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## JESUS CHRIST IN ALBUQUERQUE: A SPECIAL CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON

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Special

Pastor Mark Driscoll | December 24, 2009

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### INTRODUCTION

Merry Christmas to Mars Hill Albuquerque. Pastor Mark here from Mars Hill Church. My good friend and your campus pastor, Dave Bruskas, asked me to put together a special Christmas Eve sermon for you. So I'm very happy to do that. And I'll tell you upfront, this might be the weirdest Christmas Eve sermon ever preached. If it works, thank Pastor Dave. If it doesn't, you can blame me.

So I'll go ahead and pray and enjoy teaching you. Father God, I ask that you would send the Holy Spirit to help me to articulate the special place of the Christmas celebration in the city and region of Albuquerque. I thank you, Lord God, that Pastor Dave is there, that the congregation is doing very well, that friends of mine, like Pastor AJ, are there to love and serve as well. And God, I pray that your Holy Spirit would be with my friends as we study and as they sing and celebrate the goodness of their savior. God, it is my prayer for their city and their region, that Jesus would be fully, completely, truthfully understood, enjoyed, and worshiped. And so please allow me to help serve to that end, I ask in his good name, Amen.

### THE LIE OF PAGANISM

Well, Mars Hill Albuquerque, here is what I'd like to do. I'd like to take the cultural context of your city and region and then overlay that with the ministry of Jesus, in particular the incarnation or the coming into human history of Jesus Christ. And your region is widely affected and influenced spiritually by native spirituality. And when it comes to speaking about native spirituality, I know that before the Europeans arrived, there were 300-plus various groupings, tribes, and nations of native peoples, and there was not a monolithic theology or spirituality, but there were some consistencies among all of the tribes, or nearly all of the tribes that were native peoples.

And what they all shared in common was a violation, quite frankly, if I might be so bold, of Romans chapter 1, verse 25. It defines there the heart of what we'll call paganism. "They exchanged the truth of God for the lie and worshiped and served created things, rather than the Creator God who is forever praised, Amen." The real problem in native spirituality is not solely a problem in native spirituality, you'll find it in Hinduism, in the New Age, in New Spirituality, in Eckhart Tolle, and Oprah Winfrey promulgate it as well. So it's not just reduced to a cultural grouping or a geographic local or to a time in history past. It is, however, a grievous error. Paul calls it "the lie." It is the lie that undergirds all other lies about God. The Bible teaches that there is Creator, and there is creation, that God is over creation. He works in it, enters into creation as the man, Jesus Christ. But ultimately, there is a distinction between Creator and creation that is collapsed in paganism in general and in native spirituality in particular.

I'll explain what I mean by that. Native spirituality teaches that there is a Creator. He is called, in some traditions, the Great Spirit, and perhaps even some would refer to him in familial terms, as the Father. Under the Great Spirit, or the Father, is Mother Earth. And it is amazing how this ancient native ideology, this pagan conceptuality, actually is embraced globally now. "Respect your mother," "Love your mother," the environmental bumper stickers pick up this ideology that the earth is our mother, that it is she who birthed us. It is to her that we belong, pay tribute and homage. And underneath the Creator God, the Great Spirit, the Father, and Mother Earth, there is mediatorship—the way that people who live on the earth, it is said in native spirituality, connect to the spirit world, and to God, the Creator, is through a human mediator. Now, this human mediator is not Jesus, God become a man. It is in fact, the medicine man. Some will call him the shaman, or the witch doctor, depending upon what the cultural tradition is, and how this sort of pagan ideology plays itself out, not just in native spiritualities, but in various pagan ideologies across the world, throughout the history of the world. And in native spirituality, the medicine man is the sort of go-between, the mediator. He is the one who understands the secret. And the secret is this: it is said that the earth and all that it contains is sacred, it is divine. And so what we see in the physical world is actually concealing, as it were, a greater reality of the spirit world behind it. So there is a spirit in animals, there is a spirit in fish, there is a spirit in birds, there is a spirit in trees, there is a spirit in rivers and in lakes and in streams. And it is believed that behind all of these created things or working through these created things are very powerful spirits and spirit beings.

