

The Marvel of Christmas

God in a Manger

Colossians 1:15-20

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Scripture

The most common pattern for planning worship services in Christian churches throughout the centuries has been through the use of the Christian calendar.

The Christian calendar, developed in antiquity, was the way in which churches worshiped up until the Reformation. After the Reformation Protestants largely abandoned the Christian calendar because of the abuses attached to it in the Medieval Period.

Protestants noted that nearly every day of the year had been named after a saint. There was such a tremendous emphasis on saints and the feasts associated with them that the life of Jesus was overshadowed and obscured. Consequently, many Protestants discontinued using the Christian calendar.

Recently, however, Protestants—and even some Reformed Churches—have started using a simple and unadorned Christian calendar. This Christian calendar accents the major events in the life of Jesus, such as Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost. This Christian calendar is in fact similar to the Christian calendar used in the Early Church.

The Christian calendar begins with Advent. The word *advent* means “coming.” Advent signifies the period preceding the birth of Jesus when the Church anticipates the coming of the promised Messiah. The purpose of Advent is to help worshipers understand the events preceding the birth of Jesus. Historically, Advent spans a four-week season before Christmas.

Today, then, is the first Sunday of Advent. I would like to preach a series of Advent messages on “The Marvel of Christmas.” My sermon for today is titled “God in a Manger.” Much of the material for this series of messages is from John MacArthur’s book titled *God with Us: The Miracle of Christmas*.

My text for today can be found in Colossians 1:15-20:

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

Introduction

When Lauren was four years old she was old enough to know about and anticipate Christmas. In the weeks leading up to Christmas that year I would often ask her, “Lauren, what is Christmas?”

“Christmas is when baby Jesus was born,” Lauren would answer.

Then I would ask a second question, “And who is baby Jesus?”

“Baby Jesus is God’s Son.”

In that short little discussion with Lauren I was trying to impress on her the true meaning of Christmas.

You see, our culture has no trouble accepting Lauren’s first answer: *Christmas is when baby Jesus was born*. Christmas for our culture is simply the celebration of a baby named Jesus.

But our culture does have trouble with Lauren’s second answer: *Baby Jesus is God’s Son*. Our culture is not prepared to affirm that statement.

However, it is the answer to the second question that gives Christmas its true significance. Baby Jesus is God’s Son. Christmas is not merely the birth of a baby. Christmas is the celebration of God’s entry into our world.

The Marvel of Christmas

Our culture shifts the true focus of Christmas to the *infancy* of Jesus, whereas the true focus of Christmas is actually on the *deity* of Jesus.

Our culture will sing about the birth of a baby, but will reject Jesus as God come in the flesh.

Our culture will sing about his nativity, but will reject his authority.

Our culture will adore him as an infant, but will not bow down to him as God.

Our culture will embrace the accompanying events of Christmas—the manger, shepherds, wise men, angels, Joseph and Mary—but will not believe the advent of God in human flesh.

Lesson

Christmas is not primarily about Jesus' birth, infancy, and nativity. Christmas is about God's incarnation. Christmas is about God's advent in human flesh. Christmas is about God in a manger.

Today, let's observe several truths which affirm Jesus as God in a manger.

I. Jesus Is the Image of God (1:15a)

First, Jesus is the image of God.

Speaking of Jesus, the apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 1:15a, **“He is the image of the invisible God.”**

The Greek word for **image** is *eikon*. It means a perfect replica, a precise copy, a duplicate—something even more like the original than a photograph.

Sometimes the Greek word *eikon* meant picture, like when an ancient soldier sent a portrait to his father with the note, “I sent you a little portrait (*eikonion*) of myself painted by Euctemon.”¹

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1989), 30.

But the meaning of *eikon* goes beyond a picture or portrait because the **image of God** carries the idea of revealing the personal character of God. Jesus is not merely a portrait of what God is like, but he is actually the revelation of who God is.

The apostle Paul is saying that Jesus is the perfect replica, a precise copy, a duplicate, the exact image of God. Jesus himself said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

I read a story about a boy whose Dad went off to World War II for many years. The boy was just a toddler when his Dad went away. Before he went away Dad made sure that he left a portrait of himself for his son. After a while the boy forgot about his Dad as a person. He would look at the portrait of his Dad more and more frequently and say, “If only Dad could step out of the picture and be real. . . .”

At Christmas we celebrate the truth that God stepped out of heaven and into this world in the real person of Jesus. Jesus is the exact representation of God. Or, as the apostle Paul puts it, **“He is the image of the invisible God.”**

II. Jesus Is the Firstborn of God (1:15b)

Second, Jesus is the firstborn of God.

