

# Christmas Eve – The Christmas Story

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**Preached On:** Monday, December 25, 2017

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You know, it is this time of year, this season that we know as Christmas that even if you're one of those individuals who says, "I'm not into tradition," can we all just agree this is a pretty traditional time of the year? In fact, for your family, maybe your tradition is that you eat a certain food on a certain night for a certain purpose, or maybe y'all go and do a certain series of events, or maybe there is a certain activity or a certain endeavor, this is that time of year if there is going to be something traditional about our lives, something repetitive, this is that time of year. In fact, there are some of you that do some activities and traditions this time of year not because you started it but because somebody a long, long time ago started it, and that's just kind of the way your family does things. Well, as the family of faith, probably one of the most traditional activities, the most repeated endeavors of this season, is the reading of the Christmas story. In fact, in just a moment I'm going to read the famous Christmas story from Luke 2. If you have a Bible with you, I'd be glad for you to follow along. If not, I'd be glad for you to listen along. Luke 2 contains what we know as the traditional Christmas story. This is the account where Mary and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem because Caesar has instituted a tax. This is the story where we find the shepherds and the angels on a hillside, but most importantly, this is the story in Scripture where we find Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

In Luke 2, beginning in verse 1, what we know as the traditional biblical Christmas story. It says,

1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) 3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. 6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. 8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and

the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. 15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. 18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

This is what we call the traditional Christmas story in Luke 2. It begins with Mary and Joseph on that famous journey. They make their way to Bethlehem, a small little city which according to geopolitical terms was somewhat insignificant, but according to the prophet Micah was critical because that was what was prophesied to be the place of the birth of the Messiah. Caesar had declared that all should return to their hometown and there Joseph and Mary and Jesus in the womb made their way to Bethlehem. When we find midway through the story, though, there is the scene that I want to focus a little of our attention on tonight, it's the scene on the hillside. You know, here is this town that is not large by any contemporary much less ancient standards, but even further outside of that on the hillside in the middle of, can I say nowhere, are a group of shepherds, a group of men who are there in the midst of the night just going about their daily routine, when all of a sudden literally out of nowhere, the sky lights up, the angels descend and declare to them the news of the birth of the Messiah.

Now I want you to think about the scene with me for just a moment because it is so different than what you and I ever regularly experience. They did not have artificial light. They didn't have access to even in the darkest of nights here when we have the slimmest of a moon's radiance, we have artificial light descending from the cities around us, from the homes in our neighborhoods or even in the distance we can see the glow of those areas that are densely populated; 2,000 years ago, there was no artificial light and even if they had utilized a system of torches, Bethlehem would have been such a distance and the light would have been so dim that they would have been experiencing the darkest of nights.

I can't say that I've experienced this dark of night as these shepherds did, but a couple of nights ago I did get to do so someone. Last week our family had the opportunity to travel back to what you might call the old homestead, not in the middle of nowhere, Israel, but

in the middle of nowhere, Texas. I mean, it's the middle of nowhere. It is nine miles from the nearest city and I use that term loosely because if you call an intersection with a gas station a city, then that's the nearest place, nine miles away. But even as desolate as a place as that is, there is still the glow of artificial light, there are still the lights on the highway, though they may be a distance away, and yet even in that darkest of environments when a light shines forth, it startles anyone. In fact, as you're driving around the terrain of that type of area, particularly in those dark of night, you hear the phrase like a deer in the headlights, I've experienced deer in headlights, cow in headlights, coyote in headlights. I mean, as you're driving down those roads, it doesn't matter what the animal is, as soon as the lights pierce the darkness, they are startled. They stopped in their tracks. They don't know where to go and they just stop. Now, can you imagine here you are a group of shepherds minding your own business in the darkest of nights, darker than we can imagine, and according to this passage, it wasn't just a spotlight, it wasn't just the headlights from a car, it says that the glory of the Lord shone down upon them.

Now, I can tell you that this would have been a frightful event. You say, "Well, how do you know they were scared?" Notice what it says, they were sore afraid. I don't know what sore afraid means but that means you're afraid, I can tell you that. They are sore afraid, in fact the very first words that the angels communicate is, "Fear not." Can you imagine the look on their faces that night? I mean, can you imagine? We joke about deer in headlights and we talk about any time that we are startled that look that gets on our faces, can you imagine these guys on the backside of this hill, this light descending from the heavens, can you imagine the awe, the fear that would have been in their faces? They said, "But don't worry," and what they really share with them is, "this is the absolute best night of your life, the best information you could ever receive, for the Savior has been born."

But in verse 12 of this passage, they communicate something very interesting, they say, "And this will be a sign unto you, you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." So they presuppose that they are going to make their journey into Bethlehem and they say this is how you're going to know that you have found the right child, he'll be wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. What is interesting, though, is it says it will be a sign. Now in our culture today, a sign is a yield sign, a stop sign, a neon sign, but in a biblical context, signs are very far and few between. In fact, when a sign shows up, it is unmistakably the intrusion of the supernatural into the natural.

