

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

CHRISTMAS WITH TARDERS POINT

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Hey, I just want to thank you guys for making the Shepherd Community Center's Christmas store a success. If you are new to our church we've been talking about this partnership with Shepherd. I think this is our third year with them where we just try to stock the shelves of their Christmas store. And we set a goal this year to raise 10,000 items. You guys surpassed that to the tune of about 13,000. A number of our people were down there serving. So I just want to thank you guys for that, just for your generosity. Your generosity helps us to pivot and meet needs around the community. And I'm so grateful to do this with you.

On behalf of my family and me, I want to wish you a guys a Merry Christmas and just say, "Hey, man. We made it through the blizzard of 2022." Alright? We're finally here together. We've been cooped up the last couple of days. And I'm thrilled to be here with you. This is one of my favorite services of the year.

Shortly before Thanksgiving my wife asked me the question that she normally asks every year around this time of the year. She just said, "Hey, I need some Christmas ideas from you." And I never really totally know what to do with that. So this year I googled: Top Christmas Gifts for Him. Right? I actually wish that was just a sermon illustration, but it's not. I actually googled that. Here are just a few of the gifts that popped up on Google.

This is a pizza oven. Now, I've always wanted one of these built-in pizza ovens in my backyard where I could make these fresh, artisan pizzas. It was a vision in my mind that I would do every Friday night with my family. But, chances are if I had a pizza oven, I'd use it once. Alright?

This claims to be the best pizza oven on Amazon. And they say if you're not crazy about pizza then you can make steak, fish, or vegetables. Which, I don't know, there is something about that. I don't know if that's going to be good for any of those things. Might as well make chocolate chip cookies. I don't know.

Here's the next gift. This is an eye massager with heating pads and Bluetooth. Now, this is one of those gifts that I didn't even know existed. But now that I know that it exists, I'm trying to figure out a reason why I need it. That's what that is.

And then here's the last one. This one is kind of disgusting. The Japanese Nuubu Foot Pads. Apparently they pull toxins out of your body. The advertisement says that you'll

know it is working because at the end of every session the pads turn black. That's just gross. Alright?

Now, I didn't ask for any of these things. I don't expect them under the tree tomorrow. So, I don't know, in the off chance that you're looking for a gift for your pastor, there you go. Maybe the foot pads would be nice. Isaiah 52:7 says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news." Mine are not. We'll just share that with family.

I think that all of us would agree, coming through this year as we kind of look across the world right now, the number one thing that the world needs for Christmas this year more than anything else is *perspective*. And by *perspective* I simply mean this:

The ability to see and to make sense out of a world that feels like it doesn't make much sense.

And right now there are a lot of things that seem to be clouding our collective vision. There is a lot of noise. And there is so much information that is coming to us via our phones and screens. And we're trying to process it all. We're kind of, in many ways, post-pandemic and all of the events that we've been through over the last few years, it just kind of feels like we are feeling our way through the dark.

It brought to mind this passage out of a book I read in college by a guy named J.I. Packer. The title of the book is called *Knowing God*. Listen to what he writes. He says:

We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is, and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place and life is disappointing and unpleasant business for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you.

I remember reading that my second year of college and it just kind of hit me square between the eyes. This world is painful. And it is dark. And there are some unmet expectations. God doesn't promise to fix all of those things in the moment. But to disregard His identity and His purpose and His intent leaves us in this place where we are stumbling through the world without having a connection to whose world it is. Right now, I think many of us are just kind of trying to feel our way through. Our vision is being obstructed.

I've always had really, really good vision. My eyesight was good all through growing up. Every time I'd go to the eye doctor it was 20/20. But something changed when I was in college at the end of a semester. A lot of stress. I'd just gone through a break up. I was studying for finals. And I was super, super stressed out. I didn't know what I was going to do in the summer.

I'll never forget. I was sitting at a stoplight during finals week. And I looked to my left through my car window, the same place that I would look every day. I drove that route all the time. And the billboard and the street lights weren't clear like they normally were. They were blurry. And they've been blurry ever since. It's as if that week of stress clouded my vision.

The same thing can happen in life. The same thing can happen with our ability to see. And I'm not specifically talking about our literal eyes, I'm talking about a different set of lenses. The lenses by which we see and interpret the world around us. The lenses which inform our identity and our purpose. The lenses by which we interpret who God is and our connection to Him.

