



CHRISTMAS TURNOVERS

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New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
December 16th, 2007*

Imagine you're at a nice restaurant for dinner. You go there a little later than you normally eat, so by the time you sit down, you're starving and you order a big steak and baked potato. You eat three pieces of bread before your salad arrives. Then you get about three quarters of the way through your steak when your stomach says, "Don't you dare take another bite." It's right about then that the waiter walks up and says, "Did anyone save room for dessert?"

I feel like that waiter this morning. You've already had a full experience with the kids program today, and now I'm standing here saying, "Ready for a little more?"

We've never had a service quite like this one before, with the chairs moved around and different stages in different places. Nothing looks the way you're used to seeing it. But I'm glad we did it this way, because it's the perfect backdrop for what I'd like to talk with you about this morning.

This is the third and final installment of my series called "Twas the night – thoughts on the before of Christmas." We've been looking at circumstances leading up to Jesus' birth, and how they helped prepare people for what God was about to do. I've been suggesting that God creates or allows certain conditions in our lives to create a space for something he's going to start in us. Those are the "befores". For example, just like God took Zechariah and Elizabeth to a place of powerlessness, he can place us in a spot where we have no control so that we start to lean more on his power. Last week we looked at fear and said God may allow things to happen that will bring our fears to the surface so he can blow them out of the water.

I see another dynamic happening in a little detail that I've never paid much attention to in the past. Let me read a few verses for you from Luke chapter 2:

Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to

register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

This whole idea of the census caught my attention. Can any of you kids tell me what a census is? It's when the government decides to count everybody. It's a taking stock. Governments still do that today. Our last census was in 2000. The census takers would come and knock on your door, ask you a few questions about your family, write it down, then go to the next house. They went to every home in the country. It was a massive undertaking.

Imagine trying to do that 2,000 years ago. There were no cars to drive around in. No computers for helping you keep track of information. It would have been a very challenging process. So the government put the burden on the people being counted. They had to go back to wherever their family came from, so the census takers didn't have to roam the countryside. Knowing where you were supposed to go probably hinged on where your family owned property, and if you weren't there to register and pay taxes on it, you probably would forfeit your inheritance.

Luke tells us this was Caesar's idea, and Caesar wasn't a man who collected information for the fun of it. This was about taxes and making sure Rome was getting all the money it should.

Great for Rome, but a pain for everyone else. Talk about chaos. An entire country uprooted and transplanted. Imagine being Mary and Joseph. You're just beginning to get used to this strange calling.. As we said last week, you would have found yourself embroiled in a major scandal. You've had to explain your situation over and over and are finally nearing the end of your pregnancy. It's been hard to absorb the weight of what you've been asked to do. All your own dreams of what the future should look like were put on hold. It was no small request God made.

And now, things are just beginning to settle down when word comes about this census. Everyone has to pick up and move. And you go, "Are you kidding me? Haven't we been through enough? God, why would you let this happen now, just when we're finally ready to have this baby?"

Mary and Joseph were looking at about a 90 mile hike from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It would have been on foot across some hilly country. The open road was a dangerous place and known to be a prime spot for bandits. Given Mary's condition, it probably took the two of them close to a week to make the trip, sleeping under the stars, living off whatever food they could pack with them. Anything could happen on the way, and they didn't have good arrangements waiting for them at the other end. They were walking away from the comfort of home to an uncertain future.

Movement. Upheaval. Change. Everything getting turned over. This was the “before” facing Mary and Joseph. God took them out of the familiar and placed them in an environment they weren’t used to. That’s why I said our setup this morning is the perfect backdrop for my message. Everything feels different and out of place. You don’t know what to expect.

In the book of Genesis, here’s what we’re told about the beginning:

Genesis 1:2

Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

You picture this bubbling stew brewing. Out of that chaos, God called forth his creation. That mess is a promising mess. Upheaval is sometimes the most fertile soil for new things to happen. Movement and change are tools God can use to prepare us for what he’s about to do. And like a census, they become a good opportunity to take stock.

Think about the times of the most significant growth in your life. I’m willing to bet that almost all of them came about in the context of a major change. A marriage. A long distance move. The birth of a child. A health crisis. A financial blow. Loss of a job or a loved one. A broken relationship. Going to a new school. Not that any of those things caused the growth – they just created a setting where it was either grow or die for you.

Mary and Joseph were in one of those situations. Let’s look a little more closely at the nature of the move they had to make. One of the first things we can take from it is that **Life stirs itself.**

Joseph and Mary didn’t come up with the plan to go to Bethlehem on their own. It was forced on them from the outside, and that caused the change.

The point is simply this: We don’t need to seek out change – it will find us. We don’t need to stir the pot, because life stirs itself. We like to think that some things will always be the same, but that’s not real life. Everything is fluid and moving.

I say that because we can get the mistaken idea that if change is good for growth, then we need to pursue our own changes. The problem with that idea is that too often the changes we make are not the kind that help us grow. They are simply efforts to try and take charge of our own world. And that goes against learning from the changes God brings are way that we DON’T control.

