

“Skin in the Game”

Luke 2:1-20

Series: The Promise of Christmas Week 3: I will save you.

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The Woodside Church

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If you're like me, every year you try to make it the perfect Christmas – the perfect tree, the perfect decorations, the perfect gifts for the ones you love. And that holds true for Christmas services here at Woodside. For months we've been working hard to make these Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services perfect for all of you. That includes trying to give the perfect sermon. I'm committed to giving you my best, I've invest myself in sharing the Good News, as they say I've got skin in the game. The truth is it never turns out perfectly at home or at church. Despite all my preparations, something always goes wrong.

Couple of years ago on Christmas Eve I was up on the stage of the Vineyard preaching my heart out and I noticed everyone was really paying attention - especially the band members in the front row. Their eyes were wide with amazement. Their mouths were open with awe. They were literally sitting on the edge of their seats. I thought, “Wow. I must be killing it because usually, when I'm preaching, the band members are reading their bulletins or falling asleep. Tonight I'm really on fire!” The second I was done, they instantly rushed the stage – I thought they wanted to give their lives to Jesus. Then I discovered why. I wasn't on fire. The Advent wreath behind me was about to go up in flames. They snuffed out the candles and saved Christmas. Then they told me: “Next year have taller candles or shorter sermons.”

Christmas is filled with promises – promised gifts, promised gatherings, promised good times. Every year we promise one another that this will be a promising Christmas, perhaps the perfect Christmas. Yet in the rush and hurry of the season that promise is often broken. Four-year-old Becky was caught in the whirlwind of activities leading up to Christmas. Her Dad was busy wrapping gifts and had no time for her. Her Mother was so stressed with preparing for the celebration she almost broke out into tears several times. Becky tried to help but she always seemed to be under foot and in the way. Finally, near tears herself, she was hustled off to bed. Kneeling beside her bed to say the Lord's Prayer, her words betrayed what was in her heart. She prayed, “Forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us.”

Maybe this time of year makes us think about all the broken promises in the past.

- You promised “I do” at the altar. But now you or your spouse don't.
- You've heard it a million times: “I promise to stop drinking. This is it.” Then comes one million and one.
- “I won't tell a soul.” So why does everyone know your secret?
- “I love you all equally.” It sure doesn't seem that way.

- “Don’t worry, you won’t be in this next round of layoffs.” Now you are sending out resumes.
- “We’ll spend our golden years together.” Now you are all alone.

We learn to live with a lot of broken promises. One of the most painful is a parent who doesn’t show you love. He grew up in a dilapidated house with disintegrating walls and no hot water. The unstable house mirrored his unstable family. His father was brooding and unbalanced. Without any rules or boundaries, at the age of five and six, he stayed up to three in the morning and slept until three in the afternoon. He ate whatever he wanted. Worst of all, his father could never say, “I love you.” If the boy said, “I love you Pops” the best his father could manage was “Eh, me, too.” When he was older he called his father “a mess.” Yet Bruce Springsteen realized this lack of love, this broken relationship, had made him a mess. Whenever someone got close to him, whenever someone tried to love him, he cut them off.

I wanted to kill what loved me because I couldn't stand being loved. It infuriated and outraged me, someone having the temerity to love me—nobody does that ... and I'll show you why. It was ugly and a red flag for the poison I had running through my veins, my genes. Part of me was rebelliously proud of my emotionally violent behavior, always cowardly and aimed at the women in my life.¹

Some of us live with so many broken promises we don’t trust anyone. So when God promises to lift us from discouragement, to deliver us from our darkness, when God promises to send us a Savior at Christmas, when God promises to guide us through the difficulties of this life and into the next life, we doubt it and dismiss it. How do we know God won’t break His promise?

God will keep His promise to save us because He’s got skin in the game. He’s invested more than His time and money. At Christmas, God pulled on skin and became human. He entered our “game” here on earth. He came in person to save us. What does that mean?

