

What if Christmas Never Came?

December 27th, 2015

I was speaking with a pastor of a fairly large church and several times, with a big sigh, he asked me whether I knew what I would be preaching over the Christmas season.

- Truth is, if you put a group of pastors together in a room, **most all of them would agree** that it **can be a little challenging**
- each year to bring a new perspective to something that we, as the Church, have been interacting with so much over the past 2000 years.

This morning, however, I'd like to wrap up our Christmas series focusing *not so much* on what it meant...

- that **God sent His Son into this world** as our Prince of Peace and Savior...
- but rather, **what the world would like look like today if He hadn't.**

I think every historian recognizes Jesus as the **single, most dominant historical figure**, of the past 20 centuries.

- But what if He never came? What if we could **extract from history** anything & everything that has been impact by Him?
- What would the world look like?

Some years ago, Walt Disney's daughter wrote a biography of her dad. And, in the book, she said that when she was a little girl...

- She **never really understood who her dad was** or what he did... at least not **until she was like 6 or 7** years old.
- She was at school one day and there were kids in her school who said, "*You know, Mickey Mouse and the Magic Kingdom and all that stuff? That's your dad!*"
- She went home and said to him, "*Dad, how come you never told me that you're Walt Disney!*"

You see, my hope over the past three weeks, and this morning in particular, is that we would discover, in a whole new way, who our Jesus really is!

- Truth is, it would be **hard to choose a less likely candidate to change the world** than Jesus.
- He wasn't a political figure. He had **no connections** or influence with **Herod** or the **religious elite** or **Rome**.
- He led **no military action**. He **didn't graduate** from any prestigious school or **hold any political office**.

In fact, in the eyes many, He was no more than an **uneducated kid**, born on the wrong side of the tracks **to poor parents who conceived Him out of wedlock**.

- And yet, two thousand years later, it is **virtually impossible to imagine our world** apart from His imprint on it.
- When Jesus died on the Cross of Calvary and rose from the grave, the first thing He did was to give birth to a community of His followers called the Church.

So, imagine a world with no church! No Peter, no Paul, no Timothy, no **Francis of Assisi**, no **Mother Theresa**, no **John Wesley**...

- no **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** or **Martin Luther King**.
- No **Notre Dame**. No **St. Paul's Cathedral**. No **house churches** in China. No **Vineyard**.

In the ancient world, there were **nations**, families, **ethnic groups**, guilds of various trades, **tribal religions**, philosophical schools.

- The **church was unlike any of these**. You see, the world into which the Church was born was highly segregated.
- The **races didn't mingle**... the **rich didn't associate** with the poor... the **educated didn't mix** with the uneducated... **women were second class citizens**.

But, in **Colossians 3:11** and **Galatians 3:28**, Paul says this about the church:

- *“In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free, male or female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.”*

I mentioned Walt Disney a moment ago. Has anybody here ever been on a ride called *"It's a Small World After All"*?

- You know how that song will drive you insane after you've been on it long enough.
- Well, **where did that idea come from of the world gathered together...**
- people of **every gender**, every **nationality**, every **status**... kind of **like a family**?

Before this Jesus movement, **where was there a movement** that actively sought to include every single human being

- regardless of **nationality, ethnicity, status, wealth, gender**, and educational background?
- As a matter of historical fact, *not only* had there never been a community like this before,
- there simply had never been the idea of a community like this before. **It was His idea.**
- You see, Jesus changed the way we think about community!

But who was this uneducated, impoverished man from a small village **who could change the way whole societies would relate to one another?**

- In the early pages of the Book of Luke, the Gospel writer explains a little of what was happening when Jesus was born. He writes in Luke 2:1 that,
- *"In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)"*
- So, when was the census taken? **"While Quirinius was governor of Syria."** Now that's a clumsy way to date something!

Well, the system used in Luke's day and in that region of the world, was typically to date events according to the reign of the emperor.

- In Luke 3, for example, we're told that **John the Baptist** began his ministry **"in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar."**
- You see, there was no precise way of dating events because things would reset with each new Emperor.

But when it came to Jesus, **Luke 1:33** says that **the Kingdom of this obscure carpenter** born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth will have no end!

- And so, a full six centuries after Jesus, a **Scythian monk living in Rome** proposed a new system for dating history.
- His name was **Dionysius Exiguus**, which is Latin for little Dennis. It sounds more impressive in Latin, doesn't it?
- He was also known as **Dionysius Deliquintus**, which is Latin for Dennis the Menace. Just kidding!

