we parent our kids - on our judgmental and mean spirit - on our laziness - on our self-centered nature - on our confusing ability to love others and hate ourselves. We need God to take a risk on us.

Because risky love is **willing to travel to the other person.** To tear down the wall. To move closer.

Imagine this. What if I was your pastor but I had never left Alaska? I could of sent letters of encouragement. Maybe texts and emails. I could post on Facebook different ways to remind you of God's love for you. It might have worked...a little bit. But would you have really gotten to know me? Probably not. You wouldn't have been tickled by Isabella in the hallway or seen Wesley's joyful smile, or heard Aaron's music. So we packed up our home, traveled thousands of miles and moved to Marysville this past summer. Now, we can learn from each other in person how to live and love like Christ. It's hard enough to do in our everyday life, imagine trying to love each other at a distance? How many of you have been in long distance relationships or military deployments? Or you're watching a loved one fade with age and health. You know those dynamics. Love is hard at a distance. So we take the risk and move closer to be with someone. That's Christmas.

I had an argument with my husband about something a couple weeks ago. We were sitting on the couch about 2-3 feet away from each other. We had gotten to a point in the conversation where we'd both shared our feelings and perspective. It was time for one of us to say sorry first. I could have cut the tension between us with a knife. I had an opportunity to physically move closer to sit by him - to reach out and touch his arm - to apologize for how I'd been selfish. I had the opportunity to close the painful space between us and start over. It was a risky love moment. And you know what I did? I said something snarky, stood up and went upstairs to bed. I wasn't willing to take the risk. I missed an opportunity to grow in my understanding of love. Not my best moment.

I need the risky love of God. I imagine you do too. I don't know how to love my family, friends, neighbors, strangers and all the crazy people I see online without Jesus showing me how. And I certainly can't love myself without God showing me how. This Christmas, that's what I'm celebrating. As we gather to sing the alleluias, whisper the prayers and gaze at the candlelight in our hands, I'm celebrating the beautiful truth that **God wants to be with us.** Not when we get our act together. Not when we get to this place, or that place. God wants to be with us right now. In every moment.

It's easy to romanticize the story of Christmas, of Jesus' arrival to be with us. But besides the angels' announcement and songs, it was really a quiet and humble gathering. These refugees could hardly find a safe place to be. What's beautiful about a young woman looking desperately for a place where she could have her first baby? This story has the risk of love written all over it. Joseph took a risk on Mary - he could have walked away. Mary took a risk and chose to fully enter into this crazy adventure. God took a risk - God could have stayed distant and watched the world unfold - but it was time, to come to be with us.

My friends, this is my Christmas prayer for each of us. That we could know deep inside of ourselves that God is not a distant being, far removed from our world. God is as close as our next breath, as the rain that falls, in the tears that roll down our cheeks, in the laughter of our children, in the hug of a friend, in the kiss of a loved one. In Jesus, God came close to be with us. And in that truth, may you take a risk to love those around you with a love that doesn't make sense. With a grace that no one can earn. **That is Christmas.** Amen.