

Can Christmas Still Change the World?
Christmas Eve 2009

Some weeks ago, while doing a little Christmas shopping at the Christiana Mall, I noticed a sign outside a store: *The best gifts change lives. Step inside.* You know, this is all very beautiful, isn't it? It makes for a lovely evening and a warm feeling right now. I'm glad you've "stepped inside" to join us tonight. But what about tomorrow, or the next day or the next? Does it make any difference then? Does "stepping inside" here tonight make any difference *out there* tomorrow? I'm sure many of us will receive lots of wonderful gifts tomorrow, things we need as well as things we just *want*, and probably a few things we don't want *or* need. But will even the best gift we receive really change our lives? In the midst of war, homelessness, record unemployment, multi-trillion dollar debt, people dying from AIDS and children dying for lack of clean water, what difference does Christmas really make? Is anybody's life changed because of all this?

There is no doubt that the world *was* changed on that first Christmas night. When the baby cried and the angels sang—in that very moment, though many, maybe most, were oblivious—the world changed forever. When Jesus was born, God Himself came into our world. Not to condemn the world, but to save the world, John writes in his gospel. When Jesus came, the world was changed. But I wonder: Can Christmas *till* change the world?

In the first chapter of his account of Jesus' life, John writes this: "The Word [that is a metaphor John uses for Jesus] became flesh and made His dwelling among us." In his wonderful paraphrase of this verse, Eugene Peterson says it this way in *The Message*: "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." Here's the miracle of Christmas: Jesus did not only come at that one moment in history that we remember and celebrate tonight. He *still* comes. God is *still* moving into the neighborhood. Christmas can and does still change the world. Because, you see, Jesus came not only as a baby born in Bethlehem, Jesus *still* comes. Through us. Through His followers. Church, *we* are how Christmas can still change the world. God comes to people through people. And God wants to come to people through *you*.

You see, Jesus is not given to us merely so that *our* lives can be blessed, so that *we* can know the peace, power, presence, and purpose of God-with-us. God is up to something in His world. Church is not just a place you go to on Christmas Eve for the warm fuzzies, it's not even just a place you go to on Sunday morning, no matter how many Sunday mornings a month or a year you go. "Church" is not a place at all. The Church is a living, breathing organism. Alive and life-giving, moving and breathing by the Holy Spirit. And we are the way that God intends—*and has always intended*—to change the world. Just as Jesus was physically present with Joseph and Mary and the shepherds, He is now physically present in the world through the Church, the body of Christ. *WE* are the church—the physical presence of Jesus in the world. *WE* are how God is still moving into the neighborhood.

Neighborhoods like Edgemoor Gardens and Bellevue Manor, and the City of Wilmington and Delaire and Sharpley and put your own neighborhood here. *This* is not our purpose. We do not exist primarily to put on pretty Christmas Eve services or to provide a nice, warm place for folks to get their religious tickets punched on Christmas Eve or any other day. The Church exists for

no less a purpose than this: to change the world one life at a time. That's what we're about: *changed lives*. That's why we're here, Church. We say it in our Mission Statement: *Loving God, Connecting people, Changing lives: Reflecting Christ to the world*.

At Christmas we remember that God came, but more importantly, that God *still* comes. And the primary way that God comes is through us, through you. God comes to people through people. And by the grace of God, we're doing it, too. We've had the opportunity this season to "adopt" five families from Edgemoor whose children attend Mt.P.E. by providing Christmas gifts and food. We've loved these folks in the name of Jesus. Now, we may not have changed all of Edgemoor Gardens [yet], but we sure changed the lives of those five families. Some of you gave me money a couple of weeks ago when I spoke about the international water crisis and how little it takes to provide clean water and save people's lives. We may not have solved the clean water crisis around the world [yet], but we will certainly change the lives of many children with the money you gave. It costs just \$10 to provide clean water for a child *for life*—not for a year—*for life*.

Friends, the sign outside that store at the Mall was right. The best gifts really *do* change lives. Tonight we remember and celebrate and wonder at the best gift of all that truly does change lives: the gift of Jesus.

Some of the gifts you receive tomorrow you will love. Some you will, no doubt, have to return. And perhaps some you will re-gift. Are there any re-gifters in the house tonight? Anybody remember where that word came from? *Seinfeld*. Of course. January, 1995. God has given us the greatest gift in Jesus. The best gift that really does change lives. But it's not a gift we are meant to keep all to ourselves. Christ-followers ought to be the biggest re-gifters in the world. When you leave this beautiful place tonight, know this: God has given you the best gift of all: Jesus, through whom you can have a living relationship with God Himself. Jesus didn't come to give us religion. He came to make it possible for simple, sinful human beings to have a relationship with God. A relationship that changes everything. A relationship that brings God's presence and power, purpose and peace to our lives.

And now God sends you—God sends *us*, Church—into this broken, dark, and desperate world not only to *tell* the story of God's love, but to actually *live it*. And to re-gift what He has given us: Joy. Peace. Help. Hope. Forgiveness. Freedom. Wholeness. Power. Purpose. Life. God came to people—that's the story of Christmas. But more than that—God *still* comes. But now God comes to people through people.

And God wants to come to somebody—probably many somebodies—through you. Be a re-gifter this year. Because *that's* how Christmas can still change the world.