And it is said that the medicine man, the shaman, whichever language you prefer, he can see through the physical objects to their spiritual connectedness. He could see what spirit lies behind the mountains, and the wind, and the water, and the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, and

the fish of the sea. And so it is the medicine man's job to explain the spirit world and to also appease the spirits. Because these spirits, quite frankly, are not angels. They're demons. They're not always good. They do evil. They're not always seeking our good, they're sometimes seeking to destroy us. And it is said that the medicine man is the one who understands how to appease the spirits. He'll do this with the various things like beating on drums, which is inviting spirits for a meeting; as well as sacred dances, certain feast and festivals; and also connecting with the spirit world, not through the Holy Spirit, like Christians do, that the Holy Spirit comes into a person to transform them and connect them to God, the source of spiritual life. In native cultures, the indwelling spiritual power and presence comes not through the Holy Spirit, but through the pipe, or the sweet grass, or the tobacco, or sage. It is literally inviting in spirits. It is inviting in the spirit world so we might be connected through these created things to the spirits that are ultimately empowered behind them. It's inviting demons. That's all that it is, if I could be that frank.

And in saying that, I know that some of you will say, "Oh, you can't criticize native spirituality because that would make you racist." No, we love native peoples. We love all peoples. And to love them best, we need to be honest and say that spirituality is not a good thing, because if we open ourselves to the spirit world, if it's not the Holy Spirit, we're inviting in demons. And that's not to our life, that's to our death. That's not for the truth, that's for the lie. And this is not true just of native spiritualities. It is common across multiple religions and regions. So we're not talking just about a people group. But we're talking about in your region, in your city, an ideology that is pervasive.

I'll continue to explain. There is the Creator or the Great Spirit, there is Mother Earth, and she births us, and we pay honor and homage to her, it is said. And the medicine man is a bit of a mediator, teaching us how to connect with the spirit world, and keeping us from danger and harm, inviting in the spirits through the pipe, tobacco, through the sweet grass, through sage, things of that nature and kind. And the way that sin is dealt with is atonement. But it's not that Jesus goes to the cross and dies in our place for our sins. Instead, we have to suffer. We suffer, for example, by undergoing time in the sweat lodge, where we are deprived of nourishment, where our bodies are taxed, where we feel physical pain and suffering. And some would say that the sweat lodge is actually the womb of Mother Earth, and that we go back into the womb to be rebirthed, stealing all this Christian conceptuality. And so you must suffer to pay God back for your sins.

It's been outlawed, but in some tribal traditions, there were dances, including the Sun Dance, where someone would be pierced through the chest, a man, tied to a pole, something representing God at the top would be elevated, they would have to gaze upon it for four days straight, no food, no water, no rest, no medical care, dancing in a catatonic state, suffering as the skin was torn from their chest, until ultimately, it ripped off, and that's how they were to atone for their sin. Americans outlawed that, but now with Native American studies, departments, and universities, those kinds of dances and Sun Dances are making a return, though without some of the piercing, which has, in fact, been outlawed.

In the Pueblo tradition as well, there was something called a kiva. It was an underground (usually) meeting place, where people would gather for sacred spiritual meetings to see demons and experience spiritual power. And it was said to be, like the sweat lodge, essentially, the womb of Mother Earth. There would be a hole with a covering at the base of the kiva, and people would dance on it loudly, violently, seeking to awaken the dead spirits, to take the lid off, and then invite the dead spirits to come up and to roam among the living. These are the various ways you deal with sin, through suffering, consulting the dead, inviting spirits into your life and trying to appease them.

## **COMPROMISED CHRISTIANITY**

Now, Christianity came, and it has not in wide numbers reached native peoples. There are a number of reasons for this.

### **1. RACISM**

Perhaps first among them is racism. When Europeans arrived and those of their descent, they lied, they stole, they cheated, and they were in no way acting-as a general rule, though there were, of course, exceptions of people who were trustworthy and honest-they didn't act with any integrity. And so, when someone is lying to you, and stealing from you, and destroying you, and in varying ways, oftentimes through substances, enslaving you, if they ask you if you want to worship their god, well, the obvious answer is no. That is one reason why in your region, the church of Jesus Christ has not been very strong, particularly among those who are from peoples that have lived there the longest.

