

CHRISTMAS CHANGES EVERYTHING

By Andrew Wilson
December 24, 2010

Psalm 36:5-9
John 1:1-5

Some years back I was invited to offer a Christmas message at Jetson Correctional Facility outside Baton Rouge.

Jetson is the largest juvenile detention center in Louisiana. The inmates range in age from 10 to 20.

The invitation came from a member of the church I was serving who was a teacher in the prison's school. I was crazy busy; but it was the kind of invitation that was hard to turn down.

The evening before I was to speak I called my friend to ask what kind of message she thought would work in her classroom. She said, "Andy, you're not talking to my class. You're talking to everyone. All 800 inmates will be there."

I gulped hard. "So what are these kids like?" I asked.

"Oh, you know," she said, "we have car jackers, gang bangers, murders – the usual. They mainly just need a little hope. Something to keep them going."

I only had a couple of hours to get ready. I stared at my keyboard but nothing came to me. What could I say that would be meaningful to a junior high dropout who'd grown up in foster care, and was doing time for selling crack?

Time was running out. I decided that God was telling me just to get them talking. So I prepared a list of questions and chose a short Bible reading about Christmas.

The gathering took place in an old gym with a crummy sound system. I broke the ice with a few jokes and some questions they could have fun with. I had them raise their hands and walk up to a mike that had been set up in the center of the gym.

Pretty soon I started asking more serious questions.

"What's the hardest part about living here for you?"

"What changes are you going to make when you get out of here?"

One by one, kids of all ages walked up to the mike. To my amazement everyone listened intently to each speaker.

Eventually I started to talk about God. "How many of you believe in God?" Most of them immediately raised their hands.

"What does Christmas mean to you?"

One girl said that Christmas was a time for family, but for her it was a sad time because no one ever came to see her, not even her mother. Here and there you could see kids wiping tears from their eyes.

A scrawny little kid who was probably 10 or 11 walked to the mike. It took him a while because he was way in the back of the gym. You could tell from the snickering that lots of kids picked on him.

Hiding beneath his mop of hair, he said: "Christmas is when God sent Jesus to be our friend. At Christmas I remember that God loves me even if no one else does."

The room became silent. I put my arm around the kid and said: "I don't know this little guy, but I can see he's just about the smallest one here. And I want you older guys to take care of him. You make sure he's okay."

Finally I asked: "How many of you are involved in a Bible study at Jetson?" First a few hands reluctantly went up. Then a few more appeared. And pretty soon there were maybe 200 hands in the air. Everyone seemed surprised.

I said: "If you don't have your hand up, look around and find someone you know who does. Later today, you go and find that person and ask how you can learn more about the Lord, and how he can help you."

I ended with a two minute message about how God loved us so much that sent us his only Son.

John's Gospel tells us that Jesus is a light shining in the darkness. He's the light that shines from the very heart of God.

What you learn when you go to places like Jetson is that the darkness of this world can't possibly extinguish that light. The darker things get, the more brightly God's light shines. And the harder we work to get away from the Lord, the more obvious it becomes that we need him.

What does John mean when he says that Jesus is "the light of all people"?

Of course he doesn't mean that Jesus is a beam of light, or a source of visible light like the sun, or the candles on the communion table. He's a different kind of light. Jesus is the light that shines from the inside out. He's the divine lamp that exposes what lies deep, deep within.

There are three ways that Jesus shines his light what we can't be seen with the naked eye.

First, he shines his light on who we really are. Jesus lived without sin. He led a life that was, and is, the perfect fulfillment of what God wants for all of us. Our lives, by comparison, appear shabby and even shameful.

When we learn about the godly life that Jesus led, and we see, in his light, how far short we fall in fulfilling God's great plan for us, we have one of two choices. We can disappear into the shadows. Or we can bow before the Lord in weakness and humility.

Christmas is an invitation to lay our hearts bare to ourselves and to God. It's a chance to let God's light shine in the darkest corners of our hearts.

Jesus illuminates who we truly are. But he also illuminates his Father in heaven. He reveals his Father's heart to people who don't know him or have wandered far from him.

Jesus says:

"If you really know me, you will know my Father as well.... I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

- John 14: 7, 11

Maybe you heard the story of the old nun who was living in a convent next to a construction site. She noticed the foul language of the workers and decided to spend some time with them in the hope of correcting their ways.

