

The Gospel of Christmas

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Evan. Good morning, everyone. Good to be with you. How are we feeling this morning? Okay, excellent, great. Very lively. We're alive, sort of.

Well, I want to start out this morning with a moment of silence. I don't know about you, but it's Christmas is filled with joy, but it's also a bit crazy, a bit harried. And so in order to prepare our minds and our hearts to receive from the Lord, I want to give us the gift of silence for a moment, to ask the Lord to speak to each one of us, to share something with us that would encourage us and challenge us.

So let's take a moment of silence together. Father, we're grateful for this time. We're grateful that you are a God who speaks.

We know that you speak to us through the preaching of your word when we're gathered together in community. We pray that you would speak to us now, for your servants are listening.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Well, Merry Christmas. My name is Kevin. Welcome to Church of the Advent. I'm one of the pastors here. It's good to be together, small crowd, those of us who've stuck around in the city.

[1 : 3 0] But we're really grateful to be here celebrating Christmas. You'll notice that the scriptures this morning were the stories of Christmas. Christmas happened a few days ago, but Christmas lasts for 12 days.

And we didn't have a Christmas Eve service, so I decided we'll spend some time focusing on the Christmas story together this morning. Our lessons were all taken from the Gospel of Luke, and this Gospel provides the fullest account of the birth of Jesus.

There are three important scenes, three miraculous episodes. First, the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel announces the birth of Jesus. And then we read responsibly, prayed responsibly, the Magnificat, which is Latin for magnifies.

It's the first words of Mary's song. Magnificat anima mea dominum. My soul magnifies the Lord. And then the Nativity, the birth story of Jesus.

This is the story of Emmanuel, of God with us, and it's a fantastic story. It is, as C.S. Lewis puts it, myth become fact. An angel appears with an almost unbelievable message.

[2 : 3 8] A virgin becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit. And God, God becomes a human being. It would be unbelievable if it weren't true. But it is true.

It is an amazing story. And it's an amazing story that begins in silence and in darkness. So I want to start off by talking a little bit about the background of the story.

Immediately before the events of our story, the people of Israel experienced 400 years of silence. Scholars call this the intertestamental period, the time between the end of the Old Testament and the start of the New.

In our Bibles, the very last book of the Old Testament is the book of Malachi. And my Bible has one page separating Malachi and Matthew, the beginning of the New Testament. One page, but it's 400 years.

Easy to overlook this. And in this silence, God and Israel, husband and wife, were estranged. The faithfulness and the disobedience of God's people led them to be cast out of the promised land.

[3 : 42] They were in exile. And eventually they would return to the land. But God's presence left and it didn't return. And so the people were left to wonder, Has this 400 years been just a very long separation?

Or has God finally divorced us after all? You know, Israel was clinging to hope. They were living in hope, but it was a hope unfulfilled. There was 400 years of silence and darkness.

400 years of waiting. 400 years where it was always Advent, but never Christmas. And the people were desperate to hear the voice of God.

But the only voice they heard was the voice of their oppressors. You see, they were living under foreign rule. The people of God were oppressed by one of the greatest and most terrible civilizations, nations that humanity has ever produced.

The Roman Empire. And as the nativity story begins, we hear the voice of Rome commanding that a census be taken. A census was taken so that they could have an accurate account of the populations for tax purposes, but also to secure oaths of allegiance to Caesar.

[4 : 53] And so Mary and Joseph and everybody else had to travel to their ancestral home to be registered. And the census was a very painful reminder, not only of God's absence, but of Roman rule.

And I've tried to imagine this Advent in the past few days. I've tried to see the Christmas story through new eyes. I've tried to imagine what it would have been like for Joseph and Mary to experience this.

You know, they've traveled a long way, 70 miles as the crow flies from Nazareth in the north to Bethlehem in the south, maybe 90 miles by foot or by donkey.

And they were traveling not for a religious pilgrimage, one that they might be excited about, but for a political pilgrimage, something that they didn't want to do, especially while Mary was very pregnant.

Now, I understand you should never tell a moving while pregnant story around Mary, the mother of Jesus. But our experience last year moving while Susan was pregnant has helped me to appreciate a little bit about what they went through.

[5 : 52] We moved last November when Susan was seven months pregnant. And we had modern comforts, the benefit of modern medicine. And we wanted to move. We chose to move.

We were excited about it. And we traveled in a comfortable ride. I borrowed my brother's extended cab F-150, packed the kids in there with all of our stuff. And it took us about three and a half hours to go from Princeton to D.C.

We were very comfortable. And this is not to mention that Susan, unlike Mary, was with child according to the normal way. She wasn't living under the suspicion and the shame of a young girl who became pregnant before she was married.

