

# Christmas Sunday

*“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.  
<sup>11</sup>For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior,  
who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11. NKJV)*

**Loving Christmas**  
**December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012**  
**Luke 2:8-20**  
**Rev. Paul Carter**

## **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles this morning to Luke 2:8-20. You know this story well. This morning represents a major change of pace for me as a preacher and also for you as a hearer. For the last 51 weeks we have been engaged in our Walk Through The Bible journey and we have been preaching backwards on those readings. What that means is that we have been preaching through largely unfamiliar territory for the last year. Not a lot of sermons in God’s House from Obadiah, Habakkuk and Nehemiah but we have been parking there and we have been blessed because all Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the men and women of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. We will finish that journey next Sunday but this Sunday, Christmas Sunday we are doing something totally different. This morning we are visiting one of the best known and most frequently studied passages in all the Bible. There are only 2 Christmas narratives in the Bible – 3 if you add the few verses in John and 4 if you add the dragon dream in Revelation 12 but I think I am the only one who counts that as a Christmas story – so there really aren’t that many to choose from and we have a minimum of three Christmas services a year so people tend to know those passages pretty well. That’s ok. This is a good story to know well and my job this morning is to help you see why it is worth talking about at least every other year. Let me read to you from God’s inspired Word:

<sup>8</sup>Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. <sup>10</sup>Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. <sup>11</sup>For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”  
<sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest,  
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

<sup>15</sup>So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup>Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. <sup>18</sup>And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. <sup>19</sup>But Mary kept all these things and pondered *them* in her heart. <sup>20</sup>Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them. (Luke 2:8-20. NKJV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Given that you are likely quite familiar with this story I suspect that you do not need me to go through it with you word for word, explaining the key phrases and providing the historical background. My guess is that unless this is your first Christmas on planet earth you have heard most of that before. Instead I want to tell you what I think we are supposed to LOVE about this story. This story is GOOD TIDINGS of GREAT JOY – it is the beginning of the Good News of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We are meant to ENJOY this story and to DELIGHT IN what it tells us about the God of our salvation so let me share with you this morning the three things I love best about this well known and well read story from God’s true and inspired Word.

The first thing I love about this story is the guest list.

## **What I Love About This Story**

### **1. The Guest List**

We have five kids and have fostered several others so I know a thing or two about birthdays and guest lists. I know that if you want to know who your child loves, just ask her to fill out invitations to her birthday party. If you tell your child that only 10 friends can come to the party for bowling and cake then you will watch your child agonise her way through the class list and the cousins list and the church list in order to come up with that special line up of her 10 bestest friends. When you get that group to the bowling alley you will know all you need to know about the people your child favours.

So when the Bible announces the first birthday of God in the flesh “among those whom he favours” I want to know who those people are. In verse 8 we are told about the people who are at the top of the list:

<sup>8</sup>Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. (Luke 2:8. NKJV)

Historians tell us that the pasture lands around Bethlehem were used to raise the sheep that were used in the temple sacrifices and so if anyone was prepared to recognize and celebrate the birth and incarnation of the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world it would be these people. But ironically, because of their occupation shepherds were often ceremonially unclean and were therefore infrequent attenders at temple. According to Jewish law they were legally disqualified from serving as witnesses in a court proceeding because they were notoriously dishonest and under socialised; they tended to have a very loose definition of personal property rights. And yet they are the first human witnesses God summons on this momentous occasion.

The next person we meet in this story is Mary. She is probably around 14 years old and she already has a very questionable reputation. She is engaged, likely to a man she barely knows. She is a descendent of Aaron the High Priest and he a descendent of David, Israel’s long lost king. Such lineage had little value in those days because there was no king and the priesthood was under the control of the Romans. Still it is a good match and if nothing else the children will have proud stories to tell to their school friends.

The problem though is that Mary is pregnant and she and Joseph have not yet come together. In Mary’s day that was a pretty big deal. Because she was of the priestly line it was an even bigger deal. According to Jewish law she could be burned at the stake as an adulterer from the priestly class. But Joseph, the third person on our guest list brought no charges and neither has he shamed her by cancelling the engagement. An angel of the Lord told him that Mary has been faithful and that the child is from God.