She decided she'd go out with her lunch, and sit and talk with them.

Putting her sandwich in a brown bag, she walked to the spot where the men were eating. She put on a big smile and said: "Do any of you men know Jesus Christ?"

They shook their heads and looked at each other quizzically. After an awkward silence, one of the workers yelled to his friends:

"Hey, anybody up there know Jesus Christ?"

One of the steelworkers yelled down: "Why?"

The man yelled back, "'Cause his wife's here with his lunch."

If we know Jesus, the Bible says, we know the one who sent him. Because Jesus doesn't just *reflect* God's light as we do when we love and serve him. Jesus *is* God's light. He's the light that reveals the truth of God and his Word.

Jesus shines a light on us and on his Father in heaven. But he also shines a light on God's kingdom. He reveals the marvelous, heavenly realm that broke into our world at Christmas.

Printed on the bulletin cover is a verse from Matthew's Gospel. It's taken from the Christmas story about Joseph, and the dream he has where the angel tells him not to be afraid to marry his pregnant fiancée [BIBLE]:

"She will give birth to a son," the angel explains, "and you are to give him the name of Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

- Matthew 1:21

The name Jesus is the Greek form of the name Joshua, which means, *the Lord saves*. From the very beginning, God's plan was to send his only Son to defeat the power of sin and death, and draw us to our true Father.

Some people make the mistake of thinking Jesus came only to set things right between us and God. Securing our forgiveness of course was a big part of Jesus' work. But it was only one aspect of his work. It was only the first step in a much larger plan. The ultimate goal was and is for Jesus to plant his life in each one of us.

Let's read together John's testimony about Jesus. It's up on the screen. Let's begin:

In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

- John 1:4-5

God sent Jesus into the darkness of our world to share our weak human flesh. But the life that was in him was not the same as the life that's in our bodies. Jesus' life was and is eternal. That means it has always existed, and that it will continue to exist even when all the light and the life in the universe is extinguished and time is no more.

That's why Christmas changes everything. God became a man – a real flesh-and-blood human being – and thereby brought his realm to earth. His kingdom exists wherever people share Jesus' life.

Ten days ago I went to see Haig Diradourian in the hospital. Many of you know Haig. He has shown incredible courage and perseverance in his battle with lymphoma and has been a great inspiration to his friends at Crescenta Valley High, and especially in his scout troop.

We started by talking about trails in the Sierras. Like me, Haig is a hiker and a lover of wild places. But Haig was terribly sick, and he tired quickly. So I got right to the point.

"Haig," I said, "you believe in Jesus, don't you. You've given your life to him, haven't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I have."

"Well then," I said, "I just want to remind you of what you already know. Christ has planted his life inside you. That means you're going to live eternally with him. We've been praying, with many other people, for your healing. And if the Lord decides to heal you, we're all going to give him the glory. But if you die, you don't have anything to fear. God's going to give you a new body – one just like the one Jesus had after his resurrection. And he's going to take you to the place that he's been preparing for you all your life. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," he said. "I do. I'm ready."

Haig died last night at around 8 o'clock, with his family all around him. He fought like a soldier, and even though he often doubted, he never gave up hope.

His family and friends of course are grieving. We regret we didn't have him longer. But we who love the Lord trust in his promises. We know we're going to see Haig again.

Like Cara in our Christmas play, and like all the lonely, hurting kids met at Jetson, we've all said and done things we regret. We've all hardened our hearts against God and other people.

But God has found a way to overcome the darkness in our lives. As we turn from our sin, and place our trust in Christ, we receive from him the gift of his life – eternal life. And that frees us to fulfill God's purposes for us in this life. It frees us from the anxiety and disappointment that comes with wanting the wrong things. It frees us from hateful thoughts and destructive habits. It frees us from the fear of future.

And most importantly, it frees us to love God and live in his light for his glory.

LET US PRAY...

Holy God, thank you for loving us so much
that you sent us your only Son, Jesus.
Thank you for sharing your light and your life with us.
Thank you for giving us your Spirit.
Teach us to trust you when we're lonely or confused.
Help us to love you with all our heart,
And to express that love
by loving others as much as we love ourselves.
Amen.