

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to Christmas at Pathway. And welcome to this wonderful setting. Isn't it beautiful?
- B. Can we say a huge thank you to all the women and men who worked so hard on this incredible labor of love, and brought this setting to life?
 - 1. And a special thank you to the brains of the outfit, the one who imagines all of this in her head and then gets it done, my wife, Margi Giovannetti.
- C. Our theme is JOY. Didn't you just feel some joy when you walk in?
- D. Even as our theme is joy, I am very aware that for many people, Christmas can bring the opposite. For so many, this time of year brings sadness. Memories of loss. Reminders of pain. Levels of stress that are hard to bear.
- E. If that's your story, I understand. You make sense to me. I'm not here to shame you for not feeling all that "merry" this time of year. My heart is with you. I pray that this year can be different for you. I pray that this Christmas will mark the beginnings of a turning point for you.

II. Characters

- A. I have a fun challenge for you. Let's see how fast you can identify six traditional Christmas movies. I'll show a picture, you say the movie.
 - 1. **Rudolph/Misfit Toys**
 - 2. **The Grinch**
 - 3. **It's a Wonderful Life**
 - 4. **Miracle on 34th Street**
 - 5. **Home Alone**
 - 6. **Scrooge (A Christmas Carol)**

III. Christmas

- A. Christmas is the season we celebrate when God became human without ceasing to be God.
- B. He did this by being born of Mary, in the most wondrous and humble and counterintuitive way possible.
 - 1. *"And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Fear not! For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" (Luke 2:7-11)*
- C. When the angels described that first Christmas, they said it was good news of great joy to all people. Great joy. There it is.
- D. Later, Jesus would say,
 - 1. *"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."* (John 15:11)
- E. There has never been a system of faith and teaching as dedicated to human joy as the message of Jesus.
 - 1. Authentic Christianity is about human flourishing. It is about joy.
 - 2. That is the essence of the birth of Christ. The angels said so and Jesus said so too.
- F. In fact, every ingredient for human flourishing and joy is wrapped in the Gift of Christmas.
- G. The title of my talk is: **The Circle of Joy**

IV. God Brought You Here

- A. I believe that you are here today for a reason. Yes, you made your choice and you came (or clicked) here. But I think it's deeper than that.
- B. I think you're here because God influenced you. He brought you here because he loves you.
- C. We've been asking God to do something very special this Christmas.
- D. We've been specifically praying that this Christmas would be your first Christmas where you are officially a member of the family of God. We're praying that you actually know it because you have made it official.
- E. I want to show you how to do that today. That's coming at the end of my talk.

V. The Circle of Joy

- A. I picked these six **movies** specifically. Each movie represents a key ingredient of joy.
- B. I'm not saying that you will always be happy or that God will erase your heartaches and take away your pains.
- C. What I am saying is that when you put these ingredients together, you will have a recipe for a kind of joy that undergirds your life.
 - 1. A kind of joy where hope shines through, even in your darkest days.
- D. Here are the six indispensable ingredients in the Circle of Joy:
 - 1. **IDENTITY - Rudolph and the Island of Misfit Toys**
 - a) I picked Rudolph because he represents IDENTITY. That's the first ingredient.
 - 2. **FREEDOM - The Grinch**
 - a) I picked the Grinch because he represents FREEDOM. Every kind of freedom, including freedom from the darkness in our hearts, the second ingredient.
 - 3. **MEANING - It's a Wonderful Life**
 - a) George and Mary Bailey from It's a Wonderful Life... they represent MEANING. Having meaning in your life. Ingredient 3.
 - 4. **WONDER - Miracle on 34th Street**
 - a) I'm using Miracle on 34th Street to represent ingredient number 4. That is a sense of WONDER. There's more to this world than meets the eye.
 - 5. **LOVE - Home Alone**
 - a) Number 5 is LOVE. Kevin McAllister in Home Alone... Everything is a struggle until he's safe in the arms of love.