Secondly, in this kind of change, **God’s hand may be hidden.** As we said before, the census was Caesar’s idea. Luke doesn’t even say God put it in Caesar’s heart. There’s no outward indication that this is something God can use. And yet God worked through it

That's the confusing part about change. Most of the time, it doesn't look like it's coming from God. It's painful. It may feel random. The timing may be terrible. I look at all the people displaced from their homes in Chehalis because of the flooding, and I can't pretend I know why God would allow that type of upheaval. And I would never go so far as to say God creates natural disasters to teach people lessons. That would be absurd. He's never the source of evil either – causing bad things in order to get good results.

But I do believe that he is bigger than any disaster, bigger than any upheaval, bigger than any change. And when life brings it along -- as it always does -- God can take it and transform it into a vehicle for his grace. So when we're hit by change, we have the choice of simply being molded by those forces or looking for God's hidden hand. We can let upheaval turn us hard, bitter and angry, or we can load up our donkey and head out on the adventure of faith, finding out what God has ahead for us.

God can use anything to teach us, but I think he uses change and upheaval in some specific ways. I see at least four in the story of Mary and Joseph. Up first is what I would call

Pushing back to what's central

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem because that's where Joseph's family was from. As unsettling as it was to have to move from Nazareth, there was still a piece of this journey that was a homecoming. Who knows if they had any relatives they knew at the time, but they were reconnecting with a part of who Joseph was that went deep – hundreds of years back to King David himself. Joseph was deeply rooted in this part of the world. If you took away everything else about him – his carpentry business, his home in Nazareth, his friends, you find Joseph the man, and most central to his identity was his blood line. By its very design, the census forced Joseph to see himself in light of his family. That's what defined him.

When we get dislodged from our routines, when we're shaken out of our complacency, oftentimes God uses those circumstances to help us re-evaluate how we see ourselves. When a piece of our world falls apart, we have to ask how that piece was related to us: Did my career define me? My checkbook? My kids? My marriage? What makes me me?

We're quick to see ourselves in light of what we do or what we own, and if those things are taken away from us, we can have a hard time figuring out who we really are. God invites us in those times of loss and turmoil to reconsider our own identity, and to see that being his child is the most central thing. That's the one piece of who we are that can't be destroyed or changed or taken away. When we've given our lives to him. One of my favorite verses that I quote often is John 10:28:

John 10:28

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

On the radio this week, they played an audio clip from a reality show set in a California tanning salon. This mom had brought her daughter in to get tan before school pictures. She told the person working at the salon, "I want my daughter to look pretty for her picture. She looked a little pale last year." The sales person came up with a plan for a combo of a spray tan and time in the tanning bed. The girl wasn't sure she wanted to go through with it, and the mom kept saying, "You have to. It's for school pictures. Don't you want to look like Lindsey Lohan?" It was so sad that the most important value to that mom was how her daughter looked in the picture.

God is such a different kind of parent. He doesn't value us because of how we look or what we do or what we own. He just loves us. That relationship with him is what he wants us to cling to when everything around us shifts and crumbles. Nothing can snatch us from his hand.

Going to Bethlehem had additional significance for Mary and Joseph. It was fulfilling an ancient prophecy recorded in the book of Micah:

Micah 5:2

*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.*

Placing Jesus on the throne

God used the census to get Mary and Joseph in place so that Jesus' birth would take on added significance as a fulfillment of prophecy. Bethlehem was the city of David, the home of Israel's most famous king. Part of why Jesus was born there was to draw attention to his role as the true, spiritual King of Israel. He was the one Micah had predicted. As the heir to David's legacy, Bethlehem was his rightful place to be born.

When you translate that to our experience, I believe one of the reasons God allows turmoil and change in our life is to refocus our attention on Jesus as the king and ruler. It's about placing Jesus on the throne, or recognizing that he's already there. We get wrapped up in our lives and lose sight of who's really in charge. We set up our own little kingdoms where we're the kings and queens of our own domain.

When Isaac first started playing soccer, if there was an injury on the field, the coach would yell, "Take the knee," and all the players would go down on their knee until the crisis had passed. It was a way to show respect as the game stopped and it cleared the way for help to come on to the field.

And often when a crisis is brewing in our own life, God is saying "Take the knee. It's time to make way for help to come, to show respect where it's due."

It makes me think of that song “Jesus, Take the Wheel.” The young mom driving in the car with her baby is spinning out of control. And she knows in that moment that the car is just a metaphor for her life. She’s the one spinning out of control. The physical crisis takes her to a spiritual crisis. And she prays,

*Jesus take the wheel
Take it from my hands
Cause I can't do this on my own
I'm letting go
So give me one more chance
To save me from this road I'm on*

That’s the place God wants us to get to. As upsetting as any upheaval can be, God often is giving us a gift in it of another chance to let him take the wheel, to place Jesus on the throne.