First, it means **God Promises to Be With Us**. The angel said to Joseph, Mary’s fiancé:

Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”) (Matthew 1:20-23).

What was it like for God the Son to descend from the safety of heaven to our dangerous planet?

In his everyday life, Charles Foster is a respected veterinarian, a practicing lawyer, and a teacher at Oxford University in England. But he also has a very unusual hobby. Every so often Foster tries to live like a badger. Yes, like one of those dark-dwelling, tunnel-making, rodent and worm-eating mammals. On a friend's farm, he made a 15-foot long human-sized badger hole. Like badgers he sleeps during the day and prowls around at night. He gets low to the ground and

¹ David Brooks, "How Music Made Bruce Springsteen," The Atlantic (November 2016)

crawls on his hands and knees. He also blindfolds his eyes (because badgers have bad eyesight) and eats earthworms.² Now as strange as this sounds, imagine what it was like for:

- The Infinite God to be surrounded by the shell of a human body
- The Eternal God to be trapped in time
- The Almighty God to be dependent on the care of a teen mother.
- The Creator God to live on a tiny pin-point planet
- The Immortal God to face and endure death

The word Incarnation literally means “in skin.” When God put on skin it proved He was fully committed to keeping His promise to save us. He had skin in the game. As strange as it may seem we are a lot closer to the badger than God is to us. Yet still He came.

Why? He came to be with us in our struggles, to comfort us in our grief, to lead us through our darkness. Long ago God promised,

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

It was an incredibly risky, dangerous move. But God came down because you can't love someone long distance. You have to get close. You have to come near.

Some people dismiss this like it's no big deal. For the last twenty-eight years my sister Carolyn has created and produced cards and gifts for Hallmark at their headquarters in Kansas City. During her stay at my house last summer we went over to the local Hallmark store by Kohl's. As we walked through the aisles she pointed out one card after another that she worked on and told me stories about the artists who created other cards on the racks. When we went up to make our purchase I told the young woman behind the counter, “You have a celebrity today. My sister here is one of the artists who makes the cards in your store. She's traveled all this way from the Hallmark headquarters in Kansas City. She creates some of the stuff on your shelves.” The woman behind the counter paused and said, “Huh. That'll be \$19.95 please.” God put on skin and got into our game but many people were unimpressed.

I don't blame them. If all God did was come here and feel sorry for us that wouldn't be enough. When I'm sick and I call the doctor I don't want her to just sympathize with me. I want her to do something about it. That's why **God Promises to Save Us**. The angel said to Joseph:

Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21)

On the night of the Child's birth the angel told the shepherds:

² Ira Glass, "Being a Badger," This American Life podcast (9-9-16).

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)

I often wonder what Mary, Joseph and the shepherds thought the first time they saw the baby in the manger. They expected a wise and Wonderful Counselor, a Powerful Warrior, a Mighty King. What they got was a helpless, homeless son of an uneducated carpenter. How can this kid save them from oppression, disease, and death? And yet, when He grew up, this Child taught with the wisdom of God. He showed us how to live and forgive. This Child displayed the power of God. He healed the sick, drove out demons, fed multitudes. This Child ruled with the might of God. He calmed the waves, stilled the storms, and raised the dead.

But if that was all He did it would not have been enough. For disease and death, terror and oppression, hunger and hate, earthquakes and war still clutch and embrace our race. The reason God pulled on skin and entered our game was to save us from our selfishness, to save us from our sinfulness, to save us from ourselves. We could not do that. No prophet, priest, philosopher or king can do that. Only the Lord has the power to save. That's why the angel said "Today a Savior has been born to you; he is...the Lord." When this Child grew up, the most wonderful, powerful, almighty thing He did came when He took our place, when He died on the Cross. He took our sins. He shed His blood. He died our death. And we received His eternal life.

In his book *Written in Blood*, Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained she suffered from the same disease the boy recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same blood type, the boy was the ideal donor. "Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked. Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, "Sure, for my sister." Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room--Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when they met, Johnny grinned. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny's smile faded. He watched the blood flow through the tube.

