

“The Greatest Gift: Hope Has Arrived!”

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) would tell us that this is the worst possible time for Christmas to come. Covid cases are still high, vaccines are ready but only enough for some of the population, and many people are unsure whether they will even get a vaccine sighting concerns that it is the fastest vaccine ever produced in history and we don't know enough about it yet. So this Christmas is a bit different than ones in the past. Less Christmas parties, socially distanced and zoom Christmas parties, less Christmas concerts and zoom Christmas concerts, less Christmas worship opportunities and reduced capacity at those services. Whether you are gathering with family or friends this Christmas or not you have at least asked the question – should we gather or shouldn't we gather? Covid fatigue and political tension abounds. This seems like the worst possible time for Christmas to happen.

Do you know another time that seemed less than ideal to celebrate Christmas? That very first Christmas! The nation of Israel was part of the Roman Empire at this time and the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, had a great idea – everyone in my kingdom needs to go to their ancestral home so a population census can be administered. This would allow the Roman government to decide if they were taxing people enough or not. Just imagine how this played out in Israel, who already hated the fact that they were under the control of the Romans. They missed their independence and this latest humiliation didn't make them feel like a special people of God. Can you picture it? People and families were traveling short and long distances grumbling all the way about bad government policies, government interference in their lives, and the possibility of going through all this inconvenience for the pleasure of possibly having their taxes raised. With everyone traveling at the same time the roads are crowded with agitated people. Business people no doubt saw this as a business opportunity and gladly raised their prices on food, provisions, and lodging in order to make a few extra bucks. And with so much of the world in turmoil criminals no doubt saw this as an opportunity to steal what they wanted while law enforcement was on high alert and stretched thin. And just consider Mary and Joseph's situation. Mary being at the end of her third trimester of pregnancy is not at all the right time for her to be traveling 90 miles south from Nazareth to Bethlehem over the hilly terrain of Israel away from their familiar surroundings and health care. It's possible that it took Mary and Joseph longer to travel to Bethlehem than others because of her pregnancy and that was the reason that no suitable human lodging, much less a place to have a baby and the Savior of the world, was available to them. Health concerns and political tension - humanly speaking that seemed like the worst possible time for the first Christmas to happen.

Is this the worst possible time to celebrate Christmas? Humanly speaking, yes. Divinely speaking, No. **“When the time was right God sent his son”** the apostle Paul tells us in Galatians (4:4-5). If Christmas was just about gatherings, and concerts, giving/receiving Christmas gifts, and in general (from a worldwide standpoint) being earthly comfortable, then yes, this is a bad time for Christmas. But throughout history God is constantly reminding us to focus our attention on the true meaning of Christmas. **“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord”** (Luke 2:11). Pandemic or no pandemic, perfect health or poor health, employed or unemployed, bull market or bear market, happy family life or dysfunctional family life, content with life or struggling in life – there is never a bad time to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas. The Greatest Gift has been given: Hope has arrived!

In fact, typically it's when life is more challenging in some way that we are more willing to listen to the true message of Christmas. This message of Christmas. **"He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things"** (Romans 8:32). This verse is sandwiched between the apostle Paul talking about how God works all things out for good and how a big laundry list of scary things – Judgment Day, earthly trouble, persecution, natural disasters, and even physical death – cannot stop us from experiencing the love of God. The reason that is true is because of Christmas. God the Father did not keep his son to himself, but he generously gave us the greatest gift of all time – Jesus. And with Jesus arrival, hope for now and for eternity has arrived! Romans 8:32 seems to be talking about the death of Jesus. You can't view Christmas without also keeping in mind Jesus death. I heard recently how some historians and archeologists think that the shepherds God led to visit Jesus that first Christmas were raising sheep that would be used as sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem and were a picture of Jesus to come. If that is true, how fitting that these Shepherds would be the first visitors to worship Jesus, **"the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29). Despite what the Devil tells us, despite what the world tells us, despite what our sinful nature tells us – the reason hope is in short supply is because each of us is a sinner who has earned eternal punishment from God in a place called Hell. All the other things going on in this world, that make us feel hopeless, are symptoms of that tragic event that took place in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve first sinned. But Christmas brings us good news, hope. God fixed what was first broken in Eden. God sent us the greatest gift, his son Jesus, to be our substitute. To suffer our Hell. To exchange the wood of the manger for the wood of the cross to pay the full penalty for our sins. To make it possible for sinners, like us, to experience full forgiveness for every sin, a guilt free conscience, and the most important kind of peace – a peaceful relationship with God now and for eternity in Heaven. If God was willing to give us our Savior, Jesus, **"how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things"** (Romans 8:32). Since God was willing to give us the greatest gift that we actually needed, real hope through faith in Jesus our Savior, then trust that all the other stuff in this world and in your life – God will take care of those things too in the way that best keeps our eyes and hearts treasuring our greatest gift, the hope that is ours through Jesus.

Go now and celebrate Christmas because it is the perfect time to do so. Be grateful and enjoy the Christmas presents you get and give. Let them be reminders of your greatest gift, the hope for now and eternity that Jesus provides. Amen.