



Luke 2:1-20
 What's Under Your Tree?
 Jesus

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 Christmas Eve

Part of being human is the desire that we have deep within us for significance. There are two facets to this. **First, we have a deep desire to be valued, appreciated, and loved – to be seen as significant – and second, we have a deep desire to value, appreciate and love others – so they know that they are significant.** All people have this need for significance. This shows up in both positive ways and not so positive ways: It's why people have ambition, it's why people have friends, it's why people get married, it's why people have jobs, it's why people volunteer their time, it's why we help our neighbors; it's why the Seahawks try and win football games. I think it's one reason that the giving of gifts at Christmas is so important to many people. It's a way for us to feel valued and appreciated as we open gifts that we receive, and it's a way to tell others that they are valued and appreciated as we give them gifts. This desire for significance gets tainted, however, with selfishness, greed, lust, materialism, a quest for power and more: **So often, we're looking for our own sense of significance – you could say “purpose” or meaning in life” are synonymous with significance – we're looking for that in the wrong places, or our motives for helping others feel significant start to get out of whack.**

For instance, we see people in the public spotlight who often start out with pure motives and a right desire for significance in their life and helping others find significance as well, only to have them get caught up in greed or self-promotion or adultery or some other snare that traps them and causes their downfall. But it can happen to any of us.

In fact, it happens to whole nations sometimes. It's what happened to Israel several centuries prior to Jesus' birth. They were a great nation...they had significance because they rested in the knowledge that God their creator valued, appreciated, and loved them. As a result they had hope, love, joy, and peace as a nation, and at the more personal level as well. Probably not perfectly so...but on the whole, there was a sense of significance across the nation at the personal level. And then Israel got a little full of itself, a little prideful, and forgot that their sense of significance came from God and their

relationship with Him, and as a result of all that, they fell to Assyria, and then Assyria fell to Babylon...and then it was Persia...and Israel was in captivity and in exile, under foreign rule, with their leaders removed from the country.

And the last few weeks we've been looking at a few of the passages in the Old Testament book of Isaiah, which was written during their Assyrian and Babylonian exile, that speak to a coming servant, of someone who would lead them out of exile and out of darkness and give them significance. **And the main things that Isaiah seeks to do – and this is true of all the Biblical prophets – is: 1) To help the people see how their own sin and waywardness with God has gotten them where they are, and 2) To help people get back in a right relationship with God.** In other words, the place in life where they are – in exile, under foreign rule – is directly related to their waywardness with God. It's directly related to their pride and to their selfishness...to gaining their sense of significance from somewhere other than the Lord. So as the prophet writes of a coming servant, of a Messiah, a savior...of someone who will lead them out of the darkness they're in and into the light. And he's saying, "If that person is going to come along and have any success in leading us, we have to get back on the straight and narrow path. We have to get back to a right relationship with the Lord."

And eventually, Ezra and Nehemiah, and others who come alongside them, help Jerusalem get back to a place of true significance and rebuild the city both in terms of its population and in terms of its structures. You can read all about that in the OT books named after them. But it doesn't last real long, and it doesn't spread from Jerusalem to the rest of the nation, and so the whole country isn't really restored, their sense of significance is still reduced, and eventually, again, Israel falls into the hands of foreign powers: Greece with Alexander the Great leading the way, and then at his death, his kingdom is divided up into four parts, and Israel ends up as part of Egypt and part of Syria, and eventually in 65 B.C. the Romans conquer them along with most of the known world at the time.

And you might be sitting there saying to yourself, **"What on earth does this lesson on ancient history have to do with Christmas and Santa Claus?"** And the answer is: it has nothing to do with Santa Claus, but everything to do

with Christmas! Because for nearly 600 years the Israelites were waiting for a coming servant, the one who would be the Messiah, the savior, the one who would free them from captivity, that would make everything right in the universe and give them significance. And into that narrative, into that expectation and hope comes Jesus. God breaks in and does something miraculous, something completely unexpected, fulfilling the prophecies, answering their cries for significance...answering their cries for hope, love, joy, and peace...answering their cries for a savior...but at the same time not answering them at all in the way they thought God would, which is why so many people rejected him then, and why so many people still reject him and go through life in a spiritual exile.

God's savior is Jesus Christ, born of a virgin in the town of Bethlehem, placed in a manger. He was of the most lowly, meager, humble beginnings. And this is not how anyone expected the savior to come.