Ephesians 1:18 refers to this set of lenses as the eyes of our heart. And in the eyes of your heart, the same thing can happen. You go through a season of stress or anxiety; you go through a season where something unexpected can happen and it blurs the vision of the eyes of your heart. And I think part of the reason why the world, right now, is in the desperate place that is, is because collectively the eyes of our hearts have been clouded.

I'm just wondering as you walked in here today if you've come through this past year and maybe you've experienced something pretty traumatic that has clouded the vision of the eyes of your heart. Maybe some of you walked in here today, and this is the first Christmas that you've had since your divorce or that breakup. And your vision is clouded. And understandably so.

Maybe you recently have gone through some sort of a job loss or a career change. Maybe there is a long-time friendship you thought would always be in place, but that friendship recently unraveled, that person is no longer in your life, and it's left you somewhat confused. Maybe you've recently gone through a pretty significant transition. Maybe a move of some kind. Maybe you used to live in sunny Florida or California and God moved you to Indiana. And over the past few weeks you are like, "Why, God? Why?"

All of us have gone through it—I've gone through it. I know that you have as well. These stressful seasons of our lives have a tendency to threaten or to cloud the vision of the eyes of our hearts.

Maybe what makes it even more challenging is Christmas. You come into a setting like this.... By the way, just look around the room. This is the best we will all look all year long. You guys look amazing. It's all downhill from here. Right?

Maybe you came in here and I don't know, maybe you came in by yourself or maybe you're with some friends because you're not able to get back to where your family is from. And you kind of look around the room, and it's really easy in a setting like this.... Everybody looks really happy, we clean ourselves up, and we're taking pictures out in the

lobby, and we've got our hot chocolate, and maybe you're really hurting on the inside and you look around and you are like, "What's wrong with me?"

We sing songs about joy to the world and peace on earth, but you don't feel any joy or peace, and everybody else around you kind of seems like they do. And you're kind of left with these questions like, "What do they have that I don't?" And, "What am I missing?"

If that is you in any way, shape, or form first of all I just want to look right at you and say, "We see you. We've been there. You are not alone." And don't believe the lie as you look around that everybody else must have their act together and you don't. Every single person you'll lock eyes with today, dressed in red and green, are dealing with something in their lives.

The second thing I want you know is that when Jesus was given to us 2,000 years ago, the world was just as dark. That's the reason why He came. Jesus came to shine a light in the midst of the darkness. Listen to the way that the prophet Isaiah described Him in chapter 9, verse 2. He says:

"Those who live in great darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness," by the way, that's us. We are living in a land of deep darkness, but this promise is given, *"a light will shine."* (NLT)

Now, if I were to say to you, right now, in whatever room you may be sitting in, if I were to say, right now, in this room at Northwest that I want everybody—don't do this—I want everybody to stand up and just find a seat on the opposite side of the room, there would be a little bit of chaos in here but it wouldn't be too bad because we can see. We can navigate around each other.

Go ahead and shut the lights out.

If I were to say to everybody, "Hey, I want everybody to just stand to your feet and I want you to find a seat on the other side of the room," that would be absolute chaos, and somebody would get hurt. Alright? Because you would walk tentatively, you're not quite sure if you're going to bump into somebody or step off of a ledge."

This is the world in which we live. This is the reason why we keep bumping into each other. This is the reason why there is so much pain. Everybody seems to have an answer, but we keep slamming into each other.

Now, when the Bible uses the word *darkness* it means two things. It means *evil*, which I think most of us would automatically assume. Like, "Yep, I've totally got that." Here's the other thing that the Bible means when it uses that word, it's *ignorance*. And ignorance not in the sense of stupidity, ignorance in the sense of, "I don't know how to turn the light on. I don't understand what the answer is."

And that perfectly describes the setting in which Jesus came to in the world 2,000 years ago. Jesus was born 2,000 years ago; this is what was happening in the world:

Violence

Injustice

Abuse of Power

Depression

Displacement

Anxiety

Grief

That kind of sounds like today. That kind of sounds like the darkness that is around us today.

The other way in which the world is so dark is because no one really knows for sure what to do about that. Now, there are a lot of people who claim to know, and usually it ends up turning into is a bunch of finger pointing and blame. What do we really do about it?

