**B.C. (Before Christmas) - Week 4**

**Introduction: Worst Christmas Gifts**

Good morning we are so close to Christmas! How exciting! Do you know what that means, right? (Pause). That’s right; presents! Haha. I was looking for some Christmas gifts the other day for my wife and I came across a website that collects the worst Christmas gifts. I was scrolling through them, and decided to share some with you this morning.

So the first gift was for a young man who wanted a pair of Beats by Dre. If you don’t know what they are, they are a pair of $300 noise canceling headphones. So someone loved gave him a [**pair of beets**]. I don’t think those beets do any noise canceling.

It wouldn’t be Christmas if you didn’t get some form of clothing, right? Well this guy got a [**matching outfit**]. Seriously, imagine the moment you first see the person on the day you exchange gifts and how much you would dread the moment they actually open their gift. Thank God for gift receipts!

Show the 3 stages in pictures. Finally, you probably have a person in your family who likes to give gifts that use plenty of intrigue, misdirection, and surprise. Some inventive person gave this wonderful gift. [**Frying pan**] Imagine playing that prank and simultaneously gifting your friend with the instrument they’ll now use to whack you upside the head.

I still remember when my brother gave empty Mac Book Pro boxes to his three sister-in-laws one Christmas. They literally cried with joy upon seeing the boxes and then with fury when they realized they were empty. I think Christmas was almost canceled that year.

Too many “disappointments” this paragraph is too long. Have you ever been disappointed with a Christmas gift you received, or even disappointed that the gift you thought that special someone would love turned out to be the wrong item or not highly desired. Disappointment is always a challenge when it comes to Christmas gifts, but it’s more challenging when it comes to our real day-to-day lives. We could define a disappointment as any unrealized expectations, and whether you have high expectations or not we all have disappointments to one degree or another. The relevant question is, how do we deal with disappointment. Well, today, we’re going to learn about a group of people who were dealing with disappointment.

**Introduction to Malachi**

The last few weeks we’ve been learning about the story of God and his people called Israel in the time before Christmas, or Before Christ. And it was during this time that God sent prophets to speak to his people and they spoke with words of wisdom, warning, but always encouragement. These prophets had names like Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. And today we’re going to hear from the prophet Malachi. Here’s the background to the story…

**Video: Malachi Background**

Kid tells the background story of Malachi. Ends with something like: “...the Word of the Lord comes to his prophet, Malachi, to be given to a disappointed people.”

**Word: Malachi**

So the book of Malachi, this messenger is to go to a disappointed people – a people who are wondering about God and what God is doing. The messenger says, ***“I have loved you,”*** says the Lord. The very first word in this message in Hebrew is the root word “hb or Ahab.” It’s there for emphases. It’s like saying, “If there’s one word that sums it all up, it’s love. God says, “I have loved you this whole time. I’ve never stopped loving you!

***“But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’”*** -Malachi 1:1-2 What’s happening here is Israel is disputing God’s love for them. They’re down and out. They’re looking around at their sad state saying, “God you haven’t come through for us. How can you say you love us? When will you act? They are so disappointed that they are not only questioning God’s love for them, they are doubting it. They’re a little angry. Maybe you’ve been there.

We often feel disappointment when our needs aren’t met. That can be very hard and sad; no wonder Israel was doubting God’s love. We also feel disappointment when we realize we aren’t who we thought we were or we aren’t who we want to be. This can be especially challenging when we realize that our version of who we think we are is really a fiction or figment of our imagination.

* Do you know what I’m talking about? Maybe you used to have a vision of your life where you were in control and on top of things. But then you got sick and that changed everything.
* Or you thought your family life was perfect and then you learned about the affair and now it’s ending in divorce.
* Or maybe things are really are going well, and life seems to be going your way, but something still seems to be missing – something that gnaws at your sense of fulfillment.

About 10 years ago, I became friends with a guy named Jason, and he’s probably been my best adult friend, I’ve ever had. He worked down the street from me, we coached soccer together, and our kids were at a similar age. It was probably the happiest I’ve ever been. Our wives were friends. We genuinely enjoyed being together. And then they moved to Utah.

I’ve found in the last 15 years of my life – since we’ve had kids – how hard it is to find people you connect with where you don’t feel like you’re forcing it. Sure we still talk when he has business in town, but that relationship will never be the same and it is deeply disappointing to me and it’s easy for me to drift into isolation. This disappointment and thousands like it rob us of our joy and make us doubt and dispute the love of God and sometimes those around us. A little more on how this feels with people.

Here’s the thing about disappointments – often the holidays, like Christmas just make it worse. The familiar place, routine, or tradition you once shared has slipped from your life and it’s not the same and no amount of hype or positive thinking makes it right again.