### **2. CATHOLICISM**

Secondly, another reason for failure in the church is Catholicism is really what has taken root throughout the southwest in general, down into Mexico and beyond, but in Albuquerque in particular. I don't hate Catholics; I'm not anti-Catholic. I am a multiple-generation Irish-Catholic. I went to Catholic school. I was an altar boy. I still remember going to Christmas Eve Candlelight Mass every year. I don't believe that Catholics are all evil. I believe some, in fact, do love Jesus. But the Catholic Church also has some weaknesses, in that it's not a particularly Bible-preaching, Bible-teaching, doctrinally concerned church as a movement. There are parishes and priests, of course, which are an exception.

And so what happened was that Catholicism sort of commingled with Hispanic culture, and native culture, and it resulted in what we'll call syncretism. That is, taking what the Bible says and taking what paganism and native spirituality and animism say, and then sort of mingling them together, as if darkness and light could coexist when they ought not; as if the truth and the lie could coexist when they ought not.

Additionally, what makes Catholicism weak is that native culture and Hispanic culture tend to be more macho. It's a guy's culture for the most part. And what you see in Catholicism is the elevating as the most holy man, a man who is single, he's without a wife or children, a man who does not live in the world, he lives at the church, literally. A man who is not making his mark, but he has taken a vow of poverty and celibacy. And with the scandals in the Catholic Church, where some priests have been convicted of horrendous things against children, the church has lost its doctrinal clarity and its moral authority in many occasions to actually call people to repentance in a new way of life through Jesus that is not corrupted by sin and paganism.

### **3. CHARISMATIC THEOLOGY**

What also is popular in your area, number three, is some extreme forms of what we'll call Pentecostal and charismatic theology. And that is, that it is all experience based. It's not Bible-based, it's experience based. And in that regard, the pastor is more like a medicine man. He has dreams and visions and he interprets your dreams and visions, and he's the special holy man of God above all the rest and everyone brings large gifts to him, and he lives in affluence like the old medicine man would.

Subsequently as well, the church services become about emotional manipulation and working people into a frenzy-not a genuine enthusiasm for Jesus, but in some ways, more like a pagan experience. The "medicine man" talks about his vision while the people sing and dance and get themselves into an emotional frenzy, maybe on some extreme cases, even inviting demons into their midst. In some ways, it is just taking the belief structure and behavior structure of native spirituality and paganism, and just saying the name of Jesus and plugging in Christian concepts, like church and pastor. The result is, it doesn't-it doesn't allow our theology, what we believe about God, to define and interpret our experiences; our experiences become for us our theology. Which means people have demonic experiences. And I've dealt with enough people, and talked to enough people, even when I was visiting in Albuquerque and in follow-up discussions, that they have seen and experienced lots of spiritual things, but without the Bible, they don't know if this God or Satan, is this an angel or a demon, is this truth or a lie, and there is confusion and enslavement. So, compromised Christianity hasn't really helped the situation.

### **THE SPIRITUALITY OF AMERICANS**

Now, I tell you all of this in the weirdest Christmas Eve sermon ever, because the commingling of Hispanic, quasi-Catholicism, and native spirituality, is not just taking root in Albuquerque, in the southwest, and beyond, it actually is the prevailing, predominant theological conviction, spiritual conviction in the United States of America. Now, people wouldn't say, "I believe in native spirituality and syncretism, and sort of corrupted Catholicism all in one large confused ideology." But that's in fact what happens. Most Americans, they believe native ideology, and they practice compromised Christianity.

There was a study that was recently released by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. It looked at the spirituality of many Americans. Their findings were reported in places like USA Today. And so here is what they said. That for all Americans, those who are even non-Christians, 92 percent of people believe in a God. 70 percent believe that many religions lead to eternal life-that you don't need Jesus. 55 percent believe in a guardian angel, that there is a spirit with them. Now, it could be a demon. 52 percent believe in prophetic dreams, that God, or the gods, or the goddesses, or the spirit world speak through prophetic dreams. 67 percent say they have had a spiritual experience. They've seen an angel or a demon, or an apparition, or something supernatural.

