

Welcome to the Birthday Celebration of Jesus Christ! Pinch yourself. Feel that!? Yep, that confirms it. You are awake. It's not a dream. It is truly here: Christmas 2006. Take a moment to tell somebody next to you that you are glad to be at the Birthday Party of Jesus tonight!

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Jesus has brought you some gifts tonight. That is the theme of tonight's message: "The Gifts Jesus Has Brought For You."

When my kids were young, and we still had "kids" birthday parties, I learned something about gift giving. I noticed that even though it was Matthew's birthday – or one of those other three kids – I noticed that the invited guests went home with a stash of presents.

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I asked my wife about this mystery. "How come we are giving all of these presents to the guests? Why is this costing me so much?"

My wife said something like this: "Gracious and kind and generous husband of mine and father of Matthew – and those other three kids – these invited children need gifts, too. They need something to bring home with them." "Oh," I said.

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When Jesus came into the world he was given gifts.

- ✓ The angels put on a concert of music in the sky,;
- ✓ the shepherds shared their wonder and awe;
- ✓ the Wise Men brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh;
- ✓ others in Bethlehem brought swaddling clothes, a warm blanket, perhaps a little wooden toy for Jesus to hold.

But this, too, is true: when Jesus was born, our gracious and kind and generous Father in Heaven sent gifts to us. He still does this night as well.

Invited guest to this birthday party of Jesus Christ, the Father wants you to go home this night with gifts. I want to remind you what those gifts are.

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1. *The first Gift you can take home tonight: The Light Shines Again!*

One of the familiar Christmas readings is this: *“The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.”*

[Isaiah 9:2] What does that mean?

Think about regular darkness. Deep Darkness can be caused by many things. The battery in our flashlight can be neglected and lose power; the electricity source can fail in a storm; we can neglect to pay the electric bill, we can shut the door on the source of light.

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Think of Spiritual Darkness. Spiritual Darkness can also be caused by many things.

- Spiritual darkness can be caused by our actions.

A story about a poor action on my part: All of our family is home for Christmas. I saw one of my sons whom I had not seen for a while. He was sitting in the kitchen, just freshly home from college. I looked at him, and do you know what the first thing I said to him was? I will tell you. The very first thing I said to him after he came home was: “You look like a bum.”

Now, it was true! But that was not the best first thing to say. Fortunately my son has a sense of humor and he said, “You’re looking good too, Dad!” It could have been much worse. Don’t greet your family as a bunch of bums. The wrong words – the wrong action.

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There is much worse in me; much darker things. There are much darker things in you as well. Think back over the past year. Whom have you hurt, and how? Where have you failed by your words and deeds? How have you brought darkness into a relationship, or into a family, or into a workplace, or into a friendship gone sour?

You need the gift of light. I need the gift of light. The gift of being able to start over, the gift of acting in different ways, the gift of being forgiven and making amends for those dark actions. That is a gift of Jesus.

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- Spiritual darkness can be caused by our thoughts.

God says: "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts... my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts." [Isaiah 55:8-9]

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I wish my thoughts were always those high thoughts. But...

- ✓ The freeway narrows down from one lane to two and that person pulls in right in front of me... I think: "I hope they get a flat tire."
  - ✓ Grocery shopping before Christmas. Two grocery carts are left. Me and a woman approach the last cart. Why must I be born a man! "Ladies first," I say. She smirks – she smirks! – and goes on her merry way. I think: "I hope she has a grocery cart accident."
  - ✓ I walk past the inspirational book shelf and read the words: "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts. My thoughts are higher than your thoughts."
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The darkness closes in as I think about some of my thoughts. You have those thoughts as well. That is why Jesus came. You need a gift tonight: a gift of light.

You need a chance to think higher thoughts. You need a chance to let go of resentful thoughts and angry thoughts and soul destroying thoughts.

That is Jesus gift to you tonight. Take it home with you. Start over. That is what Christmas is about: it is about grace and forgiveness. The light is here again.

