

The Trustworthy God

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. As we're standing, let's have a quick word of prayer. Lord God, we thank you that you have gathered your people here on this last Sunday of Advent.

Lord, as we open up your word, give us eyes to see the beauty of the incarnation. Lord, help us to be right there in the story.

Lord, I pray that by your Holy Spirit you would move in our hearts. If anybody here has a misunderstood view of you, that that would be all that more corrected this morning.

For some that don't yet know you, may this be the morning they come to faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please take a seat. So some of us still travel into work, but a lot of us work from home. Before the work from home orders, some of you would travel across one of the three bridges onto the Quebec side. Think about the day ahead, think about co-workers, what you're going to eat at dinner time, new recipe.

[1 : 23] Your mind would probably be racing, but unlikely that you'd be thinking about the structural integrity of the bridge you were crossing. Or you hop on a bus, or you jump in your car, you're driving to the office, going to the front entrance, jump in the elevator, go up to floor seven.

Whatever floor you're on, thinking about you're behind at work, or maybe you're on the verge of finishing a project. Whatever. Whatever it may be. Family. I don't think you're thinking about the structural integrity of that building that you're in.

What makes a bridge or a building trustworthy? Is it not the integrity of the build? The engineering and the contingencies in place that would give us confidence to such a degree that we don't even think about the trustworthiness of the bridge or the building or the road.

Unless, you know, your mind goes in a morbid direction. Or, you know, there's an actual structural problem with it. But how about with people?

What makes somebody trustworthy? That's what makes a building or a road or a bridge, some kind of structure trustworthy. But how about people? What makes a person trustworthy?

[2 : 40] People that you trust have integrity to keep confidentiality when you share with them a vulnerable thing.

They're not going to hijack your friendship for their own reputational gain. They have a track record of trustworthiness, of showing up, of saying something and following through.

When they do something that offends you, you know, you can work things out. There's apologies. There's reconciliation. There's built trust. There's built integrity there. Now, listen, of course, no building or bridge is going to last forever.

I mean, gravity, the weather, the elements, all that stuff will take its toll. Things aren't built to last forever. Also, to be a human is to err.

So, it's inevitable that there's some kind of broken trust in relationships. No relationship is perfectly integral. There is more to trust than simply having integrity.

[3 : 53] But integrity is most certainly the crucial ingredient. So, centuries before Jesus' birth, the nation of Israel found itself in what seemed to be perpetual exile with Assyria, with Babylon, with Persia, eventually with Greece.

And by the time Jesus shows up on the scene, they're under Roman subjugation. It's constantly being ruled by a foreign power.

And if you were to read a secular historical book, sociology, whatever, on the history of Judea, they would potentially say, a historian, they would chalk it up to geopolitical forces at the time.

One nation conquers a small nation that is conquered and so on and so forth. But the biblical account is that Israel fell into idolatry. And a cycle of idolatry that wasn't just amoral, but absolutely dehumanized a whole people group.

Sacrificing children, going to war, worshipping in perverse and sexual, like terribly sexually perverse ways. And the scriptures say that because of that, they were sent into exile.

[5 : 22] So, I'm painting a bit of a backdrop leading up to Jesus coming on the scene. Up until about 500 years before the Christmas story, God spoke to Israel through the prophets.

And he promised that he would restore them. He would restore them. That their relationship, the broken relationship with him would be restored.

And that it would be done through this mysterious and magnificent, mighty Savior. We get little hints of this Savior throughout the prophetic books. This anointed one from God that would be sent to correct all the wrongs.

To fix all the brokenness. So, leading up to the first century, this messianic understanding kind of evolved past the biblical account.

So that the Messiah would come. And by the time the Romans were there, would completely upend the Romans. It would be a military and political force, this Messiah.

[6 : 27] And purify the land. And there was a great messianic fervor. But the problem was, they were still under subjugation.

They were still under the yoke of a foreign oppressive rule. And they struggled with it. There was false messiahs.

