

# The Heart of Christmas

## Luke 2:15–19 (NIV)

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” **16** So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **17** When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. **19** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

## Proverbs 23:26 (NRSV)

My child, give me your heart.

**Introduction.** A few days ago I was puttering around in my basement woodshop when I heard Patty at the top the steps call out, “Dwight, the dishwasher is leaking.” Those are words every husband wants to hear at this time of the year, right? When I went upstairs to the kitchen, I saw a dozen towels being used to sop up water. The dishwasher was not leaking, it was flooding over. Immediately I thought, “Well, a new dishwasher is probably a better Christmas present for Patty than the new iron I thought of.” I began to wonder what color ribbon would be appropriate.

When I opened the door, I saw the reservoir was completely filled with water and overflowing. As we were bailing water out of the bottom of the machine, I began to wonder, “What is wrong with this crazy thing?” I knew it was important to properly diagnose the problem.

## Spiritual longings and needs.

As this year ends and a new year dawns, some reflect on their spiritual well-being. Some have a sense their relationship with God is somewhat lacking. Others have deep longings for more of Jesus. Some sense things within just don't quite seem to be in alignment. Some feel the spiritual spark has died. Some know they have drifted. A few find their lives in chaos and they desperately need help. But what is at the root of these matters?

Next week, we will have a several people who will show up for Christmas Eve services who have not been around church in some time. I want you to know I am delighted they will be here and we welcome with open arms. Some will be here because their spouse or parent threatened them that if they did not come there would be not gift under the tree. Others however will walk through the doors hope they will experience something that will address what they sense is lacking in their spiritual being. They long for a spark to ignite their soul.

A few weeks ago I corresponded with a person I had not seen around in quite some time. I expressed how I had missed her. She responded with words expressing how much she loved many people here and me as a pastor. **But she told me she had been attending another congregation because she felt she had "needed a change."** The church she is attending and its pastor are wonderful. But her words sent me to thinking. Apparently she had some longing within and would a change in scenery really be the solution to her spiritual need. I wondered had she properly diagnosed her spiritual malady?

Through the years in ministry, I have heard her story on other occasions – **"I felt I needed a change."** I have talked with those who dropped out for periods of time (some permanently) who expressed, **"I just needed to get away for a while."** I have heard from folks who become less involved and heard them say, **"I just needed a rest."** I know that there are times when God calls people to new places (I have had that experience), I know there are times when people need to slow down but in many of these situations I wonder if they had diagnosed things properly – is it a matter of changing scenery, taking time to rest, developing a new discipline, changing the way one thinks, some sin stirring within. The answer to any of these can be, "Yes." **But there may be something greater going on.**

## The Heart.

**After the water had been dipped out of our dishwasher's reservoir, I turned off the electricity to the dishwasher.** Then I began disassembling the jet spraying devise and what was underneath. When I had removed all the parts, I snapped off a cover to the supply for the dishwashing pump. I reached my fingers down into the water and began to pull out food debris. (That was not the most pleasant experience, by the way.) After I could feel nothing else, I went down stairs and turned the electricity back on. The dishwasher came back on and it drained. After everything was reassembled and the program reset, the dishwasher worked fine without leaking.

It seems from my telling of this story that it makes me look rather "smart." **The truth is I was rather lucky in diagnosing the problem and getting it fixed.** But this I know, if the pump is not working correctly, the dishwasher is broken. If the pump is not functioning to capacity, it's a good bet your dishes will not get completely clean.

Often in our spiritual lives when there is a problem or a **sense something is lacking, it is a matter of the heart.**

On one occasion members of the religious group called the Pharisees questioned Jesus about his disciples practice (or lack of practice) of hand washing. Jesus had observed many members of this group put on a good external show but they something was missing. He scolded them for some of their hypocritical attitudes. Then he quoted a passage from Isaiah:

*'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me* (Matthew 15:8). Jesus understood these *guys' had a heart problem*. They were extremely disciplined, deeply religious but something was missing – their hearts were not fully engaged and were hardened.

