

Why We Are Called Christ-ians

The Journey to Bethlehem

What does it mean ... what do we mean when we say we are Christians?

We know from Acts 11:26 that the first-time followers of Jesus were called Christians was in Antioch.

The term was used there in Acts by non-believers as a pejorative ... a term of mockery and scorn ...

... prior to that followers of Christ were called “people of the way.”

... But the name stuck. You see, that word in Acts 11:26 is Christianos and that suffix “-ianous” is a possessive ending that means “to belong to” “to be the property of.”

When we call ourselves Christians we are saying the same thing that Jude says when he opens up his epistle, “Jude a slave of Jesus Christ.”

Today I want to show you why it is such a wonderful thing to be called a Christian.

PAUSE

As of today, I have only 6 opportunities to preach to you before Christmas ... the last one being December 24.

In praying and thinking about what to preach during this Thanksgiving and Christmas season I have sensed, from the leadership of the Holy Spirit, a need to untether the Christmas story from the Christmas season.

What I mean is that I want to separate the story of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, **from the sentiment, revelry, and tradition that comes with the American Christmas season and celebration.**

Now please don't misunderstand me ... there is absolutely nothing wrong with the sentiment, revelry, and tradition of Christmas.

... but seeing the birth of Christ only in the context of the American Christmas holidays tends to “SKEWS” our understanding ...

... it limits our ability to fully comprehend all the implications and meaning of the birth of Christ.

For example, we celebrate Jesus’ birth on December 25 whereas the Orthodox Christians (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox) celebrate the birth of Christ on January 7th.

Why the difference? Because no one knows the actual date of the birth of Christ, and knowing the actual date isn’t important, what is important that we have set aside a specific time and season to remember and celebrate.

But ... since there were shepherds in the field at the moment of Christ’s birth that means that it probably occurred somewhere around mid to late September.

... Again the actual date isn’t that important.

Another example of how the American Christmas season skews our thinking is the hymn “Joy to the World.”

... Unquestionably one of the most popular songs sung during the Christmas season ... but that song is not about the birth of Jesus ... it is about the 2nd coming of Jesus.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come; Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare him room; and heaven and nature sing ...

Joy to the Earth, the Savior reigns; Let all their songs employ; While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains; Repeat the sounding joy ...

He rules the world with truth and grace; And makes the nations prove; The glories of His righteousness; And wonders of His love ...

If you’ve read the Bible about the birth of Christ that is not what happened, then ... what happened at the birth of Christ was much different.

- The angels sang, the shepherds rejoiced, the magi worshiped ... BUT Herod tried to kill him.

- Mary and Joseph loved Jesus as wonderful parents, but the hometown people of Nazareth tried to throw Him off a cliff.
- As Isaiah had prophesied ... Jesus was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief ...
- The earth did not receive her King but like sheep who had gone astray ... Jesus came unto His own and His own received Him not ... they crucified Him!

Again, there is absolutely nothing wrong with the sentiment, revelry, and tradition of the American Christmas season ... we all love it ...

But the birth of Jesus ... the coming of God in human flesh was far more dramatic, radical and world changing **than we often suppose** when we are standing by the Christmas tree under the mistletoe drinking eggnog.

It's not about a White Christmas, it about the human heart, blackened with sin being redeemed and made pure.

It's not about the Miracle on 34th street, it's about the miracle on Calvary and the miracle of the resurrection.

The birth of Jesus is not about "being home for Christmas" ... it's about a world that had been groaning for 4000 years under the burden of sin ...

... and a people, **the Jewish people particularly**, looking, longing, and waiting for the coming of their promised Messiah.

That hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" says it best ...

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear.
O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, Free Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save and give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel! Shall come to thee, O Israel.

PAUSE

So, for the next 6 sermons that I preach I hope I can help us see that the birth of Christ in a much broader and fuller way.

... To see the prophecies that seeming came almost regularly every 400 years reminding Israel, "YOU MESSIAH IS COMING!"

... for centuries upon centuries, the Jewish people yearned and longed for the fulfilment of God's promises ...

... and then when the Messiah finally came, that event changed the course of human history forever!

PAUSE

Today I want to introduce you to a **priest named Simeon** and a **prophetess named Anna** and we are going to see the moment they meet the baby Jesus.

... the moment their years of waiting were rewarded with the birth of Jesus and I want to be reminded that:

We are called Christians because God keeps His promises.

We are called Christians because that name reminds us that we live in constant hope.

We are called Christians because that name defines our identity.

²¹ When the eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus-- the name given by the angel before he was conceived. ²² And when the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were finished, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (just as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord) ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice (according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons). ²⁵ There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel's consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, he entered the temple. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him up in his arms, praised God, and said, ²⁹ Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation. ³¹ You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples-- ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to

your people Israel. ³³ His father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and told his mother Mary: "Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed-- ³⁵ and a sword will pierce your own soul-- that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." (Lk. 2:21-35 CSB)

WE ARE CHRISTIANS ...

