

Christmas Day

Nativity Set

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This morning as we gather to celebrate the actual day that we call Christmas, one of the goals, one of the desires that I had was that it would feel kind of like being in the living room of our home except for the 1,000+ people of being there, because usually on this day we find ourselves in the living rooms and the kitchens of our home and traveling near and far, but every now and then the calendar allows us the privilege of celebrating this day on our typical weekly day of worship. As we've heard the Christmas story read, as we've sung to carols that coincide, I thought it might be interesting, hopefully fun today as far as the message is concerned, to look at the Christmas story through the light of something that you probably have in your living room, it's called a nativity set.

Now, when you get a nativity set, there are many kinds that you can acquire, some of them are large, some of them are small. Our home typically has several in them and I know many of your homes do as well. Many of them serve as heirlooms and particular special reminders of places that have been visited or people who have gifted them, but I thought today we would walk through the nativity not for the appearance sake or the style but for the characters that are represented and how they play a part in what we know as the Christmas story.

You know, one of the groups of characters that may seem somewhat strange to you of their presence are what we know as the animals. In this particular nativity, we have a camel who is present. It's nice to have a camel. We have a donkey and there is a dog present. You may wonder to yourself, "Why is there a dog that is present at this nativity set?" Well, when you read the Christmas story, you know that the birth of Jesus, the manger scene, would have most likely been a remote scene, possibly like an outdoor scene, at best offering partial shelter but not complete. The Bible records that there was no room for them found in the inn.

You know, the idea wasn't just the outdoor scene but as I'm holding the dog figure, you may wonder, "Why would that be critical to you?" I don't know if you've noticed this, maybe you don't have as many animals as our home does, but oftentimes animals are a lot smarter than humans are. Let me give you a case in point. If you hear the news report that a tornado is coming through, your dog will go and hide under the bed, humans will get their iPhone out and go videotape the tornado. So who's the wiser of the creatures?

Animals do an excellent job of warning us of impending danger, always having kind of what we as humans might call a sixth sense. But you know, biblically speaking, there is evidence that there was a particular time where the animals were wiser than the humans. It's found in the book of Genesis 6 through 9. It's the story of Noah's ark. You know the story. The Lord comes and says a flood is coming for the judgment of humanity for their sins and rebellion. The Bible records that for 120 years Noah begins to build this ark to prepare for something humanity has never seen, it's called rain. For 120 years he is mocked, he is made fun of, but on that day when the door closes, there are only eight human beings inside: Noah, his wife, Mrs. Noah, we don't know her first name but it was not Joan of Ark. We don't know her name. His three sons and their wives who are nameless in Scripture. There were eight humans on the ark and a bunch of animals so you tell me who was wiser in that story? The animals had enough sense to get on the boat and the humans did not.

Well, what we know as the Christmas story, Mary and Joseph made their way from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. It's recorded that there was no place in the inn. The only human beings that we have recorded as being at the manger scene at the moment of his birth are Mary and Joseph. We know the shepherds came a few moments later. We know, as we'll discuss in a minute, the wise men came maybe sometime later. And so this nativity set may be very accurate. There may have been more of the animal kingdom than the human realm that night to celebrate the birth of the Messiah who, incidentally, was also the Creator of the creation known as the animal kingdom.

Then we move our way to the angel. Most nativity sets picture angels as having wings. I'm not here to disparage your nativity set but the Bible speaks that angels do not as a whole possess what we know as wings. There are two special classifications known as cherubim and seraphim that are pictured somewhat winged in Scripture but as a whole, the angelic beings are somewhat wingless but one of the reasons that we picture them this way is because not only in the Christmas story but in many stories in the Bible, they are going to and fro and they are transpiring time and space much faster than anything known in the human realm. They can be here one moment and there the next. But nonetheless, the biblical story accounts that the angel of the Lord came and declared to the shepherds that the Christ had been born in Bethlehem.