Among those who say they are Christians-hear this, Albuquerque-20 percent (one in five) who say they are Christians believe there is a spiritual energy in the mountains, in the streams, in the animals. They believe exactly what the ancient native peoples do. And in fact, that way, there really aren't just ancient native peoples. There are now Americans who are also pagans, and some would say they're Christians. 16 percent believe in the evil eye, that you could look at someone and cast a spell on them to do harm to them. That's 16 percent of people who say they are Christians. And 20 percent of Catholics don't believe in death, burial, resurrection-they believe in death, burial, reincarnation, even though the Bible says it's appointed once to die then for judgment, not multiple lives.

### **THE PROBLEM OF SYNCRETISM**

Where does that bring us? Well, it brings us to a real problem. And the problem that you are facing in Albuquerque is the problem that the whole nation is struggling with. And that is that some who say they belong to Jesus or understand him, in fact believe things that are absolutely contrary to him. They have made the creation into the Creator. They worship the created world as if it were sacred, divine, and god, when it's not. The USA Today article actually went on to say that the problem is syncretism, it actually used the word. A non-Christian newspaper says the problem is taking the teaching of the Bible and then polluting it with lots of false spirituality, paganism, and demonism. It went on to say, the article did, that additionally, the real problem is that people aren't in Bible-teaching churches. They didn't, of course, call it a problem. They just said that's the cause. For me, that's the problem. Their answer was that it used to be that to understand spirituality and to interpret your spiritual experiences, you would go to church, study the Bible, and then you would have a means by which to interpret that which you were experiencing. But they said today, people don't commit to one church. They bounce from church to church to church to church to church. The result being, they don't root in a community, they don't develop relationships, and they're not participating in ongoing instruction, meaning going through books of the Bible, learning about Jesus, and the truth and the lie, and God and Satan, and angels and demons, and being able to sort out what's going on in their life.

And so the answer is rooting yourself in a church, and I know that Christmas Eve is one of those traditional times when people who aren't committed to Jesus, or are marginally committed to him, or treat churches like a salad bar, just picking whatever it is that they find most pleasing, they tend to show up, and maybe that's you. Let me say this, welcome to Mars Hill. We love you. We love you, we want good for you. We want you to know who God is. We want you to experience new life. We don't want you to just be spiritual and have experiences. We want you to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to meet Jesus. And that's what Christmas is all about, and my fear for us nationally, but for you particularly, is just throwing Jesus in among whatever you already believe and however you already behave, not realizing who he truly is and why he's come.

### **THE LIGHT HAS COME TO DEEP DARKNESS**

For that, we'll go to Scripture. And I want to share three Scriptures with you regarding Jesus Christ in Albuquerque, and I do so in the backdrop of what is going on spiritually, so you'd understand how Jesus is distinct from spirituality. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah

says this in chapter 9, verses 2 and 6: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. . . . For to us a child is born, to us a son is given." What he says is this: that Jesus comes into human history among darkness, "deep darkness."

And here is one of the more curious facts about Albuquerque. It's the place where the sun always shines, and it's the place of deep darkness. I live in Seattle, I visit Albuquerque. I'm not saying that Seattle is spiritually light. It's dark too. But Albuquerque is a place, spiritually speaking, of deep darkness. When demons are troubling people, when false religions are confusing people, when Christianity has many compromised expressions-there are other good churches in and around Albuquerque and Santa Fe to be sure, but there's also a lot of corruption and religion. There's a lot of emotionalism and experientialism, and guru-ism, and medicine-man-ism. There is also radical environmentalism and love-your-Mother-Earth-ism. There's a lot of deep darkness, deep darkness.

And the answer to deep darkness is light, and Jesus comes as the light of the world, and Isaiah says we'll know that he is coming. He will come as shining light. He will come as a child. He will come as a son. And so the hope for, quite frankly, all the spiritual darkness on the earth, but in particular, the darkness that pervades even the sunlight of Albuquerque, is the coming of a Son to bring spiritual light into deep darkness.

