

Series: PUSH THE PAUSE BUTTON - December 5, 2010

SEARCHING FOR CHRISTMAS

Matthew 1-2, Luke 1

1. I **love** Christmas music! I always have. Before Lori and I were married, I already had an astounding collection of Christmas LPs. For those of you who don't know what an LP is, it's like a big CD. One song, sung by Frank Sinatra, is entitled, ***What Ever Happened to Christmas?*** He croons, "What ever happened to Christmas? It's gone and left no traces..." You find out at the end of the song that what actually happened is that his lover took off—and took his Christmas with her! **Where was I? ...And whatever happened to you?**

-But the song **does** raise an interesting question, doesn't it? When you're a kid, the Christmas season seems to have a magic all its own—with the decorations, the music, the parties—and, of course, the vacation from school!

-But sometimes, as adults, things change. Why? How is it that what was once a time we dreamed about—became something we dread? That something that didn't come quickly enough—now comes all too quickly; that sometimes, if we're honest about it, there's a sigh of relief when it's done? Frank says, ...**Where was I?** Great question...**Where was I?**

- a. Unfortunately, Christmas has become a collecting place for all our hopes and dreams. We dream of people changing—maybe it will happen at Christmas. We dream of the family dynamics being different—maybe it will happen when all the relatives come. We dream that maybe our parents will tell us that they're going to get back together and make their marriage word—that **this** Christmas did it for them.

-We dream of the world changing—wars ending for good, everyone having a good meal—and a close friend—maybe it will happen at Christmas. We hope that a miracle will happen—and all our loneliness, fear, anxiety, pain and disappointment will disappear; that the peace—the **shalom**—the sense of flourishing, wholeness, love and joy will be the gift **this** Christmas. What we're searching for—what **every** person on this planet is searching for—is **hope**. But after Christmas, all we're left with is Boxing Day—and a few extra pounds.

- b. And the truth is, the search has been on for all these hopes Christmas represents—for **thousands** of years. People didn't actually **know** that they were searching for Christmas—but they were. Especially when you understand what Christ's birth really means for **all** of life—and **every** life.

-I guess what I'm saying is that we are **right** to have the expectations we do of the birth of Christ. Where we go wrong is expecting those things in any given Christmas season.

- c. So, what I'd like to do is briefly trace the search for Christmas through the Bible. As I do, maybe it will get a little clearer what we're actually searching for.

2. First, let's get a clearer on what Christmas is—as opposed to the junked up, dancing-singing Santa, inflatable snowman version we see. The term **Christmas** comes from **Christ's-Mass**—people gathered to celebrate the birth of God's Son, Jesus—the Christ. The Jewish people had been waiting for the coming of the Messiah for thousands of years. A quick search through the Bible shows the pattern of longing and waiting that started at the Fall of humankind.

-When God spoke to Adam and Eve right after their disobedience, God made it clear that Satan, the one behind the contamination of everything. Speaking directly to the serpent aka Satan, the Lord said:

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”
(Genesis 3:15 TNIV)

-And that was the start of God's Mission to bring everyone and everything back to Himself. But everything **still** continued to deteriorate—to the point where the evil-violence in particular--grieved God's heart 24/7. All would be lost unless He intervened. So God has a man named Noah build a ship to save all that's worth saving—and the rest is wiped clean by a massive flood. But even with all that, things deteriorate—and people live in defiance of God.

- a. And **then** God gets specific. He chooses a man named Abraham—who will follow Him—promises him that He will become the founder of a great nation—and bless him. And then God reveals what His plan has been since the beginning:

...And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”
(Genesis 12:3 TNIV)

-God wants **every single person on this planet to return to Him and find the blessing only He can give**. The question is—**How?**

- b. God **did** do what he promised. As you read the story, it becomes clear that there is this **funnel** effect. In each generation, **someone** is chosen who will carry promise forward. From Abraham's children, Isaac is chosen; then Jacob; then Judah—and so on. **Someone** is coming who will crush Satan's head and bless all the nations. **Who** God chooses to carry the blessing is quite mysterious; he chooses Jacob, the cheat, instead of his big, dumb, hairy—but likable brother, Esau. Instead of choosing Joseph, the stellar leader, God chooses Judah, the rogue brother.