Shepherds, a teenage girl from an old and noble family and a gentle man who trusts in the Word of the Lord. These are the people God invited to share in this holiest of days. There are no wise men in this story; we knew that even before the Pope wrote his recent book. The wise men didn’t

come until much later; Jesus was living in a house and he is described as a toddler upon their arrival likely two years later. Filling the stable for his first birthday were shepherds, an embarrassed teenage girl and a courageous young carpenter and maybe one very weary donkey. Minus the donkey, God in the flesh celebrated his birthday with the poor, the humble and the rejected. Who else would you expect? Isaiah 66:2 says:

this is the one to whom I will look,  
to the humble and contrite in spirit,  
who trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2. NRSV)

God has always been allergic to arrogance, stubbornness and independence. He delights in humility, repentance and those who trust in his word. If you want to experience utter aloneness this Christmas and the terrifying awareness of God's silence and withdrawal, here is what you do: Be absolutely sure of yourself. Be certain about a whole range of things you really have no business being certain about. Assume that you are able to decide right and wrong for yourself without reference to some dusty old Bible written by gap toothed Jewish goat herders from 3500 years ago. Justify yourself and all your selfish actions by comparing yourself to other people who are even worse than you. Do that and you will know barren, cold, utter silence from your God and your Creator. On the other hand, if you want to be drawn into the presence of God, if you want to know him and enjoy the pleasure of his voice and his Spirit then ask him to soften your heart. Ask him to show you your sins. Confess to him your waywardness and foolishness and ask him to open your mind to the beauty and wonder of his Word. Do that and you will find yourself drawn deeper into the presence of the Lord than you would ever have dreamed.

The secret of the LORD *is* with those who fear Him (Psalm 25:14. NKJV)

The second thing I love about this story is the location.

## **2. The Location**

<sup>11</sup>For there is born to you this day **in the city of David** a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:11. NKJV)

The City of David is Bethlehem. Bethlehem is where Kings are born. We talked last week about how the grand narrative theme that holds the Bible together is the theme of promise. Promises

made, promises deferred, promises enlarged and promises fulfilled. The first promise was made concerning Eve in Genesis 3; God said to the serpent he was cursing:

<sup>15</sup> And I will put enmity  
Between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and **her Seed**;  
He shall bruise your head,  
And you shall bruise His heel.” (Genesis 3:15. NKJV)

God promised that one day a child of Eve would come and he would make war with the serpent and crush his head. Eve treasured this promise in her heart and when she had her first child, Cain she burst forth in hope and expectation saying:

“I have produced a man with the help of the LORD.” (Genesis 4:1. NRSV)

“God and I have done it! Cain is the man, Cain is the long expected one who shall crush the devil and return peace to the earth!” But Cain wasn’t the man, Cain was a crazy person who murdered his own brother. Cain was not Jesus but this does not mean that the promise has been cancelled. The promise has been deferred. The promise goes quiet. It re-emerges and is enlarged in the days of Abraham. God selects a certain family in the line of Eve through which to bring forth the promised child, the long awaited seed. God promises Abraham:

<sup>2</sup> I will make you a great nation;  
I will bless you  
And make your name great;  
And you shall be a blessing.  
<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you,  
And I will curse him who curses you;  
And **in you** all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2-3. NKJV)

Later in this same chapter God says:

<sup>7</sup>And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, **Unto thy seed** will I give this land (Genesis 12:7. KJV)

Late in Abraham’s life God speaks again with a final word about this growing promise:

<sup>18</sup>In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (Genesis 22:18. NKJV)

So God promised to Eve that one of her SEED that is one of her sons would arise and crush the devil and restore peace to the earth. Eve never saw that promise fulfilled but she believed it and looked for it. Abraham is told that in his seed – that is in one of his sons – all the nations of the world would be blessed. This son of Abraham would inherit the land and from that land bring blessing to all the earth. But Abraham’s son Isaac lived a pretty ordinary life. He didn’t bring peace to the world or blessing to all mankind. The promise was deferred and passed on to his son Jacob as a birthright and a blessing. Jacob who was renamed Israel became the father of the nation of Israel. The promise now rested on a nation. But within that nation God selected a house. He spoke again of promise to one man in the line of Jacob and Abraham and Eve, the man David of Bethlehem:

<sup>12</sup>“When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, **I will set up your seed after you**, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup>He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. <sup>14</sup>I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. (2 Samuel 7:12-13. NKJV)

The seed that was promised to Eve, who would crush the devil and bring peace, the seed that was promised to Abraham who would rule from Israel and bring blessing to all the people of the earth is now promised to come from the house of David of Bethlehem! One of the sons of David, one of the sons of Bethlehem would arise and be king over an everlasting kingdom. He would rule over the earth not just as the Son of David but also as the Son of God! That my friends, is a very big promise.