At the end of chapter 8 of Isaiah, it says that the people, even then, they knew. There was this acknowledgement of evil, but they weren't fully sure what do about it. So in verses 19 through 20 it says that they consulted mediums and magicians. Today, our mediums and magicians are influencers and TED talkers.

And we're just like, "Well, maybe it's the latest self-help book, the latest self-care tactics, whatever we can do to turn the light on," instead of going to God and the wisdom of His Word. And the result is that they continued to stumble around in the darkness. Their vision was obstructed.

We look around today and depending upon who you talk to, somebody will say, "Well, I think that the answer today has got to be found in politics." I think this is the reason it is so divisive. It's like, "If we just get the right person in office, the right policies passed, then things would work out." But I don't know if that will ever be the case, regardless of what side of the aisle you fall on.

Maybe we look at the economy and we're like, "Well, if gas prices would go down and the stock market would go up, then... then, finally the light will come on." I don't know if that is the case, it's all cyclical. What about technology? If we could just invent the right kind of technology to move mankind forward, then finally the light would come on.

We've been looking to politics, the economy, and technology for decades. And I think part of the reason why the intensity of the chaos in the world feels so thick right now is

largely because, I think, the culture is beginning to freak out because none of those proposed answers are turning the light on.

The prophet Isaiah says that for those who walk in a land of deep darkness there is a promise that is given, the gift of Jesus Christ. He has come. He is the true light.

Now, I don't know who you are or how you found your way in here today. Maybe you're joining us at one of our campuses or online. I don't know, maybe some friends invited you. Or maybe you're here visiting family and they asked you to come, and you came politely. But if you were to be really honest you'd be like, "Well, I'm really not much of a religious person. It's really not my thing. I don't normally go to church. I'll be there on Christmas. Maybe Easter. Not quite sure what I believe about God."

Can I just say this specifically if that happens to be you? I'm really, really glad that you are here. And, honestly, you've got to do something with this message. Whether you receive it or reject is totally up to you. But here's the thing that I would just gently and lovingly represent to you. You can walk away from Jesus, and you can reject all of this if you want to. I would just hope that you would reject Him for the right reasons.

Most of the time when I talk to somebody who has rejected Him and says that he or she doesn't buy it, usually what comes attached to that is some sort of bad or legalistic church experience where he or she was shamed when growing up.

And if that is the case, I totally get why you would walk away from this and not want to have anything to do with it. But that is not Christianity. That's a person who had a misunderstanding of Christianity and was actually acting out his dysfunction, and it affected you and so you walked away from Jesus.

Maybe you worked with a Christian who was really judgmental, and he was constantly shoving Bible verses down your throat. And you were like, "I don't want to have anything to do with that. I want to have fun with my life. And so you walked away."

Listen. You're not rejecting Jesus, you're rejecting somebody because of the way that they treated you. Understand the difference. The message of Christianity is not just be more moral. If you just get your act together, then maybe the light would come on.

But, listen. I know that there is good inside of you because you've been created in the image of your heavenly Father, whether you acknowledge your heavenly Father or not. But you and I still have a sin problem that no amount of morality will pay off. Your morality might get you a little bit of a better reputation and keep you out of trouble with the law, but it takes the blood of Jesus Christ to reconcile you to your heavenly Father.

The message of Christianity is not, "Hey, we all gather in church and we're all of the good guys and everybody out in the world are the bad guys." No, we are all bad guys. There is only one saving good guy and His name is Jesus Christ. And He receives you not by your merit or by your effort, but it is a gift of grace.

You can reject Jesus if you want to. Just make sure it's Him you are really rejecting and not somebody who poorly represented Him, not somebody who acted of his own legalistic efforts because he misunderstood the message of the gospel himself.

So Isaiah says this in 9, verse 6:

"A child is born to us," Now notice these next words, *"a Son is given."* He is given. You don't work for this. You don't earn this. It's not by anything that you could do. It is a gift that God has given to us, *"The government will rest upon his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful, Counselor,"* because you and I are in need of some counsel, and He is, *"Almighty God,"* because you and I are weak. And He is, *"the Everlasting Father,"* because you and I are finite, and He is *"the Prince of Peace,"* because there is chaos in this world.

