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Christmas 2009 #1 - Broken Shalom – 12.6.9

Video

Try to put yourself in the shoes of the Children of Israel at the time when they left Egypt and went out in the wilderness. How in the world would they eat? Over two million people! How do you supply them?

As you know, they didn't have to worry about it because every morning when they got up, God had supplied them with food, and all they had to do was gather it up. A substance that looked like dew covered the ground each new day, and they didn't even know what it was, so they called it manna, which means "what is it"? Think of that! Bread from heaven! If God ever started doing that for you, would you ever lose the wonder? Would you ever stop being amazed at such a thing?

Well, yeah, you might. It's human nature, at least in our fallen state, to lose the wonder. When I first got out to Denver in June 1987, I was stunned by the Rocky Mountains. By the time I left in August, I hardly noticed them. And yes, the Israelites were amazed when God first gave them manna, but as you know, they eventually grumbled about it, said they were sick of it.

We're a lot like them, and it shows up in our attitude toward material things. If you could pull yourself from 20 years ago into today, the younger you would be amazed that you have a phone that makes the Star Trek communicator outdated. I watched *Blade Runner* again last year. It was made in 1981 and set in the future where they have androids that you can't distinguish from humans, and yet every time Decker wants to get in touch with someone, he has to go find a pay phone! It's a video pay phone, but still!

My 25 year old self who was using DOS 3.1 on his PC would think that we live in an incredible future. But are we amazed? Only for a little while. We have been trained to not hold on to amazement for long, but to always expect something better.

I've heard a guy named Chris Seay speak a couple of times and both times, he told about an especially bad flight he was on where he didn't have a book to read and he couldn't use his laptop, and the in-flight movie was no good, (and of course being one of us, the mere fact of flying through the air at 400 mph was not at all interesting!) so he reached into the seatback and pulled out what he calls the Gideon Bible of the air, the Sky Mall catalog. Sky Mall exists to sell things no one needs for unbelievably high prices, and some of these items are hard evidence of our need to buy, our need to create things we don't need:

- **The Alcohawk** home breathalyzer – If you need this, get yourself to rehab!
- **The NeckPro Traction Device** – If you need medical help, go to the doctor, don't pay \$50 for a way to adjust your own spinal column.
- **The One Ring** – If you pay \$400-600 for this, get ready for a rough social life. This ring on your finger does not signify that you've got your personal thing together.
- **The Snuggie** – This isn't from Sky Mall, but it is too amazingly popular to leave out. If you want to look like a medieval monk wearing a hospital gown, the Snuggie is for you.

Maybe the problem we're trying to address is a broken Shalom.

"Shalom" is a Hebrew word that means "peace". Shalom begins with the absence of conflict – two neighbors agree to disagree and ignore each other. Two countries pull back their armies and send them home. That's a start, but Shalom goes deeper. Shalom means a deep sense of well-being between us and God. Things are right with the world because things are right between me and God, and as a result there is no tension, no bitterness, no resentment that I carry around, no regret for all the ways I've blown it and destroyed relationships because God has restored that too and everything has been put right. The pictures of the Messianic age that you see in the Old Testament, of the lion lying down with the lamb and people beating swords into plowshares – these are images of Shalom.

Listen to one of the prophecies we read at Christmas (in a larger context) as it tells of the coming Messiah as an arbiter of peace:

Micah 5:1-5

- ¹ Marshal your troops, O city of troops,
for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler
on the cheek with a rod.**
- ² "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."**
- ³ Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.**
- ⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.**

⁵ And he will be their peace.

Those last three lines especially describe what we're looking for – to live securely because we know that his greatness reaches the ends of the earth, and he is our peace, our Shalom.

But the reality is that we live with a broken Shalom. To some extent, we always will, this side of eternity, until the ultimate healing of this world. But for many of us, our Shalom doesn't even approach the peace of God that Jesus promised that he would give his followers.

What gets in the way? It could be a number of things. Maybe you didn't have parents who spoke love and truth into your life and you had to get those things any way you could. Maybe it has been a series of disappointments that has knocked you down – cancer, divorce, job loss, rejection – so that you find it really tough to open yourself up to God's blessings. That song, "When I Get Where I'm Going" by Brad Paisley and Dolly Parton, says "**When I get where I'm going, there'll be only happy tears. I will shed the sins and struggles I have carried all these years. And I'll leave my heart wide open, I will love and have no fear...**" which is exactly what we have a hard time with down here.