He proposed that the calendar be centered, **not on the reigns of emperors** or the **pagan myth** of the founding of Rome,

- but on the **birth of this uneducated carpenter** named Jesus, who never held public office. Think about that.
- **When you think of the group of Republicans** represented in the primary debates.
- If you're not a seasoned politician than, at the very least, you've got to have an impressive resume behind you.

But Jesus had **no degrees... no pedigree... no earthly position...** and yet, for centuries, the entire Western calendar was built around Him.

- You see, the **creation of the calendar as we know it** was not just a chronological convenience.
- It was a theological statement that **life in this universe** is not an accident or a random cycle, but a **true story with a diving storyteller**.
- And, at the center of this story... at the center of human history, **stands the Messiah, the Lamb of God** who came to take away the sins of the world.

Jesus Himself **lived His life and died** all within a very small area in a relatively small region of the world.

- It's unlikely that **Caesar Tiberius**, who reigned through Jesus' life, ever heard a hint of His existence.
- And yet, while **Tiberius** was the most powerful man in the world during Jesus' day, **it was Jesus who, through over 2000 years** has been called the *"Lord of Lords and King of Kings."*

- In the first century while the movement still relatively small, such a claim may have seemed laughable.

And yet, 2,000 years after the birth of this carpenter, the fact remains every time any human anywhere on the planet **opens a calendar,**

- **unfolds a newspaper, boots up a computer,**
- we are reminded that Jesus Christ stands as the central figure of human history.
- **Caesar Augustus** died in the year of our Lord, 14 A.D... **Nero** died in the year of our Lord 68 A.D.
- **Napoleon** (the emperor of the world) died in the year of our Lord 1821. **Joseph Stalin**, died in the year of our Lord 1953.

Maybe you're unsure whether Jesus was, in fact, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. But how strange that now **every ruler who ever reigned,**

- **every nation that has risen and fallen,** must be dated in reference to the life of Jesus. Who was this man?
- I mean, just take Him as a Man. Forget about the "*God-stuff*" for a second. **How do you explain** what's happened to our world because of Him?
- Jesus shaped *not only* what community looked like **but what compassion looks like as well.**

I'll tell you, back in the ancient world, if you **got sick**, and you had **no money**, and you **weren't related to a family** who could care for you, you were toast!

- In **165 A.D.** there was an epidemic. It might have been smallpox. It wiped out a quarter of the population in Rome.
- In fact, Emperor **Marcus Aurelius** died from it.
- Then **another one hit around 250.** It wiped out up to a third of cities in the Roman Empire.

Can you **imagine the panic** that went on? It was ugly. What happened to people was ugly!

- Greek historian **Thucydides** writes about how people in Athens responded during one of the plagues.
- This is what he writes: "*They died with no one to look after them. Indeed there were many houses in which all the*

inhabitants perished through lack of any intention for care. The bodies of the dying were heaped up, one on top of the other."

- The pantheon of Greek gods had no impact on any of this because **none of the gods that the Greeks worshipped** ever said anything about an obligation or necessity to care for the sick.

But **there was this one community** of people who understood that they followed a Man who embraced unclean lepers...

- A man who told His disciples to *"Go out and heal the sick."*
- There's an ancient writing from **Dionysius** about what happened during those plagues.
- *"Heedless of the danger, they (the followers of Jesus) took charge of the sick, attending to their every need, and ministering to them in Christ. And with them departed this life serenely happy, for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors, and cheerfully accepting their pains."*

Once there was a little community of men and women; **no money**, **no power**, but they remembered One who spoke these words:

- *"I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."*
- In spite of the dire circumstances, **they apparently saw those around them differently** than every one else did.

They saw the presence of Jesus in the **lowliest**, most **humble**, most **hurting**, and most **alone**.

- And they chose to join with Him in His ministry of love and compassion.
- In the **300s** **a follower of Jesus by the name of Basil** (18:28) got this idea.
- You know in the ancient world, leprosy was a death sentence.

- **If you became a leper**, you'd literally have to yell out, "*Unclean! Unclean!*" so nobody would risk touching you.
- **Basil had this idea**. He thought, "*What if we build a place to love and care for lepers? They don't even have to pay for it. We'll raise the money.*"

In the ancient world, **when a child was born**, it could simply be left to die, no questions asked.

- In a way, babies & infants were **seen almost as disposable...** especially if they **had any defect** whatsoever... or, even if it the baby was the **wrong gender**,
- We're **told by Roman writer**, Seneca (who served as Emperor Nero's advisor), that if they weren't wanted, then very simply... they would be drowned.