David thought that Solomon was that son but he was not. Solomon was not Jesus. Neither was Solomon’s son. Solomon’s son was actually a stupid and spoiled brat and because of his stupidity the kingdom was divided and the fame of the Lord diminished among the peoples. And yet God did not remove his promise from the house of David – a child WOULD COME from Bethlehem and so the whole Bible watches as child after child is born to David’s house. Is this one Jesus? No, he is not. Is this one Jesus? No, he is not. Son and son, seed after seed is paraded before our eyes in Holy Scripture and none of them are Jesus! The line of David grows dark and evil. The men of his house become foul and unbelieving and God says to Jeconiah, near the end of Israel and Judah’s political life:

<sup>24</sup>“As I live,” says the LORD, “though <sup>f</sup>Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were **the signet on My right hand**, yet I would pluck you off; (Jeremiah 22:24. NKJV)

The sons of David are not good men and God says to David's seed: "If you were the signet ring on my finger I would rip you off and cast you from my presence!" And all creation holds its breath in wonder. Has the promise been cancelled? Has God finally given up on his plan to restore peace to the earth through the seed of Eve and the son of David? And then after 70 years have passed in silence, God speaks and reaffirms his promise upon David's house:

'I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of Shealtiel,' says the LORD, 'and will make you like a signet *ring*; for I have chosen you,' says the LORD of hosts." (Haggai 2:21-23. NKJV)

Zerubbabel was Jeconiah's grandson. For two generations all creation held its breath in fear and wonder and then the promise came to rest again on David's house. Bethlehem would produce a king! The house of David would rise as though from the ashes and rule over all mankind! But Zerubbabel never became that son, that seed that was promised. He was never a king. He was a governor but that is all. The son of Zerubbabel did not seem to enjoy even that modest appointment. David's line continued to exist under promise but it once again faded into political irrelevance. Back in the land, Israel remained a subject people. First to the Persians then to the Greeks – they were somewhat independent for a generation or two after the Maccabean Revolt but then they once again fell subject this time to the Romans. The house of David played no significant role in any of these events. God's promise was silent for 500 years. And then into that silence these glorious words:

"Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. <sup>11</sup>For there is born to you this day **in the city of David** a Savior, who is Christ the Lord....

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest,  
And **on earth peace, goodwill toward men!**" (Luke 2:10-14. NKJV)

Into that cold and frightful silence of 500 long and sorry years, God speaks! Do not be afraid! I have good news – the good news you have been waiting for for 500 years! Longer than that, this is the good news that Eve looked for in the birth of Cain, this is the good news that Abraham looked for in the birth of Isaac, this is the good news David looked for in the birth of Solomon, this is the good news we thought was cancelled in the days of Jeconiah, this is the good news whispered privately into the ear of Zerubbabel. This is the good news all creation has been longing for since the days of the serpent and the curse subjected the earth. This is THE GOOD

NEWS – unto us this day in the city of David is born the one we have been waiting for! A child has come! The promised SEED! The chosen one! Son of David and Son of God, glory to God in the highest and on earth PEACE!! Finally, at long last PEACE! And God’s goodwill toward men.

Bethlehem is the right place for glad tidings of great joy. Bethlehem is the city of all our hope.

Lastly, I love the mystery of this story.

### **3. The Mystery**

I’ve told you before that the word “mystery” in the Bible means something different than in does in Agatha Christie novels. Mystery in the Bible refers to something that is hidden in plain sight that can be only be seen with the eyes of faith. Jesus delights to speak in mystery, he regularly taught in mysterious parables, when his disciples asked him why he did this he answered:

<sup>11</sup>He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup>For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. <sup>13</sup>Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (Matthew 13:11-13. NKJV)

God speaks in such a way that only those with eyes to see can see and only those with ears to hear can hear. He does not hide or lie, but he tells the truth in a way that leaves room for a multitude of responses. He lays the truth in plain sight and he invites us to pray for eyes to see and a heart to perceive. Faith precedes sight. Prayer precedes understanding. So it is with the incarnation.