And despite all of those comforts, despite all of that excitement, and all of the safety nets, we're glad we moved, but we wouldn't want to do it again at the same time when Susan was so pregnant. And so I can appreciate but can't fully understand the anguish and the fear of Mary and Joseph who were traveling while Mary was so pregnant.

And it was a dangerous journey, one that would have taken anywhere from seven to ten days, if you can imagine. I've never been pregnant, so I don't know, but I imagine it would be very horrible. You add to this the resentment and the bitterness and the rage, the anger, the hopelessness of being forced to do this by Rome, the oppressors.

[7 : 09] And so all of those feelings filled their silence. And in the midst of this silence, God finally speaks. In the midst of the deepest darkness, the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

An angel appears, a young girl, maybe 12 years old, maybe 14 years old, with tremendous faith says yes. And God is born as a little baby. The Messiah has finally come.

It's an amazing story, but for many of us, I understand it's very familiar. We've heard it so many times, maybe since we were children, that it's become a bit rote. And so I want to try something a little different this morning to help make the Christmas story come alive for us so we can see it with new eyes.

I want to consider the Christmas story with the aid of the vision of a Christian artist, a Christian painter. I want to do a little exercise in Visio Divina, sacred seeing. So we'll use a painting to help illuminate the scriptures this morning.

Just like biblical commentaries on my bookshelf, paintings can serve as visual commentaries to help illuminate the scriptures. And I found this to be true of a painting called Nativity by an artist, a Chinese artist named He Chi.

[8 : 24] The painting that we'll look at together to illuminate the text has the Nativity story, Luke 2, 1 through 20, collapsed into one canvas. And the more I've reflected on this painting in my own devotional time over Advent and Christmas, the more I see how Chi is a really careful and faithful interpreter of Luke's gospel.

Hopefully it's on the screen here. You've been handed a program. If you open up the program, you'll see the painting on one side and the Nativity story, which we'll focus on. The screen sometimes is not ideal with the colors in the painting, so you have it right in front of you.

It'll be helpful to look at as we talk about Luke 2, 1 through 20 this morning. Also a fun thing for the kids to look at while we're all together. So I want to say a few things about the artist, an artist I've recently discovered.

His name is He Chi. He was born in mainland China. He's a Chinese Christian artist. And as a teenager during the Cultural Revolution, his job was to paint portraits of Mal.

It got him out of hard work in many ways. He painted portraits of Mal because those were in high demand for people's homes during the Cultural Revolution. And while he was in studio painting these portraits of Mal, he happened to discover a painting by the Italian Renaissance painter, Raphael, of the Madonna and the Child.

[9 : 44] And that painting changed his life. He was profoundly moved by it. And what he would do is during the day, he would do his job. He would paint portraits of Mal.

And by night, he would paint portraits. He would reproduce Raphael's painting, and he would paint the painting of Mary and Jesus. And this experience with that painting eventually led him to become a very serious Christian.

He went on to study medieval and modern art in Germany and Chinese folk art in China. And we see all those influences coming together in this painting. The painting looks a bit like stained glass.

The figures, you can see the influence of modern painters like Picasso or Chagall. And it's all translated through the idiom of Chinese folk art.

Now, most of the art that she creates are just scenes from the Bible, which you should check him out after this sermon. He has amazing paintings.

[10 : 42] And his art functions a lot like stained glass windows did in cathedrals. They're not merely beautiful decorations, but they actually teach God's people. They are visual theology.

They're beautiful. They're instructive. They're evangelistic. They are paintings that let the light in. And so this morning, I want to allow this painting to help us see the nativity scene with fresh eyes.

We'll begin with the angel at the top of the painting. And then we'll move clockwise and spiral into Jesus. And I want to look at three things as we consider the nativity story this morning.

I want to look at the transmission of the gospel. I want to look at the scope of the gospel. And finally, I want to consider the person who is the gospel. So first, the transmission of the gospel will focus on the angel.

And the angel here is at the top of the painting. You see him flying. This is the angel Gabriel. And he appears to the shepherds.

[11 : 43] You can tell the people he's speaking to are shepherds by the shepherd's crook that one of them is holding. And the shepherd preaches the gospel to the shepherds. It's what we read about this morning. In verses 10 and 11 of chapter 2, we read, The angel announces the good news of the gospel that the Messiah has just been born.

And if you look closely at the change in light divided by the geometric lines in the painting, the angel's upper torso is breaking into an illuminated section.

It appears that his message is shining light into the darkness. As the angel is breaking through, it's almost as if he proclaims the gospel. The dark veil, the darker blue colors around the edge, is being torn open so that we can see Christ illuminated.