You see, in the ancient world, **infanticide** or **selling children into slavery**, weren't scandalous things to cover-up.

- It was just **the way the world worked...**
- **Except for this growing Jesus community** whose leader told them, "*Don't keep the children away. You let them come to Me,*" and put His hands on them and blessed them.

They remembered **they followed One who said**, "*Unless you become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

- **Nobody was doing or saying that** in that world. So **they said**, "*We'll love little children, even if they're not ours.*"
- We read about **Benignus of Dijon**, a 3rd century follower of Jesus, who we're told, "*nursed, supported, and protected a number of deformed and crippled children that had been saved from death after failed abortions and exposures...*"
- He was actually martyred for doing this... for showing compassion for babies born with disabilities.

So, the early followers of Jesus decided that they would take care of babies like this... even if they're not related.

- That was **the beginning of what would come to be called orphanages**.
- They understood from Jesus that **everyone matters** to God.

There had never been any movement built on love and compassion like this!

- But it wasn't just the unwanted babies or orphans that were cared for... but all those who were **marginalized & powerless**.

Jesus expressed such care for them because, **in the ancient world**, there's no support system for them.

- **Religious people in Jesus' day assumed that, to be religious, you should** have nothing to do with the marginalized and the outcasts.
- **But Jesus** says, *"No! Walking in His footsteps means that we especially seek out and care for people like these."*

So, they cared for those who were the **victims of social or religious bigotry**... like women who had very little voice or power in society.

- **Widows by law were actually fined by Rome** for surviving their husbands.
- It was considered kind of bad form for a widow to do that, kind of a drag on the economy.

But Jesus had a special heart for people who were **considered to be inferior**... from **tax collectors** to **women caught in adultery**.

- **Religious leaders shunned them**... But Jesus welcomed them. **He didn't condone**... but He embraced & loved them... and so did those early followers.
- Those who were **at the bottom** of the social status: **women**, **children**, **Gentiles**. They began to treat them like Jesus did... like **they were on top**.

Just **go through the New Testament**... go through any ancient texts you can find (sacred or otherwise),

- and **see if you can find anyone like Jesus!** This **heart of His**... **the way He sees people, marks every encounter He has!**
- **In all that He does**, there's this **honoring**, this **regard**, this **respect** for each and every person He passes by.

And **this vision of humanity**... Jesus' vision of all those people He passed by each and every day...

- His compassion and love for each and every person YOU pass by every day, **has captured the moral imagination** of the world.
- Jesus' very life reflected the words of Scripture, that every human being, **every individual, has this embedded worth**, this rich potential... whether you know them or not.

And so, as this Jesus-movement grew into the fourth century, leaders of the church would gather together.

- And at one meeting, at the **Council of Nicea**, it was agreed that **wherever a cathedral would be built**, they would also need to build a place **where the sick and poor** could be cared for.
- By the way, that's why, even today, so many hospitals have names like "*Good Samaritan*," or "*Good Shepherd*" or "*St. Claire's*".
- They became the world's first charitable institutions.

Years later, an organization was started by a group of Jesus-followers to alleviate human suffering.

- They chose, as a symbol of their organization a large cross on a flag. It became known as Red Cross.
- Every time you see the Red Cross, **you're seeing another thumbprint of your Savior** in the world.
- In shopping malls today, you will hear people ringing bells representing the **Salvation Army**, started by a Jesus follower named William Booth.

This is not to say that there would be no compassion in the world without Christianity.

- Very often those of us who call ourselves Christians fall way, way, way, way short.
- But a philosopher named **Mark Nelson** puts it like this: "*If you ask what is Jesus' influence on medicine and compassion, I would suggest that wherever you have an institution of self-giving for the lonely, (and for practical welfare of the lonely), schools, hospitals, hospices, orphanages for those who will never be able to repay, this probably has its roots in the movement of Jesus.*" **Who was this man?**

The Jesus movement shaped education as we know it. In **Deuteronomy 6:4**, we're told to, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*"

- Many centuries later, in **Luke 10:27**, Jesus quotes the Deuteronomy passage adding one phrase to it:
- Jesus says, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*"
- What does it mean to love God with all our mind?

Around 450 years after Jesus lived here on earth, Rome collapsed as the barbarians, Huns, Goths, Visigoths destroyed the Roman Empire.

- There were no books as we know them back then. They didn't have printing presses.
- There were scrolls, and **they decayed easily** and quickly. So, **why is it that we still have the texts** of so many of these great classical Roman, Greek, and other thinkers?