Number two, a few chapters prior in Isaiah 7:14, seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, speaking to those of us who live in places of deep spiritual darkness, we're told, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." How do we know? How do we know who this promised Son, this savior, this Immanuel, this God with us, which is what his name means, how would we know that it is he? Answer: the virgin will give birth to a son. He will be Immanuel, God with us. I really need you to understand this. Jesus is God with us. He's God with us. That's who he is.

And what is tragic to me, that around Christmas, people who are spiritual, be they native peoples, Hispanic peoples, be they people who aren't necessarily committed to a tribal religion, or a compromised Christianity, they're just into Eckhart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey, and the just general vague American spiritism, they will give lip service to Jesus, maybe even sing a few songs or jump in on a church service. But friends, let me tell you, if you don't know Jesus, you're walking in deep darkness. And he has come as the only source of light. He is the promised Son born of the virgin mother Mary, and he is Immanuel, he is God come down to be with us. See, we don't connect with the spirit world through rocks and trees and birds and animals represented in totems and celebrated in dances and songs and festivals. It's Jesus, it's all about Jesus.

Which brings me to my last verse. First Timothy 2:5-6: "For there is one God," – not many gods, multiple gods, not the Great Spirit and the Mother Earth, and the spirits that imbue all of creation. Not sacred divinity and people or things. Not God within me that I need to, through yoga and meditation, go in and find myself. There is one God. One God. – "And there is one mediator between God and men," – one way to connect with God, one way to know God, one way to belong to God, and that's exactly what Jesus says elsewhere, "I am the way, the truth, the life." Singular and exclusive. "No one comes to the Father but by me." – "The man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all," – that God became a man, to live without sin and to give his life on the cross as a ransom for all, all peoples, all nations, all cultures, all tongues, all tribes, all traditions, all ethnicities. He's the ransom for all. He takes away the sin of the world. He opens spiritually blinded eyes to see the glory of God. He removes the veil of deep spiritual darkness so that the love and the life of God revealed in the person and work of Christ can be known.

Mars Hill Albuquerque, I do love you. Jesus does love you. We, as a church, so much want you to not just allow this to be a spiritual evening. A time when you're following in the tradition of your family, who would come to Christmas Eve service, as great as that is. Not just being spiritual and having Jesus among the gods and the spirits, and among the ways that you can experience the divine. Not looking into yourself for improvement and empowerment, but looking out of the deep darkness that is our sinful hearts, and our corrupted lives, and our fallen world, and our rebellious culture, and seeing the light of God revealed in the life of Christ.

So I would invite you to give your life to Jesus. If you've been wandering and straying, and you've gotten off the path into deep darkness, now is the time to return to Jesus, to walk in the light as he is in the light. That is being honest about your sin and being honest about your need for Jesus and being connected to Jesus and his people, the church. And I want you to sing, and I want you to celebrate, and I want you to enjoy not just spirituality, not just a holiday, not just anything other than Jesus as Lord, God, Savior, King, and Christ. He is the one mediator between all of us and God. He is the man. His name? Christ Jesus. We love you. Merry Christmas to Mars Hill Albuquerque. Thank you, Pastor Dave. And I hope and pray that none of you would leave our time together without meeting Jesus. It's all about him.

Father God, I do pray for my friends. I do pray that they would not settle for spirituality, that they would not do what so many have done in their region, and even today across our country. And that is to add to Jesus things that are not true. Take from Jesus things that are true. That they would not follow spirits, that they would follow the Holy Spirit; that they would not rely on a guru, be that a well-known religious teacher, or me, or a writer, an author. May they rely on Jesus as their mediator, the God who became a man to connect them to the living God. God, we pray for Albuquerque, that Mars Hill Church there would not just be a great place for Christians to gather, and families to be raised up, as good as that is. May it be a place from which light shines into deep darkness so that many would meet Jesus as Immanuel, God with us. Amen.

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*Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.*