The apostle Paul goes on to say in Colossians 1:15b: **“He is . . . the firstborn over all creation.”**

At first glance this phrase seems to suggest that Jesus is the first person that God the Father created. In fact, this is how Jehovah’s Witnesses interpret this statement.

The Greek word for **firstborn** is *prototokos*. *Prototokos* means first in *rank* or *honor*, not necessarily first in *origin*. It has to do with birthright. So, for example, the firstborn in a Jewish family was the *prototokos* and was the heir, the ranking one, the honored one who had the rights of inheritance.

An example of the *prototokos* is Jacob. Esau was first in origin, but it was Jacob who was the heir, the *prototokos*. Furthermore, in a royal family the *prototokos* also had the right to rule.

So, what Paul is saying is that Jesus is the one who is first in rank and honor and has the right to rule over all creation.

Speaking of King David, God says in Psalm 89:27, “I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.” The meaning of *firstborn* (*prototokos*) is given in plain language. The *firstborn* is “the most exalted of the kings of the earth.” If David is the most exalted of the kings of the earth, then how much greater is David’s greater Son, Jesus?

Jesus is **the firstborn over all creation**. He is the most exalted of the kings of the earth. Indeed, he is “the King of kings and Lord of lords,” to use the language of 1 Timothy 6:15.

III. Jesus Is the Creator of All Things (1:16-17)

Third, Jesus is the Creator of all things.

The claim that Jesus, being the firstborn of God, means that he is a created being completely ignores the context of Colossians 1:15.

Instead of being created Jesus is in fact the Creator of all things. Colossians 1:16-17 explicitly states that Jesus is the Creator of all things: **“For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together”** (Colossians 1:16-17).

Jesus was not created. Jesus is the Creator of all things.

Have you ever reflected on Jesus’ creation? If reflecting on Jesus’ creation doesn’t cause you to marvel at his deity, then you really don’t understand who Jesus is.

Think of the expanse of creation. The expanse of Jesus’ creation is staggering.

A ray of light travels at 186,000 miles per second. Imagine for a moment that you could travel that fast—and not get a ticket for speeding! You climb into your Lightmobile and set off. You will reach the moon in 1½ seconds! You will reach Mercury in 4½

minutes. Getting to Jupiter will take about 35 minutes. Suppose you decide to keep going. You will get to Saturn in about 1 hour. Do you know how long it would take you to reach the nearest star? It will take you 4 years and 4 months!

Traveling just to the edge of our galaxy—the Milky Way—will take you about 100,000 years, assuming you had no breakdowns along the way! If you counted the stars as you sped along to the edge of the Milky Way, you will count about 100 billion stars!

Suppose you wanted to explore other galaxies. You would have, in the words of Carl Sagan, “billions and billions” of other galaxies from which to choose.

The size of our universe is incomprehensible.

I ask you, “Who created all this?”

The baby in the manger created all this. **“For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together”** (Colossians 1:16-17).

This is the glorious truth we celebrate this Christmas! Jesus is the Creator of all things. Jesus is God in a manger. And **by him all things were created.**

IV. Jesus Is the Head of the Church (1:18)

Fourth, Jesus is the head of the church.

The apostle Paul says in Colossians 1:18: **“And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the first-born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”**

Sam Bronfman, the late CEO of the Seagram Company, once entered a crowded conference room and, anxious to get on with the meeting, plopped into the nearest chair. One of his young assistants immediately said, “No, Mr. Bronfman, you’re supposed to sit at the head of the table.”

“Young man,” replied Mr. Bronfman, “wherever I sit is the head of the table.”²

We cannot tell Jesus what to do or what not to do. Because Jesus is God, he is the head of the Church.

V. Jesus Is the Fullness of God (1:19)

Fifth, Jesus is the fullness of God.

There has never been another person like Jesus. The New Testament repeatedly underscores this truth, stressing his deity.

Colossians 1:19 in particular captures the essence of Jesus’ divine nature. The apostle Paul says, **“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.”**

No one can really explain what it means for God to be born in a manger. How does one explain the Almighty God stooping to become a tiny infant?

Jesus’ birth was the greatest condescension the world has ever known or ever will know. We cannot begin to understand what was involved in God’s becoming a man. And yet he did. Without forsaking his divine nature or diminishing his deity in any way, Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem.

People sometimes ask, “Did Jesus cry? Did he wet his diaper? Did he get fussy when he was hungry?” Of course he did. He was fully human, with all the needs and emotions that are common to all human beings.