We know a little bit about what the people in Malachi’s day were thinking. We don’t just doubt God’s love we dispute it! We might have arguments against it. If we could, we’d like to drag God into some kind of cosmic court and give us good reasons why he lets us down.

Yet, it’s in the middle of all this disappointment, Malachi declares that hope will come. He promises that One will be coming who will give them a fresh start. One who will purify and wash them clean. And he says this promised One will be preceded by a forerunner who will prepare the way for his coming (**Malachi 3:1-4**).

**The Christmas Story**

Make sure “love” comes through (even more than “hope”)

And then on a quiet evening 2000 years ago, what Malachi had spoken came to pass. Two young girls named Elizabeth and Mary became pregnant. They were from the same family maybe fourth cousins. Elizabeth and her husband Zachariah were unable to have children and were getting along in age. Maybe they had given up on the hope of having a family, resigned in their disappointment. Acknowledge families who are disappointing with this very issue… not having kids.

But then hope showed up when an angel visited Zachariah and told him they would have a child. Six months later, another angel came along and visited Mary, and hope came to all, for this child, the angel said, her child would be named Jesus and he would be great and would be called the Son of the most high and his kingdom will never come to an end.

And that boy was born, to a peasant girl and her husband Joseph, a humble carpenter. She was probably a teenager and gave birth to her son in a small backwater town away from the glamor and lights of the city, and they laid in a feeding trough most likely cut out of the floor. And that’s how should this be “love” hope came into our world.

A few years later Elizabeth’s boy John became a man and he went around announcing that the Kingdom was near and that someone was coming who would change everything. He said, [**Luke 3:4-6].**

And then he came. That son of a carpenter who grew up in Nazareth – he called people to turn away from their ideas and violent ways of bringing God’s kingdom into the world and called people to live a life of forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and reconciling love. And that somehow through that way of living we would find life that is true life. The way God came into our world was not what anyone was expecting, even disappointing for many, but it meant and still means life and hope for those who have come to know him.

Need better transition between two sections.

**A Revelation of God’s Love**

Don’t need all the Scriptures…Ted liked it with the Scripture.

**The Cradle**

If you ever doubt you are loved, this Christmas look to the **Cradle**.

The God of glory, the creator of the universe, the one who was there when the earth was formed gave up everything to become **one** of us. And not just one of us, the very **least** of us – a baby, in a cradle.

One of the most quoted passages in all of scripture so beautifully expresses what was happening: “***For God SO loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life***

Matthew, the tax collector and writer of the first book in the New Testament put it this way: ***She*** *(Mary)* ***will give him the name Jesus, and He will save the people from their sins.’”*** *(Matthew 1:18-21)*

Now I think our tendency is to hear that as a standard Bible reading for the Christmas season, but reflect on that last verse, ***“He will save the people from their sins.”*** We may not be all that comfortable with the word “sin”, but we gotta get the significance of it.

Theologian, Cornelius Platinga says that sin is the “Culpable disturbance of shalom.” It’s an attack on the kingdom of God and all that is good and hopeful. It’s when what we experience in this world is not as it’s supposed to be because God’s goodness and wholeness has been disrupted, and we have been hurt by it and likely hurt others in return. And yet Jesus was born and came to live in the midst of the havoc sin has created.

 Before Jesus, no one had ever been born who could save people from their sins. And here’s how He does it. Next verse: ***“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – which means God with us.”*** *(Matthew 1:23)*

 **Jesus in the cradle means that God loves us enough to be with us in this sin-soaked world**. God takes on flesh and becomes human that first Christmas. Theologians call that The Incarnation. The Incarnation means “God with us”, and “with us” doesn’t just mean “on our side” or “in our hearts and prayers.” It means He is literally, physically historically tangibly *with* us even in our deepest disappointments.

 Let me say this and please try to hear it like it’s the very first time, ok? **On Christmas night - God, Almighty God, Lord of Heaven and Earth, sovereign creator of the universe, put on flesh and became a human being**. One writer put it this way:

“God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He came not as a flash of light or an unapproachable conqueror, but as one whose first cries were heard by a peasant girl and a sleepy carpenter. The hands that first held him were unmanicured, calloused and dirty. No silk. No ivory. No hype. No party. No hoopla. Angels watched as Mary changed God’s diaper.” (Max Lucado)

**The Cross**

And throughout his time on earth he loved like no one has ever loved.

* He loved the rich young ruler and the woman caught in adultery.
* He loved Peter, one of his best friends who denied him three times and he loved John who stayed with him every step of the way.
* He loved the cheating tax collector and the widow who gave away her last penny.

He loved everyone. No exceptions. No deceptions. He simply loved.

And yet ***“he was despised and rejected by men” (Is 53)*** to such an extent that this baby who was born into our world became a grown man who faced the cruelest of deaths – a death on the cross. Yes, Jesus knew disappointment. He was rejected by and killed by the very people he came to save.