With the procedure almost over, his voice slightly shaky, Johnny broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny hesitated, why his lip trembled when he agreed to donate his blood. He thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he was willing to make the sacrifice. Thankfully, Johnny didn't have to die to save his sister. Each of us however, has a condition more serious than Mary's, and it required Jesus to give not just his blood, but his life.

How do we know God will keep His promise to save us? He put on skin and came into our game. He refused to save His own skin so we could be free from sin's deadly game. But that's not the end of God's promises.

God Promises to Bring Us Home. On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus said:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and

take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:1-6)

On Easter the open door of Jesus’ empty tomb means there is an open door to heaven for us. When Jesus rose in the skin of His resurrected body it means the rules of the game have changed, that sin, death and the devil can’t stop us. That Jesus is the Way to the Father.

We read this passage yesterday at the service for a dear saint of Woodside: Flavia Dardes. It is painful to lose a parent and it’s even more sorrowful to lose one at Christmas time. I have stood with many of you as you said goodbye to your beloved by the graveside. And yet, even in this darkest hour, God gives us hope. For those who place their trust in Jesus, as Flavia did, this goodbye is not final, this separation is not forever, this is not the end of the story. For decades Flavia Dardes was one of the most respected Realtors in Bucks County. She helped countless clients find their dream homes. Yet last Saturday, her Lord Jesus came and took her to the home He prepared just for her in His Father’s house. She’s simply gone home for Christmas. That’s the hope we have when we put our lives in Jesus’s hands.

Tonight you can claim God’s promises to you. He promises to lift you you’re your discouragement. He promises to lead you through your darkness. He promises to save you from your sins. And at the end of your days He promises to take you home. All it takes is a promise you make to commit or recommit your life to Jesus. If you’ve done that before then make a promise to join a Growth Group as Flavia and so many others have. If you are in a Growth Group then make a promise to invite others to follow Jesus and to serve others in need. Jesus’ tomb is empty but His promises are not.

Kelly James was sitting on the couch next to his wife Karen watching television when, completely out of the blue, he said, “I can't wait to go to heaven.” Karen was shocked. Not because of his faith. They both firmly believed in Jesus. She was surprised because the show had nothing to do with heaven. Kelly added, “Yeah, that's going to be really cool.' Karen said, "Can you hold off? Can we wait?”

Kelly’s curiosity about heaven was not out of character. The 48-year-old landscape architect was always up for an adventure. In his 25 years of climbing mountains Kelly scaled Mount McKinley, the Eiger, and over 20 ascents of Mount Rainier. On December 9, 2006, Kelly and two friends set out to climb Mount Hood in Oregon. A thousand feet below the summit one of the climbers fell. While rescuing his companion, Kelly was injured. As they attempted to descend a horrendous blizzard hit. They had to find a snow cave where Kelly could rest while the other two went for help. That’s when Kelly James called Karen with his cell phone.

“You gotta hold on, OK?” she told him. "Because I got the Christmas tree all decorated. It's so pretty. I can't wait for you to see it. Just stay awake, OK? I love you."

That's how our journey ended. We didn't know it was going to end there.

The search and rescue mission grabbed national attention. But tragically all three hikers perished.

In an interview, Katie Couric asked Karen James if her faith in God was tested by this. Sitting in front of the Christmas tree she described in her last call with Kelly, Karen said,

Kelly had this little ornament, and he's had it since he was little. It's a manger. It's always the tradition that our son Jack and Kelly put it on the tree together. And so I said this Christmas, we're going to put that ornament on the tree. One of the things we really understand about Christmas is that little baby born in a barn is the reason our family has so much strength now. I miss him terribly. I'm really sad our journey is over, (but it's only) for a while.³

Because of that baby born in the manger, Karen knows she will see Kelly again.

It's no game. Let God save your skin.

³ "Climber's Widow Tells Her Story," CBS Evening News (12-21-06)