

Sermon for Sunday, December 25, 2011
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Jesus Came to Seek the Lost
1 Timothy 1:15, Luke 19:10

1Tim. 1:15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst.

Luke 19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

In 1492 Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic, hoping to find a short, safe water route to India and China. In school we heard that Europe's monarchs thought Columbus would sail off the edge of the world. In fact, from the late middle ages onward, educated people knew the world was a sphere.¹ No one thought Columbus would sail into the abyss. They did think he would run out of food before he reached China and for good reason: Columbus estimated the distance between Spain and Japan at 3,000 miles. The true distance is 13,000 miles. Most educated people knew Columbus' estimate was off.

Columbus was a great sailor and an ambitious man. He cooked the numbers to sell his voyage to gain riches and fame. By a combination of greed, persistence, skill, faith, and luck, Columbus *came* to the new world. Eventually he realized that he had discovered a new world; he had accomplished more than he intended.

In 1520 Magellan launched an expedition to circumnavigate the globe and to claim lands he discovered. Magellan also sought riches and fame by establishing a trade route to the Spice Islands. Magellan did become famous, but accomplished none of the rest of his goals. He died in a battle in the South Pacific. Of 270 men who started his journey, just seventeen survived. They were rich and Magellan was famous but dead; he did not accomplish his goals.

Consider our expedition to the moon in 1969. The cold war, the desire to control outer space was a big motive. But we also took the trip almost the way people climbed the summit of Everest in 1953 – to see if it could be done. Arriving was a goal in itself.

Jesus also took a great journey long ago. He had the calculations that Columbus lacked. He fulfilled his objectives, unlike Magellan. He had a clarity of purpose missing from trips to the poles, mountains, and the moon.

Today we celebrate Jesus' journey to earth. All fulfilled the plan of the Father, Son and Spirit. He landed in Bethlehem, in the fullness of time, at the right time. Jesus knew his purpose and followed it. Knew what his journey entailed, how it would end, what it would accomplish.

We sometimes approach Jesus' birth as if Columbus or Armstrong were a model – as if his arrival were an end in itself. It is a marvel that Jesus, the Son of God, took flesh and became

¹ Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 1991.

human, even an infant, without abandoning his powers or purposes. He didn't come as humans went to the moon, just to accomplish it. He came with a purpose.

The prophecies of Jesus' birth already state that purpose. Micah said: "But you, Bethlehem... though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel."

The Lord said that the deliverer would bring justice and good order to his people. Jeremiah: "The days are coming when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land." He will be called "The Lord Our Righteousness" (Jer 23:5-6). He continues "For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (29:11).

All through his ministry, Jesus knew his role in God's plan. He knew he would teach, preach, heal and rebuke. He knew he would suffer hatred, pointless opposition, unjust hatred, and finally death. Jesus made his designs clear in a series of statements about his incarnation. They begin with the phrase, "I came to."

1. I came to fulfill the law (Matt 5:17)

He first spoke of his purpose when he explained the law to his disciples. He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." So Jesus came to fulfill the law, in two ways. First, he described its full meaning. Not merely obeying the legal precepts, holding hands back from stealing or striking. He teaches us to keep God's law with hands, mind and emotions. To control our hands and our desires. No murder and no anger, either.

Jesus knows the law and obeyed it in every way, so he fulfilled it a second time. His obedience became a Christmas gift to all who believe. Instead of giving the gift as a present, he wraps us in the gift, so that when he looks at us, he sees that righteousness, not our sin. He fulfilled the law for us. If you received a sweater and pull it on, think of this. You are clothed in Jesus' righteousness.

2. I came to call sinners (Matt 9:13)

Because he knows we don't keep the law, Jesus reaches out to us and calls us to himself. One day Jesus was eating dinner with a group of tax collectors – as a group, they were corrupt. They collaborated with Roman occupiers and so betrayed their own people, collecting taxes to fund Roman armies.

When the Pharisees saw this, they questioned Jesus. He said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." The "holy" Pharisees couldn't see why Jesus shared meals with such people. But that was why he came – to call sinners to repentance.

3. I came to bring a sword (Matt 10:34)

Jesus kept visiting sinners and that caused problems. But in a way, he came to cause problems. He was divisive, in the best sense. People heard his teaching, saw his methods and they had to take sides - for him or against him (Matt 10:32-33). He said, "Do not suppose that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother.... Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me..." (10:34-37). Again, "I have come to bring fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled" (Luke 12:49).

4. I came to testify to the truth (John 18:37)

The desire to kindle fire, to bring a sword clashes with thoughts of a sweet, mild baby lying in a manger. But the manger was just the starting point. He came to tell the truth without fear, and that always upsets some people. He said, "For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (John 18:37).

When God tells the truth it can be painful. Proverbs 20 says: "Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?" Men claim to be good and faithful, but who is faithful, all the way down? No one! So Jesus came to testify to our need and to meet it. Jesus knows what is (and is not) in us.

Jesus came to fulfill the law, to call sinners to repentance, and to testify to the truth, even if that causes division, and to seek and to save the lost. That is what he begins to declare in the next "I came" saying.

5. The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:10)

Jesus' purposes are never so clear as in the day when he met a man named Zaccheus. Jesus was on his way through the city of Jericho, shortly before his crucifixion (19:1). A crowd surrounded Jesus. It is hard for anyone to hear him, see him, or get near him, but Zaccheus especially wanted to see Jesus, although the odds were against him. (19:2-3).

Zaccheus had no friend to save him a space. He had no friends because he was a chief tax collector. He was Jewish, but he organized tax collections for the Romans that occupied and oppressed his people. As he collected, Zaccheus collected extra taxes and kept plenty for himself. So he had no friends.