Why? Because he loved us. Ad he didn’t **have** to die. Don’t let anyone ever tell you that Jesus had to die or that it was the wrath of God that forced him to the cross. Jesus **chose** this path. At any moment he could have called an audible, drawn up another play. But instead he chose to experience the most gruesome and excruciatingly painful death one could endure. Why? For the love of you and me.

The Apostle Paul wrote about this love to Christ-followers in Rome, when he said: “***God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** *(Romans 5:8)*

Jesus came to save us from all of the disappointment we experience because of our sin-ridden world. While we can’t always escape the effects of sin, the cross gives us hope in the present and the promise of a future where there is no more pain, no more sin, no more disappointment.

So if you doubt he still loves you this Christmas, look beyond the cradle, and look to the cross.

What looked like a disappointing defeat, ended in an astonishing victory. Jesus rose from the dead giving us a hope that even the most devastating circumstances cannot erase.

Peter, who at one point denied even knowing Jesus found a new unshakeable hope in the resurrection,.

***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead…”*** *(I Peter 1:3)*

So if you doubt God still loves you this Christmas, look to the cradle, and to the cross. -- But don’t just look, my ask is that you would respond.

Better transition

**Invitation**

**Come Back**

The first response is this: **Come back.** That’s right. Come back to God. If you have been around Community for any time at all you know we’re all about helping people find their way back to God.

Maybe you have been coming here for a while now. And you are beginning to understand who Jesus is and you’re starting to believe he is who he said is – Immanuel, God with us, your savior and Lord.

If that’s you, today can be the day when you finally say “I am yours, and I want to follow you.” It doesn’t mean you have no doubts or that you’ve stopped wondering why life is so full of disappointment. It just means that you, like the prophet Malachi, choose to put your hope in the one who has come to save you – this baby who become a man who chose to die rather than live without you.

That is Dan’s story, and here is how he told it when he was baptized in August: (I like much of his story, as it was disappointment that brought him to God and he says some great things about Community. We could get his permission to edit it down if we like it.)

*Edit this story down. We need pictures. Prior to joining Community and becoming a Christian, I had little or no relationship with God. I didn’t believe human beings needed God, and didn’t believe in the God of the Bible, even though I went to church as a child. When I was a freshman in college, someone f shared the gospel with me in a new way, however I chose to ignore his message and for most of my 20’s I did not attend church. By the time I was in my 30’s, my life seemed alright – I had a fairly successful career and friends and family who were supportive. However, on the inside I struggled with stress, anxiety, and a lack of self-confidence. In 2017, I left my job, broke up with my girlfriend, and moved, all within the span of a few months. All this change made me more open to exploring the nagging urge that had remained with me since freshman year of college, to seek God in a new way.*

*Based upon nothing more than a Google search, I decided to attend Community. Eric and Kevin were the first people I met. I quickly joined Kevin’s small group and started volunteering with setup / teardown and First Impressions. Community was* ***exactly*** *what I needed: a church that explains the core concepts of the Bible and encourages each person to seek a stronger relationship with God through community, the Bible and prayer. Through my journey over the past 2 years, I have gained a relationship with God that I never thought possible, and re-oriented my goals and ambitions to better serve Him. In November of 2018, I met Amy, now my fiancée, who is an amazing example of someone who walks with God. She and I attend church together, read books by Christian authors and listen to sermons. I am looking forward to continuing to find ways to know and serve God better!*

Do you see how it was disappointment that led Dan back to God? Stress, anxiety, leaving his job, breaking up with his girlfriend. I don’t know what disappointments you carry with you oday, but would you bring them to Jesus? Would you bring them to the one who promises to get you through whatever this life brings your way?

Need stronger invite to Christmas Eve here…Practical – invite cards, share posts… Give sentence or two about what Christmas Eve service will be about. Here is the second take-away: **Go out.**  When we find our way back to God, it is then our turn to share that new found hope with others. The Apostle Paul wrote this to some people in Corinth who had found their way back to God.

***“When anyone lives in Christ*** *(or has found their way back to God)****, the new creation has come. The old is gone! The new is here! All this is from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ’s death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ.”*** *(2 Cor 5:17-18)*

For some people, Christmas is the “most wonderful time of the year.” They love everything about Christmas – the gifts, the decorations, the 24/7 Christmas music. And for others, this season magnifies their hurts and disappointment unlike any other time of the year. For either person, I can’t think of a better time to invite them to Community. It might just be next step they need to take to find their way back to God.

(Plug for Xmas Eve or other special Christmas services).

Where is the conclusion? Go back to intro. Disappointment. Get back to Malachi in some way.

**Communion Idea (JH)**

Write a 200 word (or less) idea to introduce Communion.