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- Spiritual darkness can be caused by our cold shoulder.

A world-wide study was recently done on what people tend to worry about. Around the world the majority of people list work as their greatest worry – having a job, making a living.

In the United States the item that leads the list of things we worry about was – money: having enough money.

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I thought about that as I was looking at the following statistics:

- ✓ Every day 16,000 children die from hunger-related causes--one child every five seconds; 720 during the time we worship tonight.
- ✓ More than 1 billion people currently earn less than \$1 per day.

✓ Every year 11 million children die before they reach their fifth birthday.

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The Bible says: *“Give generously to the poor, not grudgingly, for the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do. There will always be some in the land who are poor. That is why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.”* [Deuteronomy 15:10-11]

It is so easy to give the cold shoulder – to step away from caring. It is not so easy to do that when God gives us the warm shoulder. We remember how much God loves us on this night.

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Jesus brings that gift to you tonight – the light to be a generous and caring person in so many ways. You need to take that gift home again this evening. Maybe you need to start in your own home. Maybe you need to start over.

One of the gifts of Jesus is the light he brings to our everyday lives. Jesus said: *“I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.”* [John 8:12]

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2. *The second Gift you can take home tonight: Streams in the Desert!*

Another of the readings often read during the Christmas season is this one from Isaiah: *“Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland. The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.”* [Isaiah 35:6-7] What does that mean?

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When my brother and I were visiting my Dad a couple of years ago down in Mesa, we would ditch my Dad in the afternoons and go hiking in the AZ desert. It was wintertime, and the desert was dry, brown, crusted, hard.

Someone was telling me that in the Springtime that same desert is alive with color and life. I have never experienced that time of year in AZ. So I said: “No way!” They said: “True!”

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Many of you here have been to the AZ desert. How of many of you have been to the desert area around Phoenix? How many you have seen the normally dry, brown, crusted, hard desert come alive with color and life? No way...

In a word, what is needed for the desert to bloom?

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The Bible tells us that we can be like a desert in the summer, fall, and winter. We can be dry and crusty and hard – a desert place.

- The spiritual desert can be caused by illness.

Fearful and anxious can be the words used to describe the feelings of an illness. We feel alone and lonely.

Jesus can bring a note of hope – a refreshing of the spirit – into our anxious hearts. You can bring that home with you tonight.

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- The spiritual desert can be caused by death.

Some of us are going to have people missing from our tables this year. Depressed and lonely can be the words to describe the feelings left over from the death of a loved one.

But Jesus can bring a note of hope – a refreshing of the spirit – into our sad hearts. This also you can bring home with you tonight, knowing that there will be a time of homecoming before the Father's throne. Believe it.

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- The spiritual desert can be caused by sin and guilt.

Some of us have not been going to Church regularly – and we wonder what happened. Some of us feel like we have drifted far from a relationship with God – and we want to restart the relationship. Tired and despairing can be the words used to describe the dryness of being separated from God.

But Jesus can bring a note of hope – a refreshing of the spirit – into our weary hearts.

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Someone said to me, “I have not been going to church like I want to. Don’t yell at me, Pastor!”

I said, “I will not yell at you, and I do not believe that God is going to yell at you, either. But I think God is waiting for the time when you are ready to re-engage with him. Then you will hear God and the angels shouting for joy!”

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This also you can bring home with you tonight – that if you have been disconnected from God, and you are feeling dry and crusted, Jesus can bring a springtime into your life: streams in the desert.

Jesus brings the gift of life – symbolized by water – into our daily lives. Jesus said: *“Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’”*

[John 7:38]

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Let me leave a flash-light and a water-bottle here tonight – a symbol of light, and a symbol of life. They are simple reminders of two of the many gifts Jesus brings to this Birthday Party tonight.

Take the gifts of light and life home with you this Christmas night. Jesus wants you to have them. It is why he came. Receive the gifts as you receive Jesus. Amen.