6. COMPASSION - Scrooge

- a) The last ingredient in a life of joy... Old Ebenezer Scrooge represents the opposite of the last ingredient, which is COMPASSION.
- E. Identity, freedom, meaning, wonder, love, compassion. This is everything a heart desires. It is what we were created for.
- F. I'm calling this the Circle of Joy. Because when you have these six ingredients, you have the best possible foundation for joy—one that doesn't evaporate when life gets hard.
- G. I want to make the case that of all the philosophies of the world, all the psychological systems and religions of the world... you will never find one that provides these ingredients as well as Christianity.
- H. And that is because of Christmas.
- I. Christianity promises joy because in Christianity, we have a God who became human without ceasing to be God, who walked in our shoes, and who felt our temptations, and who lived and loved and felt what we felt... a Savior whose death absorbed all the darkness of earth along with all the justice of heaven...who did absolutely everything required to not only bring us back to God, but to do that while filling our hearts with a kind of joy no one else can give.
 - a) There's nobody like Jesus. Aren't you thankful for him?
- J. You're going to have to believe in something. Why not Jesus? Why not believe in him? Why not today?
 - 1. That is my call to action for you. I'm going to ask you to actually make a choice today; one of those big life-defining choices.
 - 2. We'll get there in just a few more minutes. Don't worry. No pressure. I won't embarrass you.
 - a) Identity, freedom, meaning, wonder, love, compassion. I'd like to expand the first three today, and the last three next week, and then wrap it up.

VI. THE CIRCLE OF JOY**A. Identity - Rudolph/Misfit Toys**

- 1. It's hard not to feel for Rudolph. He's different. The other kids make fun of him.
 - a) Same for the Island of Misfit Toys. There's something wrong with them. A train with square wheels. A boat that sinks. A spotted elephant. Dolls with missing parts.
 - b) These are not the rich and famous of the world. They're the outcasts. The rejects. The Island of Misfit toys.
- 2. The first person to hear that Jesus was going to be born was the Virgin Mary, a humble young woman, not rich, not famous not important. The Angel Gabriel made the announcement to her.
 - a) The second person was Joseph, a carpenter. Not important, not wealthy, not famous. Gabriel spoke to him too.
 - b) Then Mary's cousin, Elizabeth.
 - c) Later, on the Big Day, the announcement came to shepherds, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.
- 3. If you look hard enough, you're going to see that Christmas Day accomplished one singular, beautiful, life-changing alteration to the identity of every person of faith who was involved.
 - a) I could sum it up in one word: Elevation.
 - b) Christmas found lowly women, lowly men, and humble shepherds, and without regard to rank or status or power or wealth, elevated their identities to positions of everlasting honor and glory.
- 4. The Christian worldview talks about identity in ways radically different than any other system.
- 5. Secular society says you have to claw your way to the top. You have fight for status, work for rank, labor to make yourself matter. You have to pick an identity, and then enforce it, and go to extreme lengths to try to make it stick.
- 6. In other words, identity is achieved.
- 7. Christianity offers a very different approach.
 - a) **In Christianity, you have an IDENTITY that is RECEIVED instead of ACHIEVED.**
 - b) In my teenage years, I was assigned to write a paper called Who Am I?
 - c) I didn't have the slightest clue what to write. I was so stressed out by that paper, it was due the next day, and I had no idea what to say.
 - d) That night I went to church. A young woman walked by, a friend, actually my piano teacher. We were in the little basement lobby of my tiny church in Chicago. A drinking fountain. Tile floors. Stairs going up. The sounds of adults filtering in from the main room.
 - e) Her name was Celeste. Celeste looked at me and said, "Bill, what's wrong?"
 - f) I should also mention I had a minor crush on her. I was a teenager. To me, she was an old lady, at least 27.
 - g) So she said, "Bill, what's wrong?"
 - h) I said, "I have to write a paper. I have no clue what to write." I was really stressed about this... not only about the paper... but about the question. Who Am I? Really, who am I? I was having a full blown identity crisis.
 - i) She said, "What's it about?"
 - j) I said, "Who Am I?"
 - k) She said, "Oh, that's easy. I am a child of God. I am spiritual royalty. I am adopted into the family of heaven. I am accepted. I am forgiven. I am beloved. I am complete in Christ. I have been set free..."
 - l) And she just went on an on... and I was blown away.
 - m) I get goosebumps every time I remember it.
 - n) Something inside me switched. Something changed in a very good way, and it has never changed back.
- 8. Because when you receive Jesus as your Savior, you receive the gift of a new identity. Received, not achieved. No more clawing your way to the top. No more trying to prove yourself.
- 9. Just a calm assurance that you are who God says you are.