1. Because God Keeps His Promises

Mary and Joseph have journeyed from Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem (about 6 miles) to have baby Jesus circumcised and dedicated to God.

According to OT law every Jewish male child was to be circumcised and dedicated on the 8th day.

(Circumcision was a physical sign of God's covenant and commitment to Israel that He was going to send the Messiah.)

According to the scripture Simeon was a righteous and devout man and God had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until He saw the promised Messiah.

When Simeon sees the baby Jesus he prays, "God, I have seen the promised Messiah, you can take me now."

But Simeon says a lot more:

"a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel" – this is the universal offer of salvation.

"this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many" – in other words, how people respond to Jesus and His message of salvation would determine one's final destiny.

And verse 35 is very sobering: ³⁵ *and a sword will pierce your own soul-- that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."*

The word "revealed" is the word '*apocalupto*' which means a legal unveiling ... at the end of all things Jesus, as judge of the earth will unveil the hearts of those who refused salvation.

That phrase “a sword will pierce your own soul” is directed at Mary ...

...The Holy Spirit shows Simeon the deep anguish that Mary will feel when Jesus is rejected and crucified.

God’s promises to the Jewish people were kept down to the very last detail ... God’s promises to Simeon were kept ...

We can say we are Christians not only because of what God has done but also because of what God is doing and will ultimately do ... KEEP EVERY PROMISE HE HAS EVER MADE!

But Simeon wasn’t the only person in the temple that day.

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers. ³⁸ At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹ When they had completed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The boy grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom, and God's grace was on him. (Lk. 2:36-40 CSB)

WE ARE CHRISTIANS BECAUSE ...

2. It Reminds Us We Live In Hope

Anna was only married 7 years before her husband died and she had been a widow for 84 years, so she was somewhere around 100 years old.

We’ve already read that Simeon was looking for the consolation of Israel and here we read that Anna, along with many others was “*looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*”

Although both Simeon and Anna were old, they remained passionate believers who lived their lives filled with hope and expectation.

... these were 2 OT saints who kept the law of Moses and waited with eager expectation for the coming of the promised Messiah.

Why is it, do you wonder, that Luke takes the time to emphasize how old Simeon and Anna are?

First, by describing these representatives of the OT era as elderly, Luke is illustrating to us that one era is coming to an end, and another is about to start.

Second, by relating how joyful and receptive both Simeon and Anna are of the Christ child, Luke is showing us that there is no conflict between the OT law and NT grace.

... Later Jesus himself says that He didn't come to destroy the law but to fulfill it.

And isn't it interesting that these 2 elderly Jewish believers are excited that the promised Jewish Messiah will also be "a light for the Gentiles."

Simeon and Anna are not "**old and set in their ways**" they are not "**angry and upset**" that the promised Jewish Messiah will also be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles."

In fact, the opposite is true: Simeon and Anna are rejoicing!!!

Pause.....

Did you know that getting old is one of the greatest things that can ever happen to you.

When you are younger, your minds are sharper, your body is stronger and you are able to do and learn a lot of things.

... If you take advantage of your youth, you can absorb so much information and develop so many skills and talents ... learn a great deal...

... but then as years and age advances things begin to slow down ...

... you can't do some of things you used to do ... and learning new things takes greater effort.

BUT ... NOW DON'T MISS THIS ... it is when age advances and things start to slow down that you begin to find the real treasure.

... the true meaning of life becomes clearer and clearer with each passing year.

You see ... our “slowing down” allows for God to refine, to craft and cultivate us more and more **as we begin to put into practice** all the things we’ve experienced and learned during those younger years.

I can promise you from my own personal experience ... if you will pursue God as a younger person ... if you will seek to walk with God while you are still young ...

... if you will strive to know and understand God while you are still trying to figure out who you are as a young adult ...

... when you are older it will pay off in HUGE dividends.

For all these years in the temple Simeon and Anna served in the temple ... living and waiting with great hope ...

... waiting for God to keep His promises ...

... and suddenly on just an ordinary day hope came true in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God!

We are called Christians because God keeps His promises.

We are called Christians because that name reminds us that we live in constant hope.

WE ARE CALLED CHRISTIANS BECAUSE ...

3. It Defines Our Identity

Anna was a prophetess... a spokesperson for God. ... but she **was also widow**

By the time of seeing the Christ child Anna had lived the single life for 84 years...

... Please feel for Anna because she has alone for a long time and she knows the pain of separation, loneliness, and grief.

Living alone, loneliness, is a growing reality in America.

Did you know that almost 125 million American Adults (that's 50.2 %) over the age of 18 are single?

Only 30% of Millennials (any adult who turned 18 after the year 2000) believe that having a successful marriage is one of the "most important things in life."

I'm giving you these statistics because I want you to see that you and I are living in an age of shifting values, changing cultures, and emerging priorities that are very different from our own.

... there is a new society arising that is very different from the one we have previously known.

... and many of our young adults are living right in the middle of this huge cultural shift.