Now the Bible speaks of miracles and some incredible events but a sign is even beyond that. In fact, the very first time in the Bible that we hear of a sign being mentioned is in the book of Genesis 1. The Lord makes the stars and he throws them into the universe and he says these stars are for signs and for seasons. We find out later in the book of Matthew and even in the book of Revelation the impact of how those celestial beings will play as time goes on.

A couple of chapters later, chapter 6 of the book of Genesis, we know the story as Noah's flood. We know that Noah and his family, eight people total get on that boat. For 40 days

and 40 nights it rains. It says the waters come even out of the heavens and then 15 months of the drying of the land. Once they descend out of the boat, once they make their way back to the land, the Lord says, "I'm going to give you a sign," and he places a rainbow in the clouds.

So in the first chapter it's the stars, in the ninth chapter it is the rainbow, and then we get to the book of Exodus where the Israelites have been held captive for 400 years by the Egyptians and Moses is sent by the Lord to say, "Let my people go." As you make your way through those famous plagues, when we get to the end there is a land of Goshen and there is a plague of darkness and ultimately the Passover. As you make your way toward the end of those stories it says, "And these have been determined a sign in the land," in other words, God is doing something in your midst that only God can do.

A little later in the Old Testament, a guy by the name of Gideon shows up. Gideon was a warrior for God. He was an incredibly strong warrior but he questioned God. He doubted God. He didn't know if God could pull through in the toughest of battles and he said, "God, I'm struggling" God said, "Don't worry, I'll give you a sign. Tomorrow morning, go out and put a rug out on the front lawn. There is going to be dew all around it but the rug is going to be dry." He went out the next morning and he found it exactly as the Lord had said. That night he said, "But God, I'm still struggling. I'm questioning. My faith is weak here. Help me out." God says, "Fine. Tomorrow, the dew will be on the rug and the ground will be dry."

And so whether it is stars in the heavens, whether it is the rainbow in the clouds, whether it is the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt or the dew on the ground versus the rug, any time a sign shows up in the Bible it is an absolute, unmistakable, supernatural move of God. In fact, it was Isaiah 7, speaking of Christmas, where the Lord said, "I'm going to give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall give birth to the Messiah." These men on the hillside, these shepherds, the angels said, "Don't worry, guys, we've sent you a sign."

Now these guys would have never seen a sign like that. They have obviously seen the stars and they've seen a rainbow, but they've never actually seen that demonstrated before them. What I find interesting, though, is what they say the sign will be. "You're going to find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Now if you just hear that the way it is said in verse 12, that doesn't sound like stars in the sky, that doesn't even sound like deliverance from Egypt or dew on the rug versus the ground, for almost everybody has seen a baby wrapped in baby clothes lying in a place where babies would lay, but the Lord says, "No, this is a sign." In other words, when you show up to Bethlehem, you're going to see something that only God can do.

Well, it says that they made haste and they made their way very quickly to Bethlehem. Now, you think about them that day. There would have been lots of babies that would have been born that would have been new to those in the Bethlehem area, and I am convinced that most of them would have been dressed the same way. You say, "Well, how do you know that?" Because I've been to the hospital and they dress babies the same way today as they dressed mine when they came out. I mean, babies, they are pretty

much dressed the same and they put swaddling clothes or a swaddling blanket around them, and something about swaddling clothes, they don't give you a different blanket based on what your net worth is. I mean, you just get a blanket. It doesn't matter how well-connected your family is. It doesn't matter how rich you are, how poor you are, how famous you are, how not famous you are. I mean, a swaddling blanket is a swaddling blanket.

So when they said you will find this babe wrapped in a swaddling blanket, understand there is nothing real significant, there is nothing real impactful about that, that's just how babies come and they are wrapped. In fact, I remember the purpose of swaddling clothes when our three young men were born. I'm going to tell you, I did take pride in my swaddling abilities. Now, when it comes to swaddling, those of you who have not had children yet, when this time comes you'll understand what I mean. It's because they need to go to sleep, you need them to go to sleep, and nobody is going to sleep, and one of the reasons is because they are making all this movement and they can't get settled and so you take these swaddling clothes and you wrap them up tight so that they will feel secure and that they will go to sleep. Now, I took this as a personal challenge. I think swaddling should be an Olympic event because it's not easy, and not just anybody can get that little guy or that little girl to be still in that crib. So I remember I knew, I knew, I knew I had done it right when I took that blanket and I would make it as tight as I could, as safe as I could, and this is what I would see, are you ready? All three of them would go...and they would stop. I was like, "I got it. I did it."