10. It's something God puts inside you when you receive Jesus.
11. Who am I?
 - a) I am a child of heaven. God is my father. Jesus is my brother. I am happily adopted, fully accepted, unconditionally loved, totally blessed.
 - b) I am a saint, a citizen of heaven, a prince with God, a soldier of the Cross.
 - c) I am an heir of God, a joint-heir with Jesus.
 - d) I have access, authority, and all-sufficient grace.
 - e) The riches of heaven are mine.
12. Can you see how thinking about yourself this way can help in the joy department?
13. And I received all of it as a gift when I received Jesus.
 - a) And you can too.
 - b) I will not only tell you how, I will talk you through it in just a few more minutes.
 - (1) Joy = Identity, freedom, meaning, wonder, love, and compassion.

B. Freedom - The Grinch

1. The Grinch is everybody's favorite Christmas grouch.
 - a) On Christmas Eve, the Grinch, dressed as Santa, goes to Whoville and with the reluctant help of his dog Max, steals all the decorations, the presents, and even their holiday feast.
 - b) After stealing everything related to Christmas, the Grinch waits atop his mountain. He expects the Whos to wake up and weep and wail in sorrow and distress.
 - c) However, to his surprise, he hears the last thing he ever thought he'd hear. He hears them singing joyfully on Christmas morning, even though they have lost everything.
 - d) He is so convicted by the response that his heart begins to change. Like a prodigal son returning home, the Grinch returns all the stolen items to the Whos. He's finally free from his anger, his materialism, his meanness.
 - (1) And, here's my favorite part...
 - (2) His heart, which was two sizes too small, grows three sizes larger.
2. Jesus came to offer the human race a kind of freedom that no one else can give.
3. The Bible word for this freedom is redemption. Shortly before Jesus was born, an aged priest heard about it. He said:
 - a) *"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David."* (Luke 1:68-69)
4. Christmas is God's way of redeeming his people.
 - a) He sets people free.
5. This is not just a political freedom or a physical freedom. It is much deeper.
 - a) The redemption Jesus brings is freedom from addiction, despair, dysfunction, demons, and every bondage and stronghold in your life.
 - b) This is a different kind of freedom than anything the world can offer.
 - c) Our culture is teaching people to fight for their rights. Even to the point of violence. Even to the point of making other people pay. If you want to be free, they say, take to the streets. It's a fight. It's a battle. It's a war. It's a brawl.
 - (1) That's because freedom is viewed as this thing that's out there. Somebody else took it from you, and you need to go take it back from them... by any means necessary.
6. But Christianity paints an entirely different picture.
 - a) **In Christianity, you have FREEDOM by BELIEVING, not BRAWLING.**
 - b) Jesus said, You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.
 - (1) Then he said, I am the truth.
 - c) Jesus said, I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin.
 - (1) Then he said, If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.
7. If you want to know freedom, the Christian worldview says that freedom isn't out there in someone else's hands, it's in here, already inside your heart.
8. This is because once you have Jesus, God sets your heart free from every dark force.
 - a) All the darkness that blinds you. All the heaviness that buries you. All the sins, the failures, the bad choices.
 - b) Every addiction, every dysfunction, every emotion that ties you in knots, the rap sheet, the regrets...
 - (1) Jesus Christ took care of all of them once for all when he died for you on the cross.
9. He shed his blood for them. He paid the price for them. He takes away their authority in your life.
 - a) It's like sitting in a prison cell, but somebody else pays your fine, unlocks your door, and says, "You're free."
 - b) What should you do?
 - c) You should walk out the door.
10. I'm hoping you will walk out the spiritual door, out of the power of sin, today.
11. Jesus traveled down from heaven to earth to pay your ransom. He is your Redeemer. He will put a new freedom inside you today, one you never knew before.
 - a) Pretty soon I'm going to ask you to say yes to your freedom in Jesus. You don't even have to be ready. Just be willing.

C. Meaning - It's a Wonderful Life

1. I have friends who say, "It isn't Christmas season until we've watched *It's a Wonderful Life*."
 - a) George Bailey has devoted his life to helping others in his community of Bedford Falls. Facing financial ruin and feeling overwhelmed by despair, George plans to end it all.

