



There are those who like to challenge themselves this time of year by doing everything in their power to avoid hearing the song, “Last Christmas, you gave me my heart, and the very next day,” and not to avoid hearing a pastor’s embarrassing attempt at singing it, but the original track from Wham, the 1980’s British pop duo. So, for those of you who managed to pull off

the annual holiday challenge, “Congratulations on a job well done,” and for those of you who had no idea you were supposed to be doing that as you walked into all the stores and listened to the radio and with all the other modern technologies of music and you still pulled it off anyway, “Congratulations on a job well done.” But some on this side of the Atlantic, will try to make their lives even more interesting between Thanksgiving and Christmas, as they do everything in their power to avoid hearing Mariah Carey sing, “All I want for Christmas is you,” which seems next to impossible to do nowadays, but for those of you who still managed to pull it off whether intentionally or not, “Congratulations on a job well done.”

And then I heard this strangest one, from a pastor of all people, who does everything in his power this time of year to avoid hearing, “Jesus is the reason for the season,” which may sound incredibly sacrilegious, especially for one of the clergy sort, and perhaps should not even be mentioned from a pulpit on Christmas Eve, but there is an explanation forthcoming. Regardless, a couple years ago, he somehow managed to make it all the way to December 23, when he was walking into a gas station to purchase 20 lottery tickets as stocking stuffers for his family. And then, lo and behold, as he was making his way back to his car, the Salvation Army bellringer...got him. “Jesus is the reason for the season.” And it’s not that the Reverend doesn’t appreciate the well intentions behind the statement; it’s just that if you actually keep going in the Gospel of Luke, there may be something else going on that makes this night all the more spectacular.

Because, the way the story is told, Jesus comes for looked-down-upon shepherds, the sick who have been given up on altogether, fishermen who are desperately struggling to make ends meet, the ones who believe their sin is far too great to receive any mercy at all, the hungry not just for the food, but for the grace, the ones who weep as if they have lost everything of meaning in their life, foreign Samaritans who the high and mighty religious people won’t do a thing for, the ones who feel as if they are thoroughly lost with no hope left whatsoever, and even a supposed inner-circle of friends who betray and deny him: Jesus comes for all of them and spilling over to everyone else. The way Luke insists on telling the story, the reason for the season is them, the reason for the season is you.

You who are here out of pure and utter obligation, Jesus came to life for you. You who love everything about this season: the trappings, the music, the lights, the stores, Jesus has come for you. You who cannot wait for all of this to be over: the chaos, the commercialization, the never-ending to-do list, Jesus was born for you, too. You who cherish this night with the candles and the carols and the time with family that you do not get otherwise, Jesus was brought to life for you. And you for whom this holiday is an immense personal struggle for reasons you are not willing to share out loud, the reason for all of this Gospel in the flesh is you.

Now, I will be the first to admit, I was a bit taken back when I first heard this other pastor and his seemingly anti-Christmas idea. Because, I also appreciate the music and the lights and the traditions, too. And it’s just been a part of our seemingly holy fabric for decades, “Jesus is the

reason for the season.” You cannot mess with that. Alter that and you might very well ruin all of this.

And maybe it is just semantics, because yes, Christ was born to bring all of this to fruition. But maybe there still is something to it. Maybe there is something about the ultimate Gospel authored by God to be proclaimed tonight. Maybe there is something even more spectacular about all of this. Because I know God’s love goes far, but I’m not sure I want it to go that far. I know God’s grace for us goes way too far in giving us credit, and I don’t know if I want it to go any further, because, well, look at us with what we do at times to each other, to the world. Maybe I don’t want God to make all of this hope, all of this peace, all of this joy, all of this heavenly love be about us. But I have a feeling that’s exactly what God had in mind all along: that, evidently, this Christ child came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a gift for the whole world. It might be a far greater challenge than trying not to hear Wham or Mariah Carey this time of year: to even consider just how far God is willing to go for us, and for you, too. But is it possible that God can and has gone exactly that far: that, in spite of our most conventional wisdom, that the ultimate author of the Gospel insists that you are the reason for the season. You are the reason that heaven could not contain God’s love any longer. I’m still coming around to it, and maybe that takes a lifetime to accept for some, but evidently, he came to dwell in the place and the people that we sometimes give up on altogether. For some reason beyond any conventional wisdom, God has not. And Christ has come to dwell not just in a manger stall, but in the depths of our heart, and your heart, too. And for some reason, he has no intention of leaving then, now, and forevermore. So, for that Greatest News for all of us, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!