

Christmas is a lot of different things. To many retail businesses, it is the time of the year when they make the most money. That is why the Friday after Thanksgiving is often referred to as "Black Friday" for the day the business begins to make a profit and move into the black. For kids it is the time to make out their Christmas wish list and write their letters to Santa. For families with grown kids or students away for college, it is the time to get the family together, the time to be home for Christmas. And of course the Norman Rockwell or Currier and Ives paintings show a "White Christmas." I guess snow one day a year is ok.

There are a lot of ideas about Christmas, but what is Christmas really about? That is going to be our focus for the Sundays leading up to Christmas. Today we begin with "Christmas Is ... God's Plan." The first Christmas was God's idea, the start of His plan to turn people back to Him.

If you think about it, plans are important. The blueprints or plans for a building tell you what to build and how to build it. Businesses lay out a plan so that they know where they are headed. College students may have a plan for their future. We certainly heard a lot in the past year about government plans for our nation. Plans give us direction and help us get organized.

There was a definite need for a new plan before the first Christmas. Many people had turned their backs on God. Some were struggling just to survive. Others were looking for a way out of the oppression they felt at the hands of the Romans. It was certainly a dark time in the final years of Herod the Great. He had been a successful politician and a great builder. He was responsible for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. But he was also responsible for building temples to other "gods" in other parts of Israel. He was notorious for eliminating any perceived threat to his throne, even if it came from one of his family members. His was a reign of terror.

Zechariah was a priest during the time of Herod. When his name was drawn to offer prayers and a sacrifice for the people in the temple, God sent the Angel Gabriel to Zechariah with a special announcement. It marked the end of a 400 year drought, what the Prophet Amos called a "famine of the word." It was the dawn of a new day, of a new era. It was the first glimmer of light in a world of darkness. Zechariah's name means "The Lord Remembers." God sent his angel, literally his messenger, with good news for Zechariah. Gabriel told Zechariah, "Don't be afraid." God was not going to destroy His people. He was going to help His people. Gabriel told Zechariah that he was going to be the father of a very special son who was to be called John. The name John means "God is gracious." John would fulfill the promise given by the prophet Malachi. (3:1 NLT) ***"Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming."***

Zechariah's son John would be tied to the promised Messiah. John would prepare the way for Jesus. He would be the bridge between the Old and the New Testament, between the Old and the New Covenant. John's mission was to prepare the way for Jesus by calling people to repent and

telling them to turn back to God. John began his message with these words, *“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”* (Matthew 3:2 NLT)

The call to repent is the call to turn your life around, to stop going your own way and to walk with God. Throughout history people have turned their backs on God, looked to things to provide them with security, or created their own gods. But these things never work because God is our creator and has the master plan for our lives. Things never last and fail to meet our most important needs. When we try to run our own lives our own way, we make a mess of it. How many times have you made a mess of something by trying to do it your own way? I have.

About six months later, the angel Gabriel was sent to a young woman named Mary and told her that she would be the mother of the Promised Savior. Mary’s son Jesus and Zechariah’s son John were both part of God’s plan. John was sent to prepare people for Jesus.

Jesus’ mission was to break down the wall that separated people from God. Do you have a dog? Joan and I have had a dog for almost all of our married life. One thing you discover real quick about dogs is that they will run away and hide if they think they are in trouble. I remember the time our first dog hid behind the drier because she was afraid. It took a lot to get her to come out. Like dogs that hide from their masters, people try to hide from God when they’ve done something wrong and are afraid of being punished. Adam and Eve tried to hide in the Garden after eating the forbidden fruit. King David tried to hide behind a lie after his affair with Bathsheba. Peter tried to hide from Jesus after betraying him on the night of his arrest.

Sin creates a barrier between God and people. That barrier may be called fear, guilt or shame. Whatever we call it, it has the same affect of keeping us away from God. Jesus’ mission was to break down that wall by paying the price for our sins, by taking away our guilt, by coming to help us and not destroy us. Just as the angel Gabriel said to Zechariah and the risen Lord said to His disciples on Easter Sunday evening; Jesus says to us today, “Do not be afraid.”

God’s plan to restore us was set into motion when the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah in the temple. It set the stage for the first Christmas that came about 15 months later. Christmas is God’s Plan to turn people back to Him. Christmas is the Good News that God loves us and keeps His promises. Christmas is a celebration of Hope, a real and living hope in Jesus Christ, a hope that will never disappoint us. In the long run, it doesn’t really matter whether or not kids get all of the things on their Christmas wish list, whether or not the whole family can be “home for Christmas,” whether or not we have a “White Christmas.” What matters is that God made and kept his promise, that He set His plan in motion, that He gives us hope and life in Jesus Christ. Christmas is God’s plan that gives us hope. Amen.