I think this is a really powerful way, a visual way of showing that it's in the proclamation of the gospel that Jesus is seen most clearly. The proclamation is not based on our wit or our nuance, our strength of tongue, but the power is in God's message proclaimed.

God's spirit, not our rhetoric, makes dead people come alive. It illuminates hearts and minds. I want to pause here and talk about this for a moment. You've probably heard the quote that's spuriously attributed to St. Francis.

[13 : 17] Preach always, use words if necessary. You've probably heard that before. I've seen it on a meme, maybe, on Instagram. Some of you may love it. I resonate with it in a lot of ways.

But I hate to break it to you. Francis didn't say it. And also, it's not true. Now, I appreciate the sentiment. I understand why it's a viral saying.

Our lives need to reflect the gospel. Fair enough. It's important that we walk the talk that we share, that we live out the gospel, but it's always necessary when we preach the gospel to use words, to use language.

As great as these things are, preaching the gospel is not the same as doing random acts of kindness. Preaching is not some kind of altruistic performance art.

Right? It's good to do acts of kindness with no strings attached. These develop relationships, and they earn you the right to be heard. But the gospel is transmitted through God's messengers, you and me, sharing the message of Jesus with our words.

[14 : 27] And I understand it can be frightening, but it's how people come to know Christ. Think about yourself. You're probably sitting in this pew, the pew that you're sitting in, because someone shared the gospel with you.

Somebody loved you enough, somebody was brave enough to share the gospel, to tell you about Jesus, that Jesus loves you and died for you. I thank God for them.

I think about the people who loved me enough to share the gospel that allowed me to see Christ clearly, to become a Christian. And this makes me think of Romans 10. Paul writes, So if you're sitting in here this morning, if you're a Christian, you have been sent to preach.

So I want you to think as we approach the new year, think about the two or three people in your life, maybe the Lord's bringing them to mind right now, people that you love who don't love Jesus.

What does it look like to love them well by sharing the gospel with them? I encourage you to do that as we step into a new year. Make that one of your goals this year. Share the gospel.

[15 : 48] I want to move down to the right. We see the shepherds looking up at the angel. These are the first ones to hear the good news and then themselves bear witness to see the baby Jesus.

They go and see Jesus, the first ones, after Mary and Joseph. And then they become the first human preachers. They share this message around. But I want to focus not on the shepherds this morning.

I want to focus on the sheep as we consider the scope of the gospel. And by scope, I mean considering the gospel's impact and its implications in the world. The sheep, as I've studied the painting and reflected on it, have become my favorite part of the painting.

In verse 8 of chapter 2, we see that the shepherds are keeping watch over their flock by night. What that means is the shepherd and the sheep are there together and the sheep hear the message of the angel along with the shepherds.

And then the message that they hear is followed by a song. We hear the first Noel, the very first Christmas carol in verses 13 and 14. After the angel proclaims the gospel that Jesus has been born, a multitude of the heavenly hosts suddenly appears, praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

[17 : 08] It's an amazing scene. So what's going on? An angel appears, the glory of the Lord shines, it floods the field, and an angelic choir joins in and sings.

This is a song and light show that puts the best Hillsong worship experience to shame. And she includes the sheep. And he paints them, I love this, he paints them as if they're dancing.

If you look at it, it's like there's a sheep conga line going on at the bottom of the painting. And this may seem like a stretch, sort of this creative license that she takes, but I don't think so.

Psalms 96 says that when the Lord comes, when the Lord arrives, all creation will rejoice. We see this in verses 11 and 13 of Psalm 96.

This is from the NIV. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad. Let the sea resound and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant and everything in them.

[18 : 07] Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy. They will sing before the Lord for he comes. He comes to judge the earth. In the nativity story, we see that the Lord has come.

And she is painting this in his painting. Creation is rejoicing. And this, if we know our Bibles, this should come as no surprise to us. Jesus did not come to just save human souls, though he did do that.

He came to redeem people of every tribe and every tongue and every nation. But he also came to renew creation. And creation has been waiting. Creation has been waiting for the Lord, just like the people of Israel.

We read this in Romans 8. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of redeemed human beings who will finally take up their vocation to faithfully steward the earth.

As Tommy preached about last week, stewarding the earth means cultivating it, protecting it. The gospel is indeed good news for all people, but it's also good news for the whole world.

[19 : 12] And so I want us to think for a moment, if the trees could talk, if the land that we farm or the oceans that we fish or the animals that we eat could speak, would they rejoice at how the gospel has transformed our lives?

