

**Menlo Park Presbyterian Church**  
**950 Santa Cruz Avenue, Menlo Park, CA 94025 650-323-8600**

Series:  
Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 53:4-5

December 23, 2011

**“Christmas Eve”**  
**John Ortberg**

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A lot of articles have been written over the last week or so about what happened during 2011. Frankly, I think we're ready for a new year, don't you? These have been kind of a rough 12 months. Employment is down, housing prices down, consumer confidence down, jobs among young people down. There has been a debt crisis in Europe. There has been a collapse in Greece. There's doubt over the euro. The stock market just seems to be broken. Congress just seems to be broken. Political parties seem to be unable to agree on anything. The national debt got bigger this year. Faith that we're on the right track got smaller.

There is unrest and uncertainty from Russia, to the Middle East uprisings, to North Korea. Scandals from steroids to college football have hit new highs. Reality show standards have hit new lows. Economic stagnation is lasting longer than anybody thought possible. Celebrity marriages are lasting shorter than anybody thought possible. It got so bad, this year when *Time* magazine had to name a Person of the Year like they always do, for the year 2011, they didn't choose an individual; they chose The Protester. The person who protests is the Person of the Year for *Time* magazine.

They asked, "Is there a global tipping point for frustration?" Everywhere it seems people said they'd had enough. It makes you wonder when you read those year-end news stories... *Is there any good news anywhere?* We're here tonight because there is. Here it is: Love is still a gift. Love still defeats hate. Hope is still stronger than despair. There is a God who still answers prayer, and his mercies are still new every morning. His forgiveness is still stronger than sin, and his guidance is still greater than human confusion.

His promises remain more certain than human fear. The cross is still sufficient for grace for us. The tomb is still empty, and the Holy Spirit is still quickening the minds and hearts of human beings. All this is true because 2,000 years ago, a baby named Jesus was born in a town named Bethlehem. Governments, economies, civilizations, and cultures keep coming and going, but the kingdom Jesus started is still spreading, and his light shines brighter today than it did when it started. That is why in this world in 2011, there is good news tonight. That's why we're here.

But this good news is not reserved just for people whose lives are going great. Christmas can be wonderful, but Christmas can also hurt. Sometimes in our culture, we get such an idealized picture of what the perfect holiday is supposed to look like that we forget Jesus did not come to a perfect world filled with perfect people. That world would not have needed him. He came for a broken world filled with broken people.

There's a wonderful statement about God way back in the Old Testament that says, "*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*" I thought the end of this year 2011 would be a good time to talk about how Jesus is good news for broken people, because part of the miracle of Jesus becoming human is that God himself was coming real close in the flesh to the brokenhearted.

Maybe you're having financial problems this year. Maybe you're trying to find a job, or you're afraid of losing your home, or you can't pay your bills. Did you ever think about this? When Jesus came to earth, he didn't live in a mansion or a palace; he was born into a peasant family. The Bible says, "*...though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor...*" If you have financial problems, Jesus is good news for you today.

Maybe you're feeling lonely. All the celebrations around Christmastime can sometimes make it harder because it reminds you how alone you are. Jesus knows all about being alone. At the moment of the greatest crisis of his life, all of his friends deserted him. One of them, Judas, betrayed him. He actually said on the cross he felt deserted by God: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus would say to you tonight, "I know the pain of aloneness." Jesus is good news for alone people.

Maybe you have family issues. Maybe your family is not perfect. Maybe it is. Maybe on December 25 you will sit around the table with a family of perfectly healthy, emotionally mature, well-adjusted, normal people. But researchers say every family has at least one maladjusted wacko, and if you look around the table on Christmas and you can't figure out who it is...it's you.

Maybe *family* is kind of a complicated word for you. Maybe there's some brokenness or disappointment around that word. A lot of people don't think much about this: Jesus had a family, and they did not always understand him. In fact, after he had begun his ministry, we're actually told in the gospel of Mark, "*When his family heard about this, [what Jesus was doing] they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'*" They thought he was out of his mind. He knows all about families. You have family problems? Jesus is good news for you.

Maybe 2011 has hit you with other news. It has, for whatever reason, for a lot of people in Nance' and my world. Maybe you just got a diagnosis from the doctor that's turning your world upside down. Jesus died when he was only 33 years old. Maybe a message from your spouse is wringing your guts inside out. Maybe you have been dreading this Christmas because there's going to be an empty place, an empty chair at a table where there used to be somebody you love, and it just pains your heart.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted. This Jesus knows all about rejection and failure and disappointment and pain and death. The good news is, Jesus came for broken people, and now I want to tell you how he is at his best when brokenness is at its worst. We're giving a book away this Christmas called *Unbroken*. It is the story of Louis Zamperini. Unbelievable book. It was the *New York Times* number one bestseller. *Time* magazine named it the Nonfiction Book of the Year.

If you've already read that book *Unbroken* (because a lot of people have), we have another one, a book called *Devil at My Heels*. That's the book Louis himself wrote about his life story. We only have one request. We have just enough books to give out one per household. So just to make sure we're all clear on this, if there's one person in your household, you get...one book. If there are 10 people in your household you get...one book. Make sure you coordinate who the book-getter is in your household, because you don't want to start out the year by ripping off a church. It's a bad way to start. It messes up your prayer life. It's not a good idea.