Then it goes on to share with a multitude of angels came and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. Have you ever thought of what that might have looked like that night when the glory of the Lord? Now, there are very few places where we see the glory of the Lord show up in such an incredible place. In the book of 1 Kings 8, the glory of the Lord shows up at the temple so thick that they had to have the worship service out in the parking lot because they couldn't see on the inside of the building. The glory of the Lord shine so magnificently in Matthew 17 on what we know as the Mount of Transfiguration, the Bible records that the appearance was as bright as the sun. We don't know how many angels were actually there and we don't know the volume of their declaration the Messiah had been born but we know that the glory of the Lord was present in an incredible supernatural fashion.

But, you know, it was the angels who first declared to humanity that their Savior had been born. It was the angels who the Bible records in Job 38, sang for joy when creation was initiated. You think about the Christmas story from the perspective of the angels, the angelic realm, they were there when God said, "In the beginning," the angels observed when humanity fell in the garden and so it's just rightfully fitting that it was the angels that would establish themselves on that hillside and declare to those shepherds that the Messiah had been born.

Speaking of the angels, those individuals of which they first spoke to, the shepherds, the shepherds that were watching their flocks by night. I'll be honest with you, I think these guys get a bad rap. We typically picture shepherds as lowly, meager, socioeconomically challenged individuals and to a great extent that's rightfully due. Most shepherds did not possess a great amount of education. Most shepherds did not possess a great amount of wealth. After all, what were they doing but they were tending the flocks of those who had the money to own the hills and the flocks. They were simply just being compensated to make sure that their assets were protected.

But if you think about shepherds, these were some tough guys and gals. After all, there is one man in Scripture who we know very well who grew up a shepherd. His name was David. King David was a shepherd and he was misunderstood as well. You remember the story of Goliath. It's found back in the Old Testament. Goliath is this massive huge Philistine who is giving all of Israel fits and trouble. David's older brothers were in the army of Israel. David's older brothers were supposed to have the courage and the strength to fight against the enemies of God but they did not. Much like Saul the king, none of them would go forward and face this giant beastly man named Goliath.

David's dad comes to him one day and says, "Your brothers need food and drink. Go and take it to the field of battle." So there's David, the shepherd, who goes to the field of battle and they mock him, "What are you doing here, little brother? You're just a shepherd. You have no business here." You remember the story, David shows up and says, "What's happening here? Why are we not engaging in battle?" And they said, "Because we are scared of Goliath. He is a massive man. Who are you to tell us what we should do?" And I remember David made this great statement, he said, "Is there not a cause?"

David goes into Saul, the king, and he says, "I'll fight." Saul says, "You're not capable of fighting." Do you remember the illustrations that he gave? It was from the life of a shepherd. He said, "I've killed an animal with my own bare hands." I'm going to be honest with you, I may be from Texas but I'm not going to try that. A wild animal comes into my house, we have items for that and it's not my hands. But David declared that a lion he had taken down with his own bare hands. And then we know the rest of that story, that with a slingshot and five smooth stones he took down Goliath.

Why is the story of Goliath so significant to your nativity set? Because King David was a shepherd and it was the shepherds who showed up that night. Yes, they may have been socioeconomically challenged but one of the things we find out about shepherds is they

were courageous and when all the world was in a panic, when all the world was upset about the taxation that Caesar Augustus had placed upon them as we just heard read, it was the shepherds who said, "We will go. We will meet this King of the Jews. We will worship Christ the Lord." So even though they were on the hillside and possibly in an economically challenged situation, we discover that their profession was one of courage and strength.

On the other side of this nativity is some of the most famous of characters and I want you to know that we looked long and hard to find a nativity where the wise men were not taller than anybody else. I don't know why we always picture them as being really tall but the Bible records the wise men in the Gospel of Matthew and what's interesting, when the shepherds come they find the infant Jesus. When the shepherds come it says they went to the manger but when the wise men arrived, they said it was a young child and that they went to a house. So I'm not here to change how you celebrate Christmas but most likely the wise men weren't even present and so for the sake of historical accuracy, Mike, can I borrow you for just a moment? I'm going to have you go and take these guys and put them in the foyer because they are really not a part of the nativity. Thank you, sir. I appreciate that.