Think about our habits of consumption. Is our gospel good news not only for all people, but for all the earth? If not, I suggest our understanding of the gospel might be too narrow.

As Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ, I think we're called to reconsider what our faith means for the things that we buy, the things that we consume, where we buy them from.

This is something Susan and I, and I know many of us in the congregation, have been thinking a lot about these days. So we've looked at what the nativity tells us about the transmission of the gospel and the scope of the gospel.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to consider the person who is the gospel. I want to move to the center of the painting, to the focal point of the canvas. We see Jesus, held by his mother Mary, the favored one, the servant of the Lord.

[20 : 22] I wish we had more time to talk about Mary, but we're going to talk about Jesus. The infant Jesus, you'll notice, is the only figure in the painting that's fully in the light.

The whole scene revolves around this newborn baby, the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Jesus is the focus. He's the focal point of the painting, the world.

And so we're going to end by looking at why Jesus is good news for the world. Now, in some ways, the nativity story suggests that Jesus is just a normal baby.

He developed in his mother's womb, like babies do. He was brought into the world through his mother's painful labor, with all the hard work, with all of the beauty, with all of the strength, with all of the pain that this requires.

And he was tenderly held by his mother, and he nursed at his mother's breast, and was wrapped in swaddling clothes. He was a normal baby. Jesus is fully human.

[21 : 23] But in other ways, of course, Jesus was the least normal baby ever. His father was God. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was brought into the world as the Son of the Most High and born as a king, whose kingdom will have no end.

And his birth was announced by angels. Jesus is fully human, but he's also fully God. And he shows us what God is really like. And it's surprising. The exalted Son of God was willingly brought low, as Mary proclaims in the Magnificat, to exalt those of humble estate, to save sinners.

The Son of God was born among farm animals, not in a castle. And he was laid in a manger. He was praised by peasants and not by princes. And he ultimately established his kingdom, not like most kings do, not by killing, but by being killed by the very ones that he loved and came to save and did save.

Christmas is an invitation to contemplate the absolute wonder of the incarnation, of God taking on flesh, of Jesus being fully God and fully man. It's hard to wrap our minds around it.

It's good to revisit from time to time. One of my favorite reflections on the mystery and the marvel of the incarnation comes from St. Augustine in one of his sermons preached at Christmas some 1,600 years ago.

[22 : 49] This poem is something that our family has read for the past 12 to 15 years on Christmas morning as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. I'll share it with you.

Augustine writes, He's the word of God as he's talking about the tension between Jesus being fully God and fully man. He is the word of God before all time. He's the word made flesh at the suitable time.

Maker of the sun, he is made under the sun. In the father, he remains. From his mother, he goes forth. Creator of heaven and earth, Jesus was born on earth under heaven.

unspeakably wise, as a babe, he's wisely speechless. Filling the world, he lies in a manger.

Ruler of the stars, he nurses at his mother's bosom. Jesus is both great in the nature of God and small in the form of a servant.

[23 : 54] I want to end this morning by talking about the little object that Jesus is holding in the painting. I don't know if you've noticed that as you've looked at it. It's a small detail, but it's a very important one.

Jesus is holding an apple. Why is he holding an apple? Well, the apple is a clear reference to the Garden of Eden. Jesus here is painted as representing the second Adam.

Chi is very intentionally linking Jesus to Adam, just as the Gospel of Luke does in the genealogy in chapter three. The apple is a powerful symbol.

It says that where Adam failed, Jesus would succeed. Sin and death come through Adam, but grace and life come through this baby, through Jesus, this person who is fully human being, fully God.

The apple for us is an invitation to a new way of life where we feed not on the forbidden fruit, but on Jesus himself. Jesus, the God-man, opens up for us a new way of being human.

[24 : 59] And believing the Gospel is not merely affirming a set of ideas. We do need to think right things about God and ourselves and the world, but it's not merely that. It's a relationship with God made possible through Jesus Christ.

And this relationship makes it possible for us to finally be faithful human beings in the world, finally at peace with God, with ourselves, with others, with the whole world, with all of creation.

And all of this is made possible by and in and through Jesus Christ, the one who loves us, the one who was born for us, the one who died for us and who was raised for us, the one who is the good news for the world.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that you so love the world that you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, that whoever believes in him might have eternal life.

Lord, help us to marvel, to contemplate the miracle of the incarnation and all that it means for us. Thank you that the message is so profound, Lord, that we only scratch the surface as we sing about it, as we consider paintings that depict it, as we read your word and study your word that describes it.

[26 : 21] Lord, help it to sink deep into our souls. Help us to magnify the Lord as Mary did and help us to be more like him this Christmas and this upcoming year.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.