The gospel of John would put it this way:

"The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."
John 1:9 (NLT)

If you would just open up yourself to the possibility that that light is for you, it just might change, not only your eternal future, but your immediate life in the here and the now. Life is going to continue. We're going to have to continue to contend with the darkness. The year 2023 is going to be filled with ups and downs and the same darkness that we've seen before. But what Jesus has promised is He'll give you a light to illuminate your steps, to make you sure-footed in the midst of chaos. And I would just love for you to meet Him.

Several years ago my son and I were up near Thorntown here in Indiana, just up the road from our Northwest campus. My son is 20 years old. At the time he was maybe 11 or 12.

I wasn't really familiar with the roads coming back home from Thorntown. Many of you may know that there is a stretch of highway that runs from Lebanon to Lafayette called Highway 52. And there are two lanes of traffic going one direction. There is a grass median and two lanes of traffic going the other direction. I don't know what the speed limit is, maybe 55 or 60 miles an hour.

It's a pretty significant stretch of road.

I had no idea. I had forgotten that there were two lanes one way, two lanes the other way. I just thought it was a two-lane highway. So we were turning left onto the road, and I can't see anything because it was so dark that night. I ended up turning left the wrong way into oncoming traffic. And I had no idea.

So I'm in the righthand lane. We're cruising 55 or 60 miles an hour and a car flashes its brights at me. And I was just like, "Oh, well that's helpful." I had kind of felt like

somebody was warning me of a speed trap or something. I think I even said, "Oh, thank you." And I watched my speed.

And then the next three cars, they flash their brights frantically honking their horn at me. And I got confused. I was like, "Is there an accident? Is my truck on fire? What's going on?" And then the next four or five cars got really mad. They are all laying on their horns, swerving around, and flashes their brights. And I got angry and offended. And I started kind of yelling back at them. Dad of the year award right there in front of my 11 or 12-year-old son.

And I'll never forget my son who was not driving yet, by the way, was the first to notice. He went, "Dad, I think you're going the wrong direction." And immediately as soon as I realized it, I pulled the truck over off to the side and got us into safety. I think I even drove through the grass median to get up on the other side of the road.

That's a lot what my life looked like when I came to know Jesus. I was in the dark. I had no idea what direction I was going. I had no idea of the potential destruction in front of me. And you know what? There were a few people who flashed their brights at me. There were a few people who honked their horn at me. There were a few people that I actually got a little bit irritated with by the way in which they were doing that.

Maybe you can relate to my story, "I know that Christian. I know that person who was flashing his brights at me, honking his horn at me."

By the way, can I say this? Most of us, speaking as a Christian, most of us mean well, it's just that some of us need to work on our emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. But you didn't hear that from me. Alright? So let's just keep that between us. And they might have done so in a way that was sort of off-putting. However, it doesn't mean that what they were doing wasn't true and it doesn't mean that their intentions weren't good.

I just want to ask you tonight, on this Christmas Eve, is there even a possibility that maybe you've been driving in the dark in the wrong direction and that's part of the chaos, that's part of the pain that you're experiencing in your life? And if that is the case, you don't need to be shamed, you don't need to feel bad about yourself, you don't need to be judged.

Here's what you do. The Bible says, just pull over. Just pull over and turn around. And the biblical word for that is repentance. Jesus was given for you so that a light might shine and make your perspective crystal clear.

Tonight if you're ready to receive Him, you just simply acknowledge that. You just express your gratitude and say, "God, I'll pull the car over and turn around and I'll follow You with my whole heart." And if you would like to do that, let me just pray over you. Just make this prayer your own. Just bow your head and close your eyes, across all of our campuses and even online.

Lord God, we come to You right now. We have been through an incredible few days with the weather. We have been through an incredible few years with all of the events that have gone on. And we're exhausted and our vision is blurry. Not our physical eyes, but the eyes of our hearts.

So, God, I come to you tonight and I surrender. I've been running from you because of an experience I had with a church or a Christian or maybe because my questions kept getting in the way. And, God, tonight I'm willing to admit that I've been running from you for all of the wrong reasons.

You didn't hurt me, a Christian did. That's not a good enough reason to reject you. So, tonight I express my gratitude for the gift of Your Son who was given to me, to us, 2,000 years ago. The true light of the world, so that we might see.

So, God, I receive You. I trust You as my Lord and my Savior. Meet me in this journey as I begin to walk with You in a brand-new relationship in a brand-new year.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.