Well, there are a variety of reasons, but the main one is, about the fourth century, some of Jesus' followers entered into monastic communities.

- And, for many centuries, these were the only institutions in Europe for the acquisition, preserving, and transmitting of knowledge.
- **Thomas Cahill** wrote a popular book called "*How the Irish Saved Civilization*" about how these communities painstakingly created multiple copies of the Bible.

But, for centuries, these communities **also created multiple copies of ancient manuscripts** as well.

- The single greatest preserver of pagan classical documents were followers of Jesus who **believed that we can love God with our mind** as well as our hearts.
- Because of that, the church first began to build schools to educate young people.
- Of course, the nobles and wealthy would educate their children... but the church began teaching the poorest of the poor.

Over time they began to build universities. The first one was the **University of Bologna** in Italy in the 11th century.

- It's where the word "university" was first used.
- Then came the **University of Paris**... then Oxford and Cambridge universities.
- Then universities in Rome, Naples, Vienna, Heidelberg.

These were all begun by followers of Jesus **so people could love God with all our minds**, embracing the wonders of His creation, including science and math.

- They **came to be called "universities"** because they reflected the idea that in the beginning, God created all things in the universe.
- So they created not multi-versities... but uni-versities... to study a spectacular universe created by a single, spectacular God.

Just think about how fundamental this man Jesus was **to the rise of education** in our own country. Take a look at this statement.

- This is in a college handbook. See if you can guess what college it comes from.
- *"Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life, (John 17:3), and therefore to lay Christ...as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning."*

It was written in what was basically the **1646 student handbook at Harvard** University.

- Then **Yale** and **William & Mary** and **Princeton** and **Brown** were birthed with similar visions.
- All but one school started before the American Revolution was started outside this movement of Jesus followers.
- **92% of the first 138 colleges and universities founded in America** were begun by followers of this uneducated, itinerant, **never-wrote-a-book Carpenter** named Jesus!

Who was this man? Forget about His divinity for a moment. Forget about religion. Just look at His impact.

- The **alphabet of the countless millions of Slavic** peoples in the world today is called Cyrillic.
- It was named for **Saint Cyril**, who was a missionary to the Slavs who discovered they had no written alphabet.
- So he created one for them so they would be able to read this book about Jesus in their own language.

Then, nation after nation, culture after culture, **Jesus followers went about the world...**

- learning language after language **in order to translate** the message of Jesus in a way that local peoples could understand.
- In acts of unthinkable, magnificent heroism, they devoted their lives to this task.

In fact, the first efforts of the scientific study of a language was created by these amazing people who embraced Jesus as their hero...

- wanting to make His love and goodness known to every part of the world.
- Time after time, they were the ones who compiled the **first dictionaries**. They wrote the **first grammars**. They developed the **first alphabets**.

Today, the New Testament is translated into more than **1300 languages** while the **entirety of the Bible** is translated into over 580 languages.

- According to Wikipedia, **portions of the Gospels** have been translated into over 2800 languages!
- But why? Who was this man? But it wasn't just language. **The Jesus movement revolutionized art & literature.**

Imagine **no Sistine Chapel**, **no DaVinci's Last Supper**, **no Pieta**. You can go on for a year like this.

- Without Jesus, there is **no Dante**, whose **Divine Comedy** was the primary influence of modern Italian.
- Without Jesus, there is **no Martin Luther**, whose German Bible became the primary influencer of the German language.

- Without Jesus, there is **no King James Bible**, which became the most important source for the shaping of the English language.
- Without Jesus, there is no **Johannes Bach**, who signed all of his works, "To the glory of God."

Imagine a world with no "Hallelujah Chorus," no "Messiah," no **Mozart's "Requiem,"** no Gregorian chants.

- In fact, **modern music notation** was invented in the Middle Ages by monks who wanted to **share music that would glorify and honor this Man, Jesus** from one place to another.
- From language to art to architecture to science, **nothing has gripped the artistic imagination of humanity**, like the vision of this man Jesus. Who is this man?

The Jesus movement also changed political theory. Jesus said once, *"Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God."*

- This is one of the most influential statements in political history. Think about that!
- Up until this moment, it was assumed that, **because there was no separation of church and state**,
- the empire had the right to compel their particular brand of worship.

But when Jesus said that His Kingdom was not of this world, his followers came to understand that they...