And yet he was also fully God. How can both statements be true? I don’t know. The Bible does not tell us how these things are so. The Bible simply states that they are so.

We know from other passages (such as Philippians 2:5-8 and John 5:30) that Jesus voluntarily set aside the prerogatives of deity in order to come down to earth. He did not give up being God, but he willingly gave up the independent use of the privileges and

² Leadership Journal (5-7-96), 12.

powers that were his as God. Nevertheless, in all this he remained fully God and all the fullness of God dwelt in him.

In his book on *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power* Bryan Chapell tells the story told by Paul London, who served as a missionary with the Sudan Interior Mission in Africa. At a Missions Conference Paul shared that where he ministers in Africa the strongest man in the tribe is the chief. You might think that this is because the chief must wear a very large, ornamental headdress and heavy ceremonial robes, but there are other reasons as well.

Water is very scarce where these people live, so they have to dig deep wells. These are not wells as we know them—with brick walls, a pulley, and a bucket at the end of a rope.

The African people sink a narrow well shaft as much as 100 feet into the ground. Even though the well is deep, the ground water of that dry land seeps very slowly into it and there is never a drop to waste. If the water were too easy to reach, the people might not use it sparingly, or an enemy might steal the next day's supply at night.

So, the tribesmen cut alternating slits into the wall of the well all the way down to the bottom, where the water is. By alternating his weight from one leg to the other, a man can use these slits as steps to walk down the shaft to the water. Only the strongest men can make the arduous climb down the well and back up again with a skin full of water for the whole tribe.

One day a man carrying water out of the shaft fell back down and broke his leg. He lay at the bottom of the well, crying for help. No one was able to help the man because no one had the strength to make the climb back up while carrying another man.

And so the chief was summoned. When he saw the plight of the injured man, he took off his massive headdress and set aside his ceremonial robe. Then the chief climbed down into the well, took the weight of the injured man on himself, and brought the man up to safety. The chief did what no one else could do.

This is just what Jesus did for us. He came down from heaven to earth. He set aside his heavenly glory, just as the chief set aside his headdress and robe, in order to rescue us.

Let me ask you a question, “When the chief took off his headdress and robe, did he stop being the chief?” No. Of course not. He was still the chief.

In just the same way, when Jesus left the glory of heaven and set aside his divine prerogatives, he did not stop being God. He was still God.³ Indeed, as the apostle Paul says, **“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him”** (Colossians 1:19).

VI. Jesus Is the Lamb of God (1:20)

And sixth, Jesus is the Lamb of God.

The question naturally arises: *Why would God become man?*

Why would Jesus, though he is before all things, and though he has in everything the supremacy, come to earth as a baby? Why would Jesus come to earth and suffer, and eventually die an excruciating death?

The apostle Paul tells us why in Colossians 1:20: **“. . . and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”**

Jesus was born as God in a manger in order to make **peace through his blood**. Jesus’ goal was to reconcile man to God.

Earlier this year we received a phone call one Sunday evening telling us to come quickly because our son Jon had broken his arm. When Eileen and I arrived at the scene of the accident we found Jon in terrible pain as his left arm was very badly broken. We rushed him to the emergency room at the University Community Hospital. After a very long time Jon was finally treated.

Even though Jon was heavily medicated he was still in painful agony. I knew that his arm would have to be set. The doctor

³ Bryan Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 10-11.

eventually asked Eileen to leave the room so that he could set Jon's arm.

It was then that I recalled the time I dislocated my shoulder as a student and had to have it repositioned in the hospital emergency room in Cape Town. I was in agony. And so I knew the pain that Jon was about to undergo. It was in those moments of heart-break that I found myself thinking, "Oh, my son, how I wish that I could suffer in your place."

I remember another who saw my suffering because of my sin. He willingly took my sin upon himself and he suffered in my place. Why? Jesus did that so that he could reconcile me to God the Father **by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.**

Conclusion

Friends, this is the marvel of Christmas! Don't miss the true significance of Christmas. Christmas is not merely the celebration of a baby. Christmas is the celebration of God in a manger.

But Christmas is meaningless unless you make it personal. You make Christmas personal by believing that Jesus is indeed God in a manger. But more than that, you believe that Jesus is the only one who can reconcile you to a holy God.

Believe that Jesus is God. Believe that he paid the penalty for all of your sins. Believe that you can do nothing to earn or merit God's favor. Believe that Jesus is the only one who can take you to heaven.

If you believe that, let me assure you that you will discover the marvel of Christmas and receive the greatest gift ever: God in a manger. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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