PREACHING & TEACHING

Christmas Sermon

A Christmas Eve and Christmas Day sermon framework written for the hardest preaching night of the year: a full room, half of whom are visitors, a story everyone already knows, and eighteen minutes to say something true about it. Built around the detail most Christmas sermons skip.

18 min preached · 6 segments

Six movements, eighteen minutes. Shorter than a normal Sunday on purpose. The framing is written out; the local detail is yours.

BEFORE YOU RECORD

- Christmas Eve is shorter than a normal Sunday. Eighteen minutes is the ceiling and fifteen is better. Half the room is there because a relative brought them and the other half has children who have been awake since five.
- Do not assume the story is known. A growing share of any Christmas congregation has never heard Luke 2 read straight through, and preaching to the assumption that they have is the fastest way to lose them.
- If you are recording this as an episode, publish by the second week of December. Search interest in Christmas sermon material peaks well before the day itself.

01. The hook: the ordinary detail

2 min

[start small - resist opening on the cosmic scale]

Open on something physical and unremarkable from the story. The feeding trough. The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which is about ninety miles and takes four days on foot. The fact that a census meant paperwork and queues.

The room has heard the story rendered as a painting many times. It has rarely heard it rendered as a week that was actually endured by two tired people.

[your opening detail, 150 words - one concrete thing, described plainly]

02. The text

3 min

[read it properly - for some people in the room this is the first time]

[read Luke 2:1-20 aloud, or John 1:1-14 if your service uses that]

Then one minute of setting. An occupied province, a census ordered from a thousand miles away for the purpose of taxation, and a young couple walking because an emperor wanted a number.

03. The tension: the room is not all believing

3 min

[name the visitors without patronising them - they can tell]

Some of you are here because someone asked you to come and it was easier to say yes. That is a perfectly good reason to be in a building on a Wednesday night in December, and I am not going to pretend otherwise.

And the difficulty with this story is that familiarity has worn it smooth. It has become a scene rather than an event. Something you could describe without ever having decided whether you believed it.

[pause - three seconds]

04. The turn: who was told first

5 min

[the claim - the shepherds are the argument, not the decoration]

Notice who gets told. Not the emperor who ordered the census. Not the governor. Not the priests in Jerusalem, forty minutes away, who had spent their lives waiting for exactly this.

Shepherds. Night shift workers, whose testimony was not accepted in a court, who were outside the town because that is where the animals were. They are told first, and they are told at work.

If you were designing this to be believed, you would not do it this way. Which is, I think, exactly the point. The first Christmas announcement was made to people nobody would have chosen, and that has been the pattern ever since.

[your material, 400 words spoken - one illustration only]

05. Application

3 min

[gentle - this is not the night for a heavy ask]

Keep it light and real. Nobody is going to restructure their life on Christmas Eve. But a person can leave a room willing to ask one honest question, and that is a genuine outcome.

[your application, 200 words - one question rather than one instruction]

06. The close

2 min

[come back to the opening detail - then stop, and mean it]

[return to your opening detail, 100 words]

The shepherds went back to the same field and the same sheep. Luke says they went back glorifying and praising God, which is a striking thing to say about men returning to a night shift. Nothing about their circumstances had changed. They had simply been told something first.

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