Even when we don’t feel like we’ve been trying to take charge and that’s not our battle, a major change in our life gives us an opportunity to intentionally say, “Jesus is my King. I don’t understand why this is happening, but I’m going to trust that he’s in charge, and that he’s better at it than I am.”

For Mary and Joseph, there was another reason to get to Bethlehem that wasn’t just about them. We’ve already heard what the angel said to the shepherds, but I’ll read it for you again:

Luke 2:10-12

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Putting Jesus in a manger was the end of a long string of improvised decisions for Mary and Joseph. Sometimes we mistakenly think spiritual maturity means reaching a time when everything will go as planned. We’ll be able to read God’s mind and map our steps accordingly. But life is full of upheaval no matter how spiritual we are. Mary and Joseph were no exception. It was all improvisation as they went. First there was the long, hard trip to Bethlehem, then there were no good accommodations when they got there, then there was no bed in the stable, so the manger was the best option in a bad situation. It was not Mary’s first choice to put Jesus there – she would have preferred to lay him in a crib back in Nazareth. But these highly unusual circumstances that were so taxing for her became the very thing God used in his plan to reach the shepherds.

Pointing the way for others

Upheaval brings movement and change, which naturally puts us in contact with different people than we normally would interact with. We can find ourselves suddenly rubbing

shoulders with a crowd outside our circle, and that's a good sign God is doing something strategic.

The early church gives us a really clear picture of that. Before Paul even became a Christian, the church suffered intensely. When he was called Saul he was there at the stoning of the Apostle Stephen. And here is what Acts says happened:

Acts 8:1-4

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Obviously a tragic scenario. Far from God's will. And yet, God used that persecution to further his kingdom, because the next verse says this:

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

The squeeze put on the church only drove them to new places with the gospel, where they took Jesus to people who wouldn't have heard about him otherwise.

God can turn your moment of crisis into a sign, pointing those around you to him.

A turn of events as random as a census resulted in Joseph reconnecting with who he was, drawing attention to Jesus as King and giving other people a sign of God's activity. One final outcome of this big change for Mary and Joseph can be found a little later.

Matthew 2:13

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

This happened after the wise men had come and gone. There wasn't much time, and Joseph and Mary had to be on the road again. The upheaval starts again. But if you look at a map of Israel, you'll see that Bethlehem is much closer to Egypt than Nazareth is.

Sometimes God uses change in our life when he is

Positioning us for our future

God knew that Mary and Joseph would have to flee long before they did, and he put them in a much better spot to do that by moving them to Bethlehem. Sometimes, God isn't just teaching us through change – he's getting us ready for a future still to come.

My father-in-law had several years of very difficult work as pastor of a church in California. It was a large church with a lot of politics, and he weathered some very

intense storms. Toward the end of his 12 years there, he finally reached a good spot where things were more healthy, the church was growing and it was a good season. Then he was called to become the dean of a seminary. And he wondered about God's timing of moving him just when things were getting good.

But when he got to his new job, he discovered that all of his hard years at the church had prepared him for the tough challenges of leading a school. All that time, God had been equipping him for a future he hadn't seen coming. Yet even when things were at their worst, God was still speaking to him. At one particularly low point, when he cried out to God, the Lord pointed him to a verse in Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 12:5

*If you have raced with men on foot
and they have worn you out,
how can you compete with horses?*

It was as if God was saying to him, "You think this is tough. I've got a much bigger race for you to run, and I need you to get prepared." God didn't show him what was ahead, but he gave him the strength to keep learning and growing while he waited for what was next.

In college, Karin and I had a friend who had just broken up with her fiancé. It was a really painful break up and rocked her world in the way we've been talking about. She was sitting in her car at an intersection, crying and praying, "God please show me why you did this. What do you have planned for me? I need to know what my future is going to hold now."

Just as she prayed that, she looked across the intersection. The sun was shining directly into the car opposite her, and she could see a mom driving with her little girl. The visor wasn't low enough to keep the sun out of the little girl's eyes, so the mom had her hand up to shield her daughter.

In that moment, our friend knew that God was doing the exact same thing for her. He was shielding her from a glimpse of her own future, and it was for her protection. She was questioning his love for not showing it to her, when all the time it was his love that was guarding her from it.

You may be going through complete upheaval and wondering why. God may be preparing you for a future while shielding you from it at the same time. In both cases, it's his love that is at work, shaping who we are now and who we will become.

Has God put a census in your life? Is there some taking stock going on? Is it just upheaval, or is God's hand hidden in it?

Do I need to reconnect with what matters most?
Am I still holding on to the wheel?

Whose path am I crossing in my crisis?

Luke tells us that Mary treasured all these things in her heart. These days of change and uncertainty stayed with her the rest of her life and became a significant part of who she was. She valued them and kept them in mind, letting them impact her life.

May God do the same for us in the turnovers that come our way.