As you probably suspect, when the Bible speaks of the *"human heart," it is referring to more than the heart in our chests that pumps blood throughout our bodies*. (That heart is critical for our health and survival.) The *"heart"* in the Bible refers to our *seat of affection and emotion*. When we are stirred within by feelings and desires, these arise out our heart. *Love comes from the heart* (Deut 6:5). Solomon described the heart as the *"well-spring"* of life (Pro 12:23). It is that place where our life bubbles out from us. It becomes the storage place or reservoir that influences our whole system – Jesus said it is the place from which our thoughts arise – both good and evil (Mat 12:35). For Mary when Jesus was born, she found the heart was the storage place of all her memories. It is where we store our treasures (Mat 6:21).

As I was studying for this message, I was surprised by what I discovered in scripture related to the *"heart."* The *great blessings from God for which all us long have a strong heart connection*.

- *Joy* – Hannah who prayed to have son found her *"heart rejoicing in God"* (1 Sam 2:2)
- *Peace* – Jesus offered peace to his disciples as they faced his arrest and execution. He said, *"Don't let your hearts be troubled"* (John 14:27)
- *Hope* - Paul shared that hope flows out of us because God poured his love into our hearts (Rom 5:5).

Not only do divine spiritual blessings connect to the heart, the spiritual exercises or disciplines do as well. The heart is to be and is *engaged in genuine worship* (Mat 15:8), when we *study scripture* (Psa 119:11), *when we pray* (2 Chro 6:38); *when we serve* (1 Sam 12:24) and *when we give* (Mat 7:19ff). When the heart is not engaged and involved in any of these exercises, their impact and effectiveness is limited. Think about it, what would a prayer really mean if your heart is not in it?

That is not all. The heart interacts with God. You see *true repentance (that is turning away from our sin and turning to God) engages the heart* (1 Kings 8:48). *Saving faith* resides and is expressed from out of the heart (Rom 10:9ff). Best of all, love flows from the heart (Deut 6:4ff).

There is even more. This is better than nesting dolls. Do you know where Jesus resides within us? (Eph 3:17). How about the Holy Spirit? (Gal 4:6). *Our hearts is the place of residency of God in our lives*. The heart is central to everything spiritual and religious for us as followers of Jesus Christ.

One of the strongest churches in the NT era was the Church at Ephesus. It was planted by the Apostle Paul during one of his missionary journeys. As a matter of fact, he spent more time there in the early phases of its birth and development than any other church. He gave himself fully to that congregation. It was a strong and vibrant church. Four or five decades after the church was established, it became the center of a message in the Bible. In Revelation, Jesus instructed the author to write letters to seven churches in Asia minor, one of which was Ephesus. The letter revealed how the church had fared from God's perspective. They were commended for their holding firm to orthodoxy and praxis. They were hard workers. It seemed all was well until the critique came: *they had abandoned their "first love."* This was a matter of the heart. They had begun with a deep love for Jesus but the love had faded. They had a real heart issue.

### **Give God your heart.**

Today I would predict there are folks across the spectrum when it comes to *"heart"* issues. Some may find their lives in spiritual crisis and things of the heart are a wreck in relationship to God. Others find themselves in state where their hearts seem to be drifting away from the

Lord. Others sense something is missing within and have a longing for more. Even those who today feel a close heart-felt connection to Christ, there is a need to do routine maintenance on the heart. In other words, all of can commit to some heart work.

The problem we had a few days ago with the dishwasher overflowing could have been avoided if I had been cleaning the drains regularly. Routine maintenance would have prevented that problem. Jeremiah asked God to “*search his heart and see if there was any wicked way in him*” (17:10). David prayed, “*Create in me a clean heart, O, Lord.*” (Ps 51:10). Intentionally opening our hearts to God for servicing is vital.

What about if we have drifted or worse have turned away from the Lord? In Joel we hear God speaking: “*Return to me with all of your heart*” (2:12). God left the door open for Israel. God left the door open for the Church at Ephesus. God leaves the door open for those of us who turn away to come back.

The bottom line of this response to God is found in Proverbs. Listen as these words spoken from God to you: *My child, give me your heart.* This I believe is an on-going exercise for all of us.

A few years ago I was introduced to a carol that I thought at first seemed strange. It is based on the poem of Christina Rossetti – In the bleak midwinter. It has become a favorite.

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;  
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.  
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom cherubim, worship night and day,  
Breastful of milk, and a mangerful of hay;  
Enough for Him, whom angels fall before,  
The ox and ass and camel which adore.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,  
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;  
But His mother only, in her maiden bliss,  
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.