Jesus – the long awaited SEED of Eve and Son of David is born in Bethlehem but he was also born in a stable – that we do not expect. Kings are born in palaces and with much fanfare – Jesus is born in a barn to a crowd of watching shepherds. Hidden in plain sight. He is announced as the one we’ve been waiting for but the angels slip a little mystery into their message, did you catch it? We have been waiting 500 years for a King to be born in Bethlehem who will bring peace to all the nations but did you listen carefully to the angelic message:

I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. <sup>11</sup>For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.... (Luke 2:10-11. NKJV)

City of David, good, Christ is the Greek word for Messiah so that's good, Lord is "adonai" which means master and also refers to God so that is good – it's all good! Everything is there but the angel manages to slip in some mystery there in plain sight. Did you catch it? A Savior. A what now? They were looking for a King and instead they hear whispers of a cross. This is the piece that never seemed to fit. The Messiah cannot also be the Savior – the Christ cannot die on a cross. Jesus cannot be KING and LAMB – those things do not fit together! Jesus fought against this confusion all his days. Do you remember what happened after Jesus fed the multitudes with miraculous bread?

<sup>15</sup>Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone. (John 6:15. NKJV)

Do you remember when Peter finally had the courage to declare his belief that Jesus was the Christ? He said: "You are the Christ! You are the Holy One! You are the one who is Son of David and Son of God! You are the one!" It was a big moment, it was the first time one of the disciples had put all that together. But then:

Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.

<sup>22</sup>Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!"

<sup>23</sup>But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:21-23. NKJV)

Peter was not quite able to penetrate the mystery. He didn't understand that the Majestic Christ was one and the same with the suffering servant. He didn't see all of who Jesus was. You see in the Old Testament there are two great comings that represented the hope of the Jewish people. The main one was the coming of David's Son – the Messiah. The other one was the coming of the Suffering Servant who would take away the sin of the people. Isaiah said of this one:

<sup>13</sup> Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently;  
He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high....

<sup>15</sup> So shall He <sup>£</sup>sprinkle many nations.  
Kings shall shut their mouths at Him;  
For what had not been told them they shall see,

And what they had not heard they shall consider. (Isaiah 52:13-15. NKJV)

A Servant is coming who will make atonement for many people from all nations.

Yet we esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten by God, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But He *was* wounded for our transgressions,  
*He was* bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him,  
And by His stripes we are healed.

<sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray;  
We have turned, every one, to his own way;  
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6. NKJV)

The Suffering Servant must come and bear the sin of many people and bear in his own body the punishment of our peace. That coming is also in the Bible but nobody understood that the Suffering Servant and the Glorious Messiah were one and the same person. Unto us this day in the city of David is born more than a king, unto us this day is born also the punishment of our peace. Mystery. Hidden in plain sight and only seen through the eyes of faith.

### **Conclusion:**

I would like to end this morning with a confession. I need to repent of general grouchiness with respect to all things Christmas. I find Christmas deeply and terribly annoying. Now let me be clear, I find the incarnation to be breathtakingly beautiful and life-givingly precious – I am pro-incarnation but I have become decidedly anti-Christmas. The whole gift buying, mall shopping, gluttony inducing pagan overlay has somewhat robbed me of Christmas spirit. I realized this the other day when my kids asked me why I hate Christmas. That’s not a good question. Max was bothering me about putting lights up and Mikayla was in on it too and I realized that my kids have figured out that I am less than enthusiastic about Christmas. I don’t do lights, I don’t do malls – if you get a Christmas present from me this year let me save you the suspense and just tell you – Shauna Lee bought it and I don’t know what it is so don’t ask me. I’m coming clean with you. But here’s the thing, I think it’s ok to be weary of the pagan overlay. I think it might even be ok to be angry at the pagan overlay. But. We better make sure – I BETTER MAKE SURE – that my kids and anyone else who cares to see can also tell what we love about Christmas.

Because I actually do love Christmas. I love what it says about God. I love God’s condescension toward the poor and the humble. It stirs in me a desire to simply lose myself in the fullness of his

word. It makes me want to stop worrying and just believe what is there. When I give my mind to trust, I feel invited into the secret place of God and I love what I find there. I love the reminder that all the promises of God are yes and amen in Christ. God never forgets his promises. If he said it – IT WILL SURELY COME TO PASS. I may not understand the timing, I may have to wait through a season of deferment and silence but it will come to pass. All of history moves along the chords of Promise towards the end of God's decree. I rest in that. I glory in that. And I love the mystery – I love the fullness of Christ unveiled to the opened eye of faith. I want to do more than walk in a winter wonderland this Christmas I want to walk by faith into the fullness of God in Jesus Christ. Lamb of God and King of the World – born to die and yet to rule. Fullness of God in helpless babe. Even so Come Lord Jesus. And all God's people said, amen. Amen and Merry Christmas.