You see, when it says I'm going to give you a sign that there is going to be a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, there is not a whole lot of uniqueness about that because that's what most babies, if not all babies would have been wrapped in, and these shepherds would have had no idea what the baby actually would have or should have looked like. I mean, to them a baby would have been a baby. Here's what I find interesting, here's the sign: a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Notice that when the shepherds show up, it does not say they found the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, it said they went to the manger. You see, the sign, the importance here is the manger, and I'm not talking about the building that it was attached to or was it a cave or such, you see, a manger is more specific than that. It's not just about a structure, it's not just about was it a hollowed out cave or was it made of sticks and bricks, you see, a manger was actually something that was utilized for the purpose of feeding and for watering animal life. Isn't that what we see in our nativity sets in our home? When we set up those nativity sets, no matter what they are made of or how fancy or not so fancy they may be, we have the Mary and Joseph, the Jesus character, and we always have animals somewhere in that nativity, do we not? Because a manger was a place where animals fed. It was a place where animals got refreshed with water. But more specifically, a manger possessed not just an outward structure but critically it possessed a key piece. Most of them would have been about three feet long by 18 inches. In our culture today, it would have appeared to be like a cement slab with an indentation in it or it was hollowed out so that the food or the water could be placed in. Though very crude in fashion, it would have made the perfect crib for an infant that night. It would have already been hollowed out, it would have been roughly the size it would have needed to be, and there in the stillness of

the night, there was a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes perfectly laid in this feeding trough for animals.

Now you may be wondering to yourself, "How is this a sign? I mean, I can understand it kind of guides you to where you need to be and not all babies are in that specific fashion in that specific location." But I want you to think about swaddling clothes, lying on what we would call a slab of concrete.

Some years ago I had the opportunity and I know many of you have had this as well, I had the privilege of traveling to Israel. I had the privilege of seeing the sites that we read about in the Scriptures all throughout, and I went to that place where many people and historians believe was the burial place for Jesus Christ. It was a typical burial place, one of that economic persuasion, Joseph of Arimathea, who allowed him to borrow his tomb. And they took us in there one by one or two by two and we went into this place and what was unique about that burial place is that every place that was prepared for someone to lay in their death – hear me clearly – appeared like a concrete slab with a slight indentation in the middle. In other words, the significance of the sign is that when you see a babe who is in a burial place at his birth, I want you to hear the significance of this, the angels declare for unto you a child is born, this is the day that the one who came to take our sins away has been born, the one who came for the purpose of exchanging his life for ours, the one who came with the very goal of allowing himself to give of himself so that through his death we might experience life.

You know, at the end of the story it says the shepherds could not contain themselves. It says they went to and fro and they told everybody the things they had seen and the words they had heard because for the first time, they were actually getting to experience what they had hoped for their whole life. They had hoped the Messiah would come. They had hoped that forgiveness would be at hand. They had hoped that salvation would finally be a reality and there it was lying in that manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

You know, it mentions that it's a sign. I gave you a lot of the signs that are found in the Old Testament but not the one that is found in the Gospels. As you read the Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, in Matthew 12, there is a group of guys who surrounded Jesus and they were upset. They don't like what he's teaching. They don't like what he's preaching. They don't like any of it and finally they say, "Okay, Jesus, we know that you can heal, we know that you teach wonderfully, we know the crowds love you, but there is one thing we want: show us a sign. Show us something that only God can do. I mean, make it big, Jesus." Do you know what he says? "I'm only going to give you one sign, as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights." The only sign that Jesus said he would give would be his death and eventual resurrection and even on the night of his birth the angels said, "I need you to look for a sign. There is going to be a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and he is going to be foreshadowing, he is going to be picturing, he is going to be prophesying what's going to happen in about 33 years when he allows his life to be exchanged for yours." You see, tonight we have gathered on Christmas Eve. This is a time that we celebrate. We sing "Away in a Manger" and "Joy to

the World." We celebrate the birth of the Savior but we cannot adequately celebrate the birth until we have remembered the death and eventual resurrection.

In just a few moments, we as a family, a family of faith as well as our own families, are going to have the opportunity to do just that. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 11 it says that when we gather for the Lord's supper, that we are remembering his death until he returns. In just a moment I'm going to pray for us and after I pray, I'm going to have some of our ministers here and they are going to be at the tables and at that time you're going to have the opportunity as a family whether you are single, a couple, whether you and your entire row want to come, that's fine, we're going to gather around and we're going to have the opportunity as a family to participate in remembering the Lord's death on the day that we celebrate his birth.

Let's pray together.

*Heavenly Father, as we gather around your table, Lord, we have for many days and weeks and even months leading up to today, we have celebrated and pointed to and spoken of your birth but Lord, in these next few moments, we are going to remember your death. God, we are grateful that you loved us so much that you were willing to give of yourself for us. You loved us so much that you were willing to exchange places on our behalf. God, that you loved us so much that you were willing to experience death so that we could ultimately experience life. Lord, I pray in these next few moments as we celebrate around your table we will remember the reason that we celebrate this season is because Christ the Savior has been born. It is in his name we pray. Amen.*

As I mentioned, we've got several tables that are established here at the front as well as a couple in the balcony, and at your leisure and at your pleasure, if you will just make your way as a family to a station and participate in remembering the Lord's death.