-When Moses leads Israel out of 400 years of slavery, God doesn't choose his line; but He does use Moses to give more clues. He points forward and says:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your own people. You must listen to him.
(Deuteronomy 18:15 TNIV)

- c. As a nation, God's people don't get any closer to blessing the nations. After a bad start with Saul—it **seems** that the great leader, the Deliverer **could** be David. He's a man after God's heart. All the people love him and follow him. Right when he's about to build a temple—which would be his crowning feat—God stops him and says: "No. Not you. It will be your son." And then these final words:

Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever. (2 Samuel 7:16 TNIV)

-More clues, but his kingdom *doesn't* last forever. Solomon—brilliant, wise, rich—internationally known—starts well, builds a magnificent temple. And I'm sure people thought, **Man, he's even better than David—and has all the right credentials!** But then Solomon, through his lack of whole-hearted devotion, takes the whole kingdom off the rails. His kingdom divides between north and south—and both groups of people get hauled off in two different directions; one to Assyria, the other to Babylon. When they got back to their land, they were a shadow of what they had been. They waited and waited—and nothing happened.

3. The picture that emerges from the prophets, the people who spoke on behalf of God, always points to the future, always points to hope—and always points to something that is way bigger...and contains clues that must've puzzled **everyone!**
- a. For example, Isaiah writes these words:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14 TNIV)

-Has anyone ever heard those words before? Now, there was a local fulfillment of this—but the sign God was giving of what He was up to was **way** more profound. It must've left people scratching their heads. "A **virgin conceiving a child? A son called Immanuel? God with us!** A puzzling clue about a future event.

- b. Isaiah drops another clue—this one just as profound. Right in the middle of the fear of Assyria, a blood-thirsty nation that had decimated other countries, Isaiah says, "God still controls history!" Then these words:

...In the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:1b-3 TNIV)

-Galilee, now run by the Assyrians, is going to become famous. What happens there is going to be **so** profound that people who **now** live in deep darkness will see a **great light!** Hmmm!

- c. A few verses later, it becomes clearer; what happens in Galilee—the **great light dawning**--is somehow wrapped up in a **person**—a child who will be born.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-9 TNIV)

-Another unbelievable clue; a baby will be born—but with the names and titles He's given, this couldn't just be *any* baby:

***Wonderful Counselor:** Somehow this baby would one day speak wisdom into the most profound problems the world is facing.

***Mighty God:** Think about it—a child born the normal way—but... **Mighty God?** Limitless power and authority? How could **God** be born?

***Everlasting Father:** Now—think about that for a minute. How can a child be **born**—and also be **Everlasting**—and have the supremacy to be called everlasting **Father?** Seems strange, doesn't it?

***Prince of Peace:** Peace—the return of everything to what it **should** be—it's what everyone has longed for! And this child to be born will be the **Prince of Shalom!** But there's more—another clue.

*** He will reign on David's throne** and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.
-Somehow this child who is born will connect all the prophecies, all the promises--everything that God has been doing up to now.
And His leadership—his rule—will be characterized by dignity and justice and integrity. Then, the final piece:

***The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.** What happens will **not** be the result of human effort. God Himself will step in and make sure this happens!

- d. Now, there are other clues—but let me give just one more. This one is **very** specific. It comes from the prophet Micah:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (Micah 5:2 TNIV)

-Two specific places are mentioned; Galilee—and Bethlehem. And, again, the supernatural nature of who this ruler will be. He will have ancient origins—ancient from the perspective of someone writing in 700 B.C.!

4. With all of these clues that have been dropped—it seems a little confusing and overwhelming. Most of the Jewish people knew these prophecies by heart. Now,

imagine **Mary's** shock when an angel shows up, greets her, and begins using all these same word pictures. She lives in Galilee. She's a virgin. She's told that this baby will be the Son of the Most High—and take the throne of his father, David—and she's an ancestor of David! Listen to these words—and think of how **Mary** heard them!

“Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.” Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:28-35 TNIV)

- a. My guess is that all these clues dropped by God through the prophets suddenly started coming together. A virgin shall conceive--a light from Galilee—**very** great—a kingdom that never ends. And the final piece: Conceiving this child will happen through the intervention of God—this will be **God's** Son! When Joseph announced that he and Mary had to go to Bethlehem to register with the Roman tax system because he was from the house of David...my guess is that final puzzle piece clicked into place! “Of **course!** That's how **Galilee** fits with **Bethlehem!**”

-And Mary's response to all of this? Even with the immense personal price tag on all this...it was clear that all the hopes and dreams of her people would be fulfilled through her obedience:

“I am the Lord's servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me according to your word.” Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:38 TNIV)

- b. Now, did Mary understand fully that she was actually carrying the **Mighty God**—the Creator of all things—in her womb—as we are told in the writings of the New Testament? Probably not. But she **did** understand that this was the child of the promise.

-And when Mary is with Elizabeth—her relative who is also miraculously pregnant, she just cuts loose with praise—in essence saying, “I'm the most fortunate woman on the planet!” Then this:

He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what he promised, *beginning with Abraham and right up to now.* (Luke 1:51-55 MSG)

5. All through the Bible—right up until the moment Gabriel appeared to Mary—God’s promise has been that God would resolve the mess in the world. That He **would** in fact make things right again. The word that describes everything before the Fall of humankind, before the trainwreck—was **shalom**. When Adam and Eve rebelled, it was **shalom** that was lost! I want you to think for just a minute about what this means—cause it means more than just a ceasefire on battlefields. And it’s bigger than just an inner calm that you feel when you’ve settled yourself down.

-**Shalom** is when things are **the way they’re supposed to be**. Not just in your home. Not just in a gathering of God’s people—but in the **world**. Shalom is people living in cooperation with creation—and not destroying it. How many of you would like to see people—and creation cooperate—and not compete?

-**Shalom** is what happens in your relational world when it’s not junked up with selfishness, self-centeredness, self-pity, lust, resentment, jealousy and impatience. **Shalom** is what happens when grudges are dropped and sins are forgiven.

-**Shalom** is a world without violence and greed. **Shalom** is what happens when people do what Jesus said—when we love our neighbours as ourselves; when we treat other people like we would like to be treated. **Shalom** is when people who have a lot are filled with compassion for those who have nothing; it’s when authenticity and kindness and goodness run all the systems of this world; the political system, the health system, the justice system, the United Nations, and the school system.

-**Shalom** is what happens when everyone in a home can sit at the kitchen table—and be genuinely grateful, both for what they have and for each other. **Shalom** is what happens in your heart and in your emotions when you’re at the best concert you’ve ever been to; when you use your talents and gifts—and what you create turns out extremely well! **Shalom** is the deep sense of meaning and spiritual purpose when you sense in others and in yourself when you truly make a lasting difference in the world.

-**Shalom** is your body, your mind, your emotions and your soul all cooperating together in unity with you, with God and with others. It’s your body behaving and being a good servant—not running your life.

-**Shalom** is this inner sense of giddiness and joy and satisfaction and hope—and **peace**. It’s this inner sense of calm; that everything’s going to be okay. That you don’t have to worry and fuss and stew and boil. That the God of the universe don’t just **love** you—you know, because He’s God and He **has** to. He **likes** you! He’s glad for the way He’s made you. Not only will He be there for whatever you happen to face in life-- He will prepare the way for you; if it’s tough, He’ll help you get through; if it’s good, He’ll help you throw a party!

-And mostly, **Shalom** is hope. Expectant hope. Hope that an **Awesomely Good God** is at work everywhere—even in those places that seem mucky and uncertain. It’s hope that not will all the evil things stop—they will be **reversed**. Hope that **knowing** that **God** runs all systems—and that whatever powers we see—are ultimately accountable to Him. It’s our hope, friends, that **love wins! It wins now. And love will ultimately win the day.**

-Now, hear me on this. **Shalom is what God is all about. And shalom only comes through Jesus Christ—that is why His coming is GOOD NEWS!** And this is *exactly* why the angels made the announcement they did the night Jesus was born:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” (Luke 2:14 TNIV)

- a. How many of you think that maybe—*just maybe*—that the **shalom** Jesus came to restore to this universe *might* be what people have been looking for all through history? In all the wars, in all the technological advances, in every purchase of a home, or celebration of a harvest? How many of you think that **shalom**—rest, worth, fulfillment, meaning, love—deep, deep satisfaction—eternal life—is what people are looking for when they develop a romantic relationship, kiss, and hold each other?