- b) An angel named Clarence intervenes. He shows George what life in Bedford Falls would have been like had he never been born.
- c) He sees what his life has meant, and everyone lives happily ever after.
- 2. So, "Meaning."
 - a) What is the meaning of life?
- 3. Let's ask Jesus that question.
 - a) Jesus, why were you born into this world? What is the meaning of your life... and death... and life?
- 4. Jesus gave us the answer:
 - a) *"I have come [= Christmas] that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."* (John 10:10)
- 5. Jesus found his meaning by enabling us to find our meaning.
- 6. That you may have life more abundantly.
 - a) Most people don't realize that human flourishing and joy are at the heart of the meaning of Jesus.
- 7. In the secular mind, there really is no meaning to life. A leading atheist scientist named William Provine, a long time professor at Cornell, said this:
 - a) "There is no evidence for God, no life after death, no absolute foundation for right and wrong, no absolute meaning for life, and no free will." ~William Provine
- 8. There is no absolute meaning for life, so says our secular society.
- 9. Most of our culture has gone with this. If you follow out the claim there is no meaning for life, you can only go in one of three ways:
 - a) Absurdity — just accept that life is meaningless, but try to have a good time anyway, and try not to take your own life. That's Albert Camus and the existentialists.
 - b) Humanism — everybody defines your own meaning for your own life and then try not to get in a war with others. That's Isaac Asimov, Margaret Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut.
 - c) Avoidance — don't think about it. Just live without thinking too hard, that's Homer Simpson. Which is probably where most people are at today.
 - (1) They are living by default. They haven't thought it through.
- 10. How is this philosophy working?
 - a) A study out of the University of Chicago, which has been conducted every year for 50 years, made a disturbing finding. They concluded that American happiness is at a 50 year low. Something's not working in the joy department.
- 11. I am saying that what isn't working is that we have broken the circle of joy, especially in this area of your life's meaning.
 - a) **In Christianity, your life has MEANING by DESIGN not by DEFAULT.**
- 12. When you receive Jesus, he gives your life meaning, and satisfaction, and abundance.
- 13. Part of that is because he makes us an interconnected body where we rise above our own narcissistic impulses.
- 14. But a much bigger part of our life's meaning comes from something only Jesus can give.
 - a) With Jesus, everything you do is connected to God.
 - b) The meaning of your life begins to connect with the mighty purposes of God.
 - (1) The meaning of your life becomes bigger than you. Bigger than this world. You have eternal significance. You donate your life to influencing people to Jesus. You want everybody to find the treasure you found when you found him.
 - c) Precious people will be in heaven because of you. I find that an extraordinarily meaningful way to live. And it brings me joy.

VII. Conclusion

- A. Identify. Freedom. Meaning. Wonder. Compassion. Love.
- B. Welcome to Christmas. Welcome to Jesus. Welcome to Joy.

VIII. Prayer

- A. Enough talk. We're going to pray.
- B. Actually, I'm going to ask you to pray. Silently. In your heart, straight to God.
- C. I'm going to talk to you through a prayer to receive Jesus.
- D. I'm going to ask you to bow your head, and to close your eyes. We do this to create a quiet space for you, and to extend that courtesy to the people sitting around you.
 - 1. **ADMIT.** God, I admit I need you. There is a gap between me and you. I feel it in my conscience, I feel it in my heart. I am fallen. I am sinful. I cannot reach you by myself, and never will.
 - 2. **BELIEVE.** But I believe that on Christmas day, you sent Jesus into the world. I believe he is your son. I believe he offered the one sacrifice for all my sins, once for all when he died on the Cross. I believe he rose again. God, I don't get how all this works, but I'm telling you as best as I can, that I believe in Jesus as my Savior.
 - 3. **CHOOSE.** So right now God, I choose to trust in Jesus as my Only Hope. I choose to believe in him. I'm telling you God, as best as I can, that I'm believing in Jesus and receiving him as my Savior and my one and only Hope. And I ask you right now, because of Jesus alone, please save me. And please make this Christmas my first Christmas as your child forever.
- E. If you prayed that prayer and meant it, God has in this very moment joined your life to the Greatest Love Story Ever Told. You have fulfilled the one condition of John 3:16 — "whoever believes in Him." You have received for yourself the best Christmas gift of all. This is salvation. This is what it means to be saved. This is everlasting life. It is a walk with God, with a new heart and a life to match it.
- F. Welcome to God's Family. Welcome to your first Christmas as a child of God.