They are called wise. They saw the star in the East. They had heard or possibly even read the Scriptures, the scrolls, particularly from a man the Lord used by the name of Daniel who declared precisely when the time of the Messiah would be. Though they were not there in that manger scene, though they were not there physically that first Christmas day celebration, we remember the gifts: they brought gold and frankincense and myrrh, picturing that this child was to be a King. That one day he would rule the world. That this child was to be a priest. That he would intercede on behalf of humanity for their sins. This child would be a prophet. He would declare truth even in the midst of adversity. The gifts were more than just valuable, they were more than symbolic, they pictured that the Christ child who they would visit would be prophet, priest and king.

You know, the Bible calls them wise not just because they saw the star in the East, not just because they believed what the Scripture said but after they met Herod, after they went and presented their gifts to Jesus and Mary and Joseph, the Bible said that they were warned not to go back to Herod and they were wise enough to take a different path home. By the way, though they technically were not there at the manger scene, we also know that there are not an exact number in Scripture of how many wise men there were. It just said that there were three gifts so we have assumed that there had to be three wise men. And so since we are kind of gathered in the family room, ladies, let me help you out. You know the joke that there could not have been more than three because there is not more than three wise men in the world but nonetheless, we traditionally say that there were three. There could have been 30. We don't know how many there were but we know they followed the star and then they took a different route home.

Well, up to this point we've hit the peripherals and we've dealt with the animals, we've dealt with the angels, the shepherds and the wise men. We now find ourselves to the key component of the manger scene: Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. I want to begin with

Joseph. As the video we showed earlier stated, he may be one of the most misunderstood characters of the Christmas story. Here was a man who most likely was in his late 20s, 28 to 32 years of age. He had been in a profession as a carpenter for years anticipating that day when a young lady by the name of Mary would be his wife. He had been betrothed or in our vernacular, he had been engaged to her for years. It had been arranged by their families. It was something that he looked forward to, she looked forward to, and then the news came. Mary came to him one night and shared with him that she was going to have a child and the one whom the child was from was God himself. Now, ladies, I defended y'all just a moment ago, guys, I'm going to defend you: now do you understand why God had to come to him in a dream and say, "Pay attention to what she said, it is true"? The Bible said that he thought to put her away privately and then decided not to.

I think Joseph is the unsung hero of the Christmas story. Can you imagine the shame and ridicule that he received during her pregnancy? Can you imagine what people said about him or what he should do. And what did he do? Let me tell you what he did guys: he hung in there. He stayed the course and he saw it out. He would on earth, he would on earth, he would father and teach a child that was not his own and people criticized him for doing so. And yet the Bible said he made provisions, he made sure that they had a way to get to Bethlehem, they had the means to do so. We don't hear a whole lot about Joseph in Scripture but the very fact that he was there the night Jesus was born tells us a whole lot about who he was. As Jesus grows older, the person of Joseph is not mentioned again after the incident where he is 12 years old in the temple. Most likely he would have passed on in Jesus' teenage to early adult years, but in those early formative years, a critical component in the earthly realm to the one whom we call Messiah. Misunderstood most likely but integral.

Then there is Mary. I don't want to sound crass but I think oftentimes we make just a little too much about Mary. Was she important? Absolutely. Did she find favor with God? Of course, but there's a passage in the Bible called the Magnificat where she prays to God and she makes this statement in her prayer that within her womb she says, "is my God and my Savior." We all need a Savior and Mary recognized that. But can you imagine being a 13 to 14-year-old young lady and going to school and saying that you're going to bear the Messiah? I don't know what words they used in Nazareth in those days but I can tell you what would have been said today, "Yeah, right. Really? The Messiah is going to come from you? You're not even married. You're only 13 years of age. Your family is not wealthy. You're not well-connected. There's no way." Do you remember how many times during the ministry of Jesus where they would say, "Aren't you the carpenter's son? Aren't you the son of Mary?" In other words, "You don't have the standing or the status that we desire the Messiah to come from." Yet she was a willing vessel. She found favor and was willing to go not just through the physical pain but the emotional, the mental, all of the issues that would have come from their culture. She was willing to bear the shame for the sake of bearing the Savior. That night while the animals were around and the shepherds were on their way, she would have the opportunity, the privilege, of bearing the one in flesh who in a few years would bear her sins on the cross.