Still today, it's not how anyone expects any savior to come. Saviors are supposed to be first-round draft picks, they're supposed to be from the Ivy League Schools, from the prestigious family name, they're supposed to be flashy and powerful and wear cool uniforms with an "S" across their chest or a logo by which to recognize them. That's what we expect saviors to be. And that's certainly what they expected 2,000 years ago.

In fact, if we were to take some of these expectations and 21st Century ideas and superimpose them on the birth of Jesus, we'd have a nativity scene that looks like this:



I mean, isn't that a nativity for a savior



that pushes all the right buttons?

Of course, that's not the only way we might prefer the nativity to have been. In fact, some people aren't too impressed by fictitious superheroes. Some people would prefer a nativity more like this:

A cupcake topper nativity that you can eat. Wouldn't that be sweet?



Or butter is good with almost anything, right? So wouldn't a butter nativity be better than the original?

Now, this hand-carved nativity undoubtedly took a lot of time, which makes it at least "margarine-ally" better than the others. ☺

And who doesn't love a cute little pig? So

why not a pig nativity?



I don't think the Jewish people in Jesus' day (in particular) would have appreciated that one very much – it's not exactly kosher.

And they'd appreciate this next one even less, but if you ask me, this one really takes the bacon:



A bacon and sausage nativity.

Now for some folks, that's just too far out there. And in the 21st century when we're all about the cool, the hip, the trendy, the latest and greatest i-this and Windows-that....certainly there's a more impressive way for the savior to come to us, right? How

about this: Video clip can be seen at: <http://nypost.com/video/millennials-invade-this-traditional-christmas-scene/>

You see, we want significance in our lives and in the lives of others, but we want it our way. It's the same problem the Israelites had that led to their exile for all those centuries. We're not so different, and we spend an awful lot of time in the darkness of our own exiles. Some of you here tonight probably feel like you're in a place of exile tonight, even. God comes to you this Christmas in Jesus Christ, to bring you back from that place of exile and into relationship with God your creator. Of course, when God brought Jesus into the world 2,000 years ago, some people decided that Jesus wasn't all that significant at all. Not for themselves, and not for anyone else. It's still true today. And so some people's nativity looks more like this:



In some ways, I like this one. It feels very modern and contemporary, like the homes that are getting built in our neighborhoods now, or like the glass skyscrapers of Seattle. It feels strong and solid, and kind of durable – it's not edible, it's not going to melt away, it's

not comprised of fictitious superhero characters. In fact, you can envision some power tools having been used to make this, and power tools are always good, right? But it's also a nativity that essentially lets you ascribe your own significance to it. **It's blank...it's abstract, and you can make it what you want; you can give this nativity its own significance.** It could be Jesus represented by the white block, or it could be something else: money, a job, power, and so forth. You get to decide what your savior is here, and what's significant about it, which really is not all that significant. That always leaves us wanting more, like a well that runs dry.

But the whole Christmas narrative is about the significance of the birth of Jesus: It's about what God has done in this event, the significance He ascribes to it, and the significance that He gives us through it. It's about our need for a savior, for a redeemer, for a servant who will lead us out of our own exiles...out of our own spiritual waywardness...out of the darkness...and into the light, and it's about how God has done that in Jesus Christ.

God says to you and me in the Christmas event and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that you are significant. You are worthy of his love. You are worthy of his grace. You are worthy of his truth. You are worthy of this light of the world. You are worthy of his life. You are worthy of his death. You are worthy of his resurrection. In Jesus Christ, God says you are significant. Your sins, your failures, your anger, your spiritual dryness...these kinds of things need not define you. You may be in spiritual exile, and looking for significance and for salvation in an Amazon Prime box, from a superhero, or wrapped in bacon. But God comes to us as he chooses: in Jesus Christ, born in a manger in Bethlehem.

As you open your gifts tomorrow, I pray that you'll gain some measure of significance from them. I hope there's some hope, joy, love, and peace that comes from those gifts. But don't let your true sense of significance come from them, because it won't last, and gaining our sense of significance from anything other than our Creator leads to spiritual exile. The one gift that's going to lead you out of the darkness and into the light and have real and lasting significance is not under your tree. Jesus Christ the Messiah, who lived, died and rose from the grave so that we might, by faith, live in a right relationship with God our heavenly Father...Jesus Christ the Messiah, the savior, does that, and He is God's gift to you this Christmas. I hope and pray it's a gift we would all receive with open hands and open hearts. Let's Pray...Amen.