Anyway, this book *Unbroken* is about as suspenseful a story as I have ever read. Louis was a troubled kid. Kind of got saved because he found out he could run fast. He became an Olympian track star. He actually went to the Berlin Olympics in Nazi Germany in the 30s, and then signed up for World War II. He was in a plane that got shot down over the ocean. He ended up on a raft, and survived longer on a raft in the

ocean than anybody had previously in recorded history. He literally killed a shark with a pair of pliers. Unbelievable story.

Then he knew, after 90-some days, the euphoria of getting rescued by a ship. Then he knew the horror of finding out that ship belonged to the enemy. He got thrown into a POW camp run by a guard who became globally notorious for his sadism, and Louis was his number one most hated prisoner. Torture, disease, starvation, and you wonder as you read through this book, *Can anybody survive this?*

I don't want to spoil the story for you, but he does. He comes back to the States and you just get this sense of relief: *I can't believe he made it through.* Then is the worst part. Just when you feel relief, his life falls apart, only now from the inside. What beatings, and bullets, and war, and sharks, and starvation, and disease couldn't do, anger and bitterness, alcohol, despair and sin, brokenness do. Because the real brokenness, the worst brokenness in this world is inside our hearts.

Then Louis Zamperini met Jesus Christ. He didn't want to, but he fell to his knees. He surrendered the whole broken mess of his life, and Jesus healed him. So we're giving away this story, and then this is kind of cool: Starting January 7-8 as a church, we're going to do a whole series on this book. The series will be called *Unbroken*. How do you learn to live with God in spiritual resiliency? How do you find God when you're in the doldrums? How do you find God when there's somebody in your life who doesn't deserve to be forgiven?

What I'm most looking forward to, the last week of the series, January 21-22, Louis Zamperini himself is going to be here in person. He is now 94 years old, so pray for his health, because it's just one more month. His story, if you've read the book... I mean it's going to be a movie. It has intrigued Hollywood so long that the first actor who was originally scheduled to play Louis in a movie was an actor named Tony Curtis.

Has anybody ever hear of Tony Curtis? Tony Curtis died of old age. Louis is still going strong. He's going to be with us, and we're going to learn about this God who changed Louis's life. Here's what we're going to be learning together (what a great way to start a new year): *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted..."*

At the core of human brokenness is what the Bible calls *sin*. That's what has messed up our world. That's what only Jesus could fix. I mentioned earlier, 2011 is officially declared "The Year of the Protest." Do you know the most powerful image in the history of protests, the most widely known symbol that ever cried out against wrongdoing, violence, and injustice was a wooden cross? It remains the most widely recognized symbol in our world.

It's strange, we generally think about human beings protesting stuff. Didn't you ever wonder, *What does God think of what the human race has done to his world?* It's as if one day God looked at the darkness, and the sin, and the wrongdoing, and the injustice in this world and said, "I've had enough." It's as if the horror of it all caused God to reach a kind of divine tipping point of frustration. There was a public march through a city called Jerusalem to a hill called Calvary, and a cross was put up for all the world to see. It's almost as if God were protesting what happened to his world.

All the violence, all the selfishness, all the abuse, all the greed, all the lust, all the betrayal, all the secret little sins that I harbor, that you harbor, that we forget, that we rationalize, that we overlook... It's so easy to protest the big sins of somebody else. On the cross, God is protesting my sin. God is protesting me.

What's strange and unforgettable is the person on the cross. Not a dictator, not a tyrant, not me, not any of us who deserve to be there, but God's son. The baby in the manger grows up to be the man on the cross.

The Bible says, *"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering...the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."* Jesus did not come to take away our brokenness; he came to take *on* our brokenness. People sometimes get sentimental about the manger. Nobody ever gets sentimental about a cross, but it's there we find the protest and love of God most fully expressed over a broken world.

I'm going to ask Debbie and the musicians to come back out. Debbie has written a song especially about how, through Jesus, God has come close to the brokenhearted. So many people don't understand about this: You don't have to wait for your life to be perfect to offer it to God. You don't have to clean up any of it. You don't have to make it look any better than it is. He didn't come to give approval to people with perfect lives; he came to give healing to people broken by sin.

So right now if it would help you to bow your head and close your eyes you can do that, but allow God to speak to you through these words, and then we'll take a moment to talk to God together.

[Song]

A lighted tree, a fight at home  
A shining star, a spouse alone  
Echoes of singing, "All is calm and bright"  
One with questions staying up all night

Christmas is for the broken  
Christmas is for the broken

Bells that ring, the dream torn apart  
Children sing, a hardened heart  
Everywhere it seems a loveliness  
When inside there is a mess

Christmas is for the broken  
Christmas is for the broken

O weary daughter, O troubled son  
Is there a heartache wherever you run?  
He has come for us

Christmas is for the broken  
Christmas is for the broken

It's for me; it's for you  
It's for me; it's for you

[End of song]

Would you pray together with me? Jesus has come into a broken world, and if you have never confessed your own sin and brokenness and asked God to forgive you through Jesus, asked Jesus to become the leader and friend of your life, this would be a great time to do that. You can do that right now in this moment. Maybe you're thinking right now of somebody you know who is in a world of pain. Maybe that somebody is you. God loves you so much. God loves you so much.

Heavenly Father, in this world, in this year, would you send your Son, the Prince of Peace, to bring healing into every heart? We pray in Jesus' name, amen.