Well, the nativity set that is in your home or the one that you've seen in many places, there are a lot of characters that you can involve, there are a lot of individuals to take part, but there is not a nativity set without Jesus. If you have Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the wise men, you've got a nice scene but you don't have a nativity. A nativity set is not complete without Jesus.

Now, we understand that the birth of Jesus as far as the quantity is concerned, is very limited in Scripture. It's spoken specifically in Matthew and in Luke. It's alluded to in John 1 but the Gospel of Mark doesn't mention it at all. In fact, up until Jesus being about 30 years of age, we have the birth narrative and we have a situation where he's at the temple mesmerizing the doctors and the theologians of the day, but the overwhelming majority of your Bible doesn't deal with Jesus the baby, it deals with Jesus the Savior.

Yet the Bible records in Hebrews 5 that Jesus learned through obedience. You know, I think one of the things that we struggle with as humanity, we don't struggle a whole lot with Jesus being God, he walked on water, he healed the sick and the lame, he was able to multiply food, do incredible things. I think what we struggle with is Jesus' humanity. You see, Jesus was 100% man, he was 100% God. Any less percentage of either, then he would've been neither. You think about it: Jesus grew up. In the flesh, he had to learn how to walk. Think about that for just a moment: God learning how to walk. I've got one for you: Jesus had to learn to tie his shoes. I know what some of you are thinking, "Well, they wore sandals back then." Those sandals had a lot more strings on them than our shoes do today. He had to learn to tie his shoes. He had to learn to walk. You think about all the things that we don't grasp at the nativity yet he was 100% flesh, 100% God. Though he came as a babe, it would not be the babe that would make the difference.

I know you've heard me say several times and I will continue for years to come, if it were not for an empty tomb we wouldn't be celebrating today at all. The Bible records that he was wrapped in swaddling clothes, clothes for burial. He came. His first night he was wrapped in a cloth that pictured that he would go to the cross.

You know, it's interesting of all the characters in the nativity, only one of them preaches a sermon. The wise men, we have conversations with Herod but they don't make any declarations. The shepherds, we don't hear anything other than it says that they went and told others. Joseph doesn't say a whole lot in Scripture. But Mary has an interesting sermon. You say, "Mary preaches in the Bible?" She does. She has a one verse sermon. It's found in John 2. Jesus' first miracle. He's turning water into wine. Listen to what Mary said. Are you ready for this? This is the Gospel according to Mary: whatever he says, do it. Whatever he says, do it.

You know, the Bible records very clearly over and over Jesus said he came to set us free, he came to forgive us of our sins and he said that if we would believe in him, that he would grant us everlasting life. That famous verse, John 3:16 came from the mouth of Jesus, "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

One last thing about the nativity and I'll close. Of all the characters and I joke about the wise men being tall, but all of them are fit to scale that evening. In Romans 10:9 in light of what Jesus told us, it says, "If you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, you shall be saved." Isn't it interesting that of all the characters in the nativity, Jesus is the only one that can fit in the pocket next to your heart? All the rest are too big. You can't get it in there. It won't fit. So the nativity is the nativity in your living room because you know the nativity is in your life when Jesus is in your heart. And he's the only one who can, he's the only one who is able, and he is the only one that makes a difference not just in this life but in the hereafter. And as we depart from this place and as we go to celebrate in our homes and with our families and in the communities around us, let us not forget the message of the nativity, that all these characters were coming for the Christ child. The Christ child is the one who promised he would forgive us if we believed in our heart and confessed with our mouth. Now we have the privilege of taking that story to others.

For our final Scripture reading this morning, I'm going to ask my family, my wife Tracy and Marshall and George and Jonathan to join me on the platform. We're going to be reading from Luke 2:17-18 and as our benediction today, it's only fitting that we sing a Christmas carol entitled "Go tell it on the mountain," because that's what the shepherds did and that's what we're called to do this Christmas season, take the Jesus that is in our heart and go share him with everyone we know. Luke 2:17-18, it says, "And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds."

If you would, stand with us as we close our service today with the Christmas carol, "Go tell it on the mountain."