- and **even the kings of the world...** will one day answer to a higher power.
- So from **Augustine** to **Martin Luther** to **John Locke**, humanity developed this notion that the state operates in a restricted sphere.
- Because of the teachings of Jesus, His followers came to believe that the **state should not run religion** and that **religion shouldn't run the state**.

I'm not saying the notion of a **separation of church & state** couldn't have developed outside the Christian context, but the reality is...

- it did develop in a culture where people had to work out what does it mean **to follow a king whose kingdom is not of this world...**
- A Kingdom where people were truly meant to be equal to one another.
- Who is this man who changed how we think about **human rights** and **worth** and **dignity**.

Our founding document says this, *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and have been endowed by their Creator with certain rights."*

- Where did this idea come from **because it's been not self-evident** to lots of folks?
- It **wasn't to the Goths or the Huns or the Nazis**. The idea wasn't part of the **Indian caste system**.
- Well, it came **from the idea that all human beings have been made by God** in His image and are loved by God.

That's why reformation movements like abolition were overwhelmingly led by followers of Jesus.

- He uniquely taught **love of enemies**, phrases like, *"Turn the other cheek... Bless those who persecute you, etc."*
- The **idea that you're to love your enemies** is not a natural human idea. Of course, **Jesus didn't just talk about this**.
- On His cross, He said about those who were executing Him, *"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."*

He created a community of people who would actually love this way. A first-century senator of the Roman Empire named Tacitus wrote this to describe so many of those early Jesus-followers who died as martyrs:

- *"Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths..."* You see, they died for their love of Jesus.
- *"They were torn by dogs and perished; or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames..."*
- These are our brothers and sisters. This happened.

Nero would cover them with pitch and use them as human torches to light gladiator games.

- This went on and off for three centuries. But the response of the people to this movement was **not to dream of revenge,**
- **not to start an army, not to create armed resistance...** It was to love Nero! It was to love Rome. Who was this man who could incite this kind of love?

The reality of this love for enemies was so powerful, for example, that **we read about a pagan military commander called Morris** who said he could not execute any more Christians.

- He himself was executed for that decision. Who was this man that even Roman pagans would surrender their life to Him?
- How could this man who **never traveled more than 200 miles** from his home...
- whose **public ministry spanned only three years...** how could He have changed the world like this?

He inspired a writer named Tolstoy, who wrote a book called Resurrection that was banned in Russia.

- And yet, it **inspired a British-trained lawyer** to start a Tolstoyan community in South Africa.
- The last full letter Tolstoy ever wrote to a non-relative was to this lawyer to **praise the self-sacrificing, enemy-loving love of Jesus.**

That lawyer's name was Mahatma Gandhi. He eventually went back to India and changed history.

- There's just **no way to understand the movement Gandhi fostered** apart from the Sermon on the Mount and the suffering love of Jesus. Who was this man?

Most famous speech of the twentieth century was given by a preacher by the name of Martin Luther King.

- **"I have a dream."** I'll tell you something cool about this speech. Taylor Branch writes about this.
- Martin Luther King is **speaking from a prepared text** on this date. He **throws in at one point a quote from Amos,**

- *"We will not be satisfied till justice rolls like the waters. We will not be satisfied till righteousness rolls like a mighty stream."*

The crowd could not keep quiet. They started to applaud. They **started to yell back to Martin** Luther King, "Yes! Amen! Amen! Preach it!"

- Martin Luther King could not go back to his prepared text. You look at this video some time, and you watch what happens when he gets to that quote from Amos.
- After that, **Mahalia Jackson shouts out to him...** "Tell them about the dream, Martin."
- He never looked back at his script. He then begins talking about his dream, that...

"One day all children of God will be judged no longer by the color of their skin but the content of their character. I have a dream today. I have a dream that every valley will be raised up, and every mountain will be brought down. The glory of God will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together. I have a dream!"

You see, that's not simply Martin Luther King's dream. It was the dream of One who rejected offers of earthly power...

- One who was born in obscurity to an oppressed people... the One who said, *"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*
- That is not a secular speech. No secular speech can move the human heart like that. That is Jesus at work. Who is this man?

Who is Jesus? He is the **hinge of history**. He is the **hope of the oppressed**. He is the **inspiration of the despairing**.

- He is the **King of Kings**. He is the **Lord of Lords**. He is the **greatest teacher who ever lived**. He is the **greatest mind that ever thought**.
- He **sparked the greatest movement** that has ever spread. He **offered the greatest gift** that has ever been given.

He alone **mastered life**. He alone **conquered death**. He alone **overcame sin**. He alone is the **Son of God**. He is the **Savior of the world**.

- That's who this man is!