... It's not that some of them don't want to get married but, (whether you know it or not) finding someone to marry is getting increasingly more difficult.

This new and growing reality has resulted in a rash of new self-help books on this topic:

- **Nika Beamon** *"I Didn't Work This Hard Just to Get Married"*
- **Kate Bolick** *"Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own"*
- **Eric Klinenberg** *"Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone"*
- **Lori Gottlieb** *"Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough"*

Eric Klinenberg: *"People who live alone don't want to be alone or isolated, so they spend an enormous amount of time out in public."*

In Lori Gottlieb's opinion, *"Many people have never learned how to cope with not always getting their way... they are ill equipped to know how to compromise and that is a barrier to marriage."*

Karin Denison from Massachusetts (who writes the blog 'Single in the City') is now in her 40s and still single, as she puts it, *"when it comes to dating, at a certain point you just get really tired of meeting new people." ... but I get lonely, so I keep trying."*

- Some people are single because they haven't gotten married yet.
- Some, because past relationships didn't work out...
- Others live with loneliness because tragedy or death has separated them.

Anna the prophetess knew something of loss and loneliness... she had been a widow for 84 years.

But there's something very wonderful about Anna—in spite of it all ... she lived with hope!

How? ... BECAUSE OF WHERE SHE FOUND HER IDENTITY.

Your identity is what you look to, to see if your life has meaning, significance, fulfillment, and purpose.

... Identity is what you use to **measure the quality of your existence.**

Some people find their identity in their career, their hobbies, positions they hold, friends, family, the things they possess ...

PAUSE

If someone gave you a pen and a piece of paper and ask you to write a list of things to describe yourself ... what would be the first word you would write on that list?

[American, wife, husband, sportsman, democrat, republican, musician, son, ...]

“Anna describe yourself.” **“I am a devout follower of God serving Him night and day with fasting and prayer.”**

Anna found her identity in God ...

... that is why Anna lived her life her life to fasting, praying, worshiping and waiting with anticipation for God's promised Messiah to come.

If Anna had found her identity in being a wife, then when her husband died the loss and loneliness would have broken her and turned into bitterness and anger.

Family is wonderful, marriage is magnificent, friends are amazing ... **but that is not where we find lasting identity.**

In fact, marriage, family, and friendships are more wonderful and more lasting and more amazing when we first find our identity in Christ.

Pause

It is interesting to me that the life of Jesus begins **with people telling others about Him ...** [shepherds, angels, wise men, John the Baptist, and here Anna]

Jesus then ended His time on earth by saying, **“Now go tell the world about me.”**

Jesus earthly life began and ended with the theme of telling others about Jesus.

I recently read the story of a prison minister, Greg Boyle, and 15 year old gang member he ministered to named Rigo.

Greg was getting ready to hold a special worship service for incarcerated youth in the prison when he casually asked Rigo if his father would be coming.

"No," Rigo said, "My dad is a heroin addict, and he is not in my life. My dad used to always beat me."

OH..... Suddenly Rigo began to tell Pastor Greg about his childhood

"When I was in fourth grade, I was sent home early one day from school.

[When I got home] my dad asked, 'Why did they send you home?'

.... And, cuz my dad always beat me, I said to him, 'If I tell you, promise you won't hit me?' He just said, 'I'm your father. Of course I'm not going hit you.'

So (Rigo said) I told him."

Rigo began to cry...rocking back and forth. ... Pastor Greg put his arm around Rigo until the boy slowly calmed down.

When Rigo could finally speak again, he spoke quietly, still in a state of shock:

"My dad beat me with a pipe ... with ... a pipe." [And he wept uncontrollably.]

After Rigo composed himself, Pastor Greg asked, *"what about your mom?"*

Rigo pointed to a small woman who had just arrived and said, *"That's her over there ... There is no one like her."*

... Then Rigo paused and said ... *"I've been locked up in here for a year and half and she comes to see me every Sunday.*

Do you know how many buses she takes every Sunday just to see me?"

Rigo started crying as uncontrollably as before.

After catching his breath, Rigo gasped through the sobs ...

"Seven buses. She takes ... seven ... buses. And every week she tells me, Rigo, this prison is not who you are, God has something better for you."

All of us have these two forces in our lives ... the force that will beat us, break us and destroy us if it can... and another force that says, ***"This is not who you are, God has something better."***

You see this is why we are called Christians ... Those who belong to Christ.

Satan, the forces of darkness, the world ... that's the force that wants to beat us break us, and destroy us.

But the birth of Jesus Christ proves that God takes sin seriously and that God has moved heaven and earth to say to you ...

... your **sin** is not who you are, your **failures** are not who you are, your **mistakes** [loneliness, hurts, disappointments, catastrophes] are not who you are ... **GOD HAS SOMETHING BETTER!**

God has promised to do for you far better than you can ever think or imagine for yourself ... so, then why don't you let Him?

²⁸ "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matt. 11:28-29 CSB)