There are many paths to a broken Shalom, but there's only One who can put it back together. **John 14** starts out with Jesus saying: ¹ "**Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.** ² **In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were not so*, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.** ³ **And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, *there* you may be also. (NKJV)** And **John 14** almost ends with Jesus saying: ²⁷ **Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (NKJV)** Paul says in **Philippians 4:7 - And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

How do we get our Shalom put back together? One answer is found when we go back a couple of verses in that **Philippians 4** passage where Paul says: ⁴**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!** ⁵**Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.** ⁶**Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.** ⁷**And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** Prayer, rejoicing – these are vital disciplines for restoring a sense that the greatness of Jesus reaches the end of the earth and therefore we can live at peace. I can't stress enough the importance of being connected with God in a relationship through prayer. The alternative is going it on your own and the result is a broken Shalom.

What I want to talk about now is confronting this materialistic lust that Sky Mall embodies, this very real feeling that sneaks up on any of us that THIS thing I can buy will restore Shalom in me, this sense of "Maybe if I had the One Ring of Power, or maybe if I had a home Breathyalyzer, things would turn around for me!" Materialism is a counterfeit shalom.

That's where the Advent Conspiracy folks have some good ideas. Their plan is to reform and redefine Christmas, which has become the biggest symbol of our materialism. In so doing, they want us to be like the Old Testament prophet **Ezekiel** who, by the direction of God, did things like lay on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for 40 days as a wild stunt to illustrate God's Word and (in their case) God's coming judgment. If Christians make Christmas about rejecting materialism, enjoying each other's company and giving to people who are really in need, that will catch people's attention and it will speak forth the Word of the Lord, or what we sometimes call "the true meaning of Christmas".

By the way, remember that people might not appreciate this. You might think that if we all spend less and give more of ourselves, no one could object, but remember these words from a couple weeks ago by [Paul Gruchow](#), who said: *"It is one thing to decry the rat race...that is the good and honorable work of moralists. It is quite another thing to quit the rat race, to drop out, to refuse to run any further--that is the work of the individualist. It is offensive because it is impolite, it makes the rebuke personal. The individualist calls not his or her behavior into question, but mine."*

That's a downer and we have to be ready for that, but the upside of making Christmas about serving and doing for others is that we trade the role of the spoiled child for the role of Santa. When I first heard the truth about the big guy, I immediately wanted to join in the fun that I realized the grown-ups were having. I wanted to help sneak things past my younger brothers and I wanted to be a giver who knew the joy of seeing their eyes light up. On a larger scale, that's what the Advent Conspiracy is calling us to, except not with electronic trinkets and toys but with water and food and shelter and the Gospel of eternal life itself!

In **Luke 10**, Jesus sent 72 followers out on a mission. What was the mission? If you're familiar with the text, you might say "Preaching the Gospel", and that is true, but it isn't what the text says. Listen:

¹After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. ²He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. ³Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. ⁴Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

⁵"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' ⁶If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. ⁷Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.

⁸"When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. ⁹Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' ¹⁰But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ¹¹'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' ¹²I

tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

What was their mission? The first hint is that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few, which calls to mind evangelism, sharing the good news, calling people to repent and believe. But the specific assignment is about proclaiming shalom. When you enter a house, let your peace rest on it, and if a man of peace is there, a man whose Shalom is from the Lord, all will be well. Proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near and accept that man's hospitality.

But Jesus knows that all will NOT be well in every place. The shalom of God sounds like a threat to people who are heavily invested in the ways and things of this world, so he gives them that instruction about wiping the dust of that town from their feet and moving on. But their mission is to proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom and the Shalom that cannot be ultimately broken, and the sign of their truthfulness will be that they will heal the sick.

And what did they have to load up and take with them on this peace-giving journey? Nothing. Not luggage, not money, none of the things that usually would make a lot of sense.

Why not? I'm tempted to say that it's because God's shalom comes without presents and it comes without tags, and it comes without packages, boxes or bags, to quote the good Dr. Seuss. But it's better to say that those who go out proclaiming God's peace had better know it themselves, and not come into town carrying everything they need to eat and drink and wear for the coming year. If we have all that stuff with us, how can they believe us when we say, "But I don't really need it. My shalom comes from God!"?

That's why it is so vital for our witness that we reject materialism. And that's why I challenge you to do these two things, both of which I mentioned to some extent last Sunday.

1. Find someone YOU know who needs your service, your love, even some of your money – and give it. It's a fine thing for the church or the men's group or the teenagers to go mow someone's grass or fix their stove or carry in wood, but let's decentralize that from the church to the family, the couple, even the individual.
2. Figure out some way you can spend less on presents in your family, and give more of your presence. Plan a way to spend time together and enjoy each other's company and reject the idea that money can buy the best Christmas ever.

"Peace I leave with you", the Lord said. "My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives!" That's broken Shalom. "Come to me", he says, "and find real peace."