-This, friends, is *profound*. And this *hope* is how all the people who’ve gone before us made it through the difficult times of waiting. Watching people sometimes crush others and hurt the world by trying to **steal** the *life* that God offers only as a gift. And *that’s* why all these prophets pointed forward and said, “This is what we have to look forward to—and it will come through the Deliverer. The **Savior**.”

-How many of you think that the *driving passion* behind everything that happens might be this search we’re on for **shalom**—for *life*? Now, please remind me—*where does this profound peace and fullness of life ultimately come from?* Well, God—through Jesus, right? And if we try to wrench it from His hands any other way—we ultimately wind up dissatisfied—and we hurt others.

- b. If you were to draw it out—this is what it looks like—with all the prophecies and hopes and dreams of the Bible leading right down, pointing to the birth of Jesus—we call it **Christmas**--and all the effects of His coming—and the spread of His power, healing, grace and forgiveness into the world from that point on.

-Lori and I were at the MDHS music concert on Wednesday night—and it was pretty cool to hear the band and choir play and sing songs like, **Hark, the Herald Angels Sing, glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!** I mean, if you can get beyond all the stupid Christmas songs like, **Santa Baby**—with all due respect to Eartha Kitt and Madonna—the music expresses some of the deepest longings of the human heart—for peace, for hope, for love—and for meaning.

-It’s at Christmas that people tend to at least *think* about someone besides themselves. It’s at Christmas that people have hope that *maybe* they can make a difference; that *maybe* they can find love; that *maybe* there is hope after all—in all the mess of life.

- c. And I'll tell what sometimes happens. People get hurt or disillusioned because they think that God's promise of peace and hope has to do with a **season**. And it doesn't. God's promise has to do with a person—Jesus Christ.

-See, the problem is thinking that Christmas is a kind of magical season where dreams come true—just because it's the **season** for it. Love and hope and joy don't come to our lives because we put up Christmas lights, sing carols, give gifts and help charities. All the hopes for peace in our world, with God, with each other, with family and with ourselves are based **solely** on the fact that God **Himself** showed up in a filthy manger on that night 2000 years ago. His Name is Jesus—and **He** is our **hope**.

-Now, here's the deal: You can't eject Jesus from Christmas—and expect shalom of **any** kind. That's not a popular message in our world—because it sounds so **narrow**, so **exclusive**. What's important to understand is that Jesus is not the sole property of Christianity or **any** religion. In fact, Jesus ultimately came because of the failure of **all** religion to bring people back to God. Christmas is **powerful**—because it celebrates the day when the tide of evil and sadness and sorrow began to turn.

-But Christmas is not **magical**. See, the change we long for only happens one person at a time. And that change **always** starts with me—and with you. It starts with us, not just inviting this Jesus back into our Christmas celebrations—but **right into the control center of our lives**—and then letting His power and goodness leak from our lives into all the people and places we find ourselves. When your heart changes, when you find hope—and joy—and peace—when you learn how to love, it just, well—**leaks! Good News always does!**

6. Here's the deal. Are you ready? Christ did **not** come to create a holiday named after Him—you know, the most wonderful time of the year--when we all get less selfish for a few days, give gifts, eat more, go to parties, and spend hours decorating our houses and trees. He came to restore shalom—the goodness and peace of God to **everyone** who would receive it.

-But, you know, it's the strangest thing. He had to be laid in a manger when He was born—because the world He came to was jammed with other stuff. No room. And that was the story of Jesus' life, really. Everyone **wanted** the peace and life He offered—they just had no space for **Him**. My question is—**Do you?**