Zaccheus was rich and traitorous and short. (In fact he was a wee little man and a wee little man was he.) But he had heard about Jesus and wanted to see and hear him. As Jesus approached, Zaccheus did something strange. He climbed up a tree, so he could see Jesus (19:4). It's good to climb trees, but it's something children do. It looked strange and what if he fell?

Jesus came to Zaccheus' spot and looked up at him. They had never met, but Jesus knew him by name and called him by name: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today" (19:5). It's a small miracle that Jesus knew his name, but the next moment is just as striking: Jesus' invited himself to Zaccheus's house.

Think: Jesus is a stranger to Zaccheus, but he says, "I'll be coming to your house for dinner tonight." Have you ever done that, since you were seven years old? No. Has anyone ever invited himself to your house? Probably not. In fact, it's stronger than that. Jesus doesn't invite himself to Zaccheus' house, he commanded Zaccheus to hurry out of the tree and take him to his home at once.

But there is more. Jesus not only invited himself to Zaccheus's house, he invited himself to the home of a traitor to Israel. Every law and custom of the day said holy men and teachers never went to the homes of sinners. So Jesus upset the crowd. They said, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" But Jesus was on a mission. He left heaven and came to earth to seek sinners.

This is why Jesus became a man – so he could walk into a town, scan the crowd, see a man and say, "We need to talk." Zaccheus was rich and powerful and lost as a baboon in the arctic. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. People like Zaccheus. Jesus' strange act surpassed Zaccheus's fondest dream. He had wanted to see Jesus. Now he will host Jesus for a meal. He welcomed Jesus with joy (19:6).

One of our favorite Christmas hymns says, "Joy to the world, *the Lord is come*." The Lord came and still comes into people's lives. He entered Zaccheus' life and our lives. Jesus saw Zaccheus' sin, but like a good physician, he planned to heal it.

We don't know what Jesus said to Zaccheus, but he repented that very day. He realized that he loved riches, lived for wealth. He realized his love of wealth had led him into sin. So, when he repented, he said, "Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

By giving away his wealth, he showed he wasn't living for wealth any more. By repaying, four-fold, any acts of fraud, he showed he was truly sorry – with actions, not words.

Not everyone is willing to act. Jesus met another rich man, a little earlier. He also claimed to have any interest in spiritual life. But he was unwilling to make any changes. Zaccheus did change and so proved he had entered the Kingdom of God. His faith was real. Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house, for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

That's why we are here. Jesus did not come as an adventure traveler, seeing the sights of earth in the Roman era. Jesus came to seek sinners - like you and me. We come today to worship him. He came to accomplish a goal – and we are that goal. He came to seek and to

save the lost. If we come to him it's because he first came to us. That is why we worship and adore Christ the Lord.

6. Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20)

"I came to give my life as a ransom." A ransom is a purchase price paid to release someone from bondage or slavery. The price here is not financial. Left to ourselves, we are somewhat like slaves. Slaves can't escape bondage. No one holds us in iron chains. We're in bondage to sin. We can't escape our tendency to think of ourselves first. We sin and we can't stop it.

7. Jesus came into the world to save sinners

The apostle Paul summarizes everything in one sentence, one faithful saying: Christ Jesus came into world to save sinners.

- Christ – the title. Anointed for a purpose, a mission.
- Jesus – the name means "The Lord saves."
- Jesus came – implies his pre-existence. He arrived from somewhere.
- To the world. The sphere of humanity, its normal life and its need. If Jesus and disciples lived today, they would be driving two old mini-vans, Peter calling shotgun.
- To save sinners, of whom I am (not was) the first or foremost.

Paul was indeed a great sinner. He persecuted the church, tossed Christians in jail. He tried to force Christians to blaspheme. He tried to eradicate the church. He acted in ignorance – he thought he served God – but he was a great sinner.

By this time, however, Paul is an apostle. He traveled the world, suffered prison, beatings, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, and shipwreck in the service of Jesus. Yet he refused to distance it from himself from his past or his sin.

He does not say "I was" but "I am" the chief of sinners. Our need of Jesus should always loom large in our own eyes. As a present reality. This is the gospel: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, such as Paul and you and me.

The gospel message: Jesus came to earth and did what he intended – he reconciled a lost race to himself. There was more to come at the incarnation – the cross and the resurrection. There still is more to come – we await the return of Jesus, when his peace will fully reign on earth.

One of our goals in Christmas shopping, is to buy something that will actually enter a life. If the gift is music, we want our friend to play it over and over. If it's clothing, a game or a cookbook, we want it to become a staple – one that's used again and again. Who wants to give a camera, perfume, or a bicycle that just gets shoved around the closet. Unused gifts testify that we can't always fulfill our plans. It's the human condition. That's why it's easy to get used exercise equipment.

The Bible says we "do not even know what will happen tomorrow." As we look to the new year, we ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (James 4:14-15). We do not know what tomorrow will bring (Prov 27:1, cf. 16:1-4).

We make plans that we never fulfill. We also accomplish things we never intended. We drift into things that mean far more to us than we could ever have guessed - a book club or sports group which bring lasting friendships. Ten years later, we see the happy accident as God's hand.

But Jesus did not drift to earth. Nor did he come with one plan and fall into another. The Bible says, "The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps 33:10-11). Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That is the purpose of his journey to earth, 2000 years ago – blessing and peace to all who know it, deep in their hearts.

What then? First, let's give thanks quietly today. For the greatest gift – that God came and fulfilled his plan.

Second, let's live confidently, come what may, trusting that God has good plan for us this year. Not always plainly visible, but a plan.

Third, pray for one person to know the plan this year.