There were collaborators. There were people being led astray. There were essentially political terrorists. All within the nation of Israel. All trying to achieve some kind of messianic.

And the question then is asked by these people. Has God forgotten about us? Does he lack integrity?

It's been 500 years since he spoke to us. Let alone the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah coming. 500 years. Even the exodus or the enslavement in Egypt was 400 years.

[7 : 28] This is 500 years. There's groaning. There's frustration. Is God who he says he is? Is he the promise keeping God? Does he have integrity? Can we trust him?

In fact, there was a savior already on the scene. So to speak, a savior. Caesar Augustus was the first emperor of Rome.

And his reign ushered in relative peace to the known world. Maybe this is the savior that history points to. But our story doesn't pick up in Rome.

It does not pick up in Jerusalem. It does not pick up in a palace. Our story picks up in lowly backwater Bethlehem. And this is the backdrop for the text that we'll read this morning.

As we read, keep in mind the angst that is felt by society under Roman rule in ancient Israel and Judea.

[8 : 31] Think about the question in your mind as we read, can God be trusted? Is he trustworthy? Is he an integral God? Because, I mean, I don't know if there's anybody new.

If you're new, welcome. If you're new at home, welcome. But everybody here, I think, has been to church before. And immediately you'll jump to, oh no, of course God is trustworthy.

Of course he's integral. Because we see the end of the story. We're familiar with the end of the story. But I'd say put yourself, not at the end of the story, but in the story.

Try to feel the angst. Ask the question. Let it kind of sit uneasy in your heart. Is God trustworthy? Is God trustworthy? So if you have a Bible, please turn with me to Luke chapter 2, starting in verse 1. If at any time you need a Bible, we have some Bibles here at the front. Help yourself to a Bible. Feel free to take it home. So we'll read Luke chapter 2, verses 1 to 7 to open it up.

[9 : 34] In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

A quick pause here. I'm not going to get into it at all. If you're into kind of historical criticism, or you've heard that there's a bit of a discrepancy with this possible, like a dating issue with verse 2, this registration under Quirinius, George, in his blog, had a good explanation for this.

The blog is from November 22nd. I'd encourage you guys to check it out. It should be on the YouTube show notes right under the video. And you can check that out. But we'll continue.

I'll start again in verse 2. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and all went to be registered, each to his own town.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

[10:46] And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth, and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

Throughout this chapter, and really throughout the rest of Luke, but especially in this chapter, there are these subtle jabs at Caesar Augustus.

Not because Luke has this thing out for Caesar Augustus. It's because Caesar Augustus was the most powerful man in the world. Easily the most powerful man in the world.

Caesar is the one who brought peace, remember, to the known world. And here in this story of Jesus' lowly birth, he is just an unknowing agent of God's plans.

The emperor, the greatest emperor of the greatest empire, is a mere pawn in the purposes of God. Caesar had registration across the known world for the purpose of taxation, a grand, grand, grand thing, and it was used by God so that an 800-year-old prophecy could be fulfilled.

[12:08] The prophecy in Micah chapter 5, that the Messiah would be born in lowly Bethlehem. But Mary and Joseph were in Nazareth. God, in his providence, orchestrates the fulfillment of a prophecy, and he uses the most powerful person as a pawn.

It's remarkable. It really is remarkable. You could say it's coincidence. If it is, let's, if you feel that way, if you're thinking that way, that's okay.

Let's just keep, continue on. But before we continue on, I'm not sure if you guys knew this, I'm no prophet, all right? I can predict that I'll make breakfasts most mornings, and I'll change at least one poopy diaper.

That's kind of the extent of my prophetic ability. So I'm no prophet. So I'm not going to muse on how the Lord is going to use really, like, current, current events for his purposes.

I'm not going to, I'm not going to try to figure that kind of stuff out. But I'll just say this. It would seem that throughout history, whenever a human force tries to suppress God's church or claim absolute authority over God, it seems that God turns it on its head and uses it for his own purposes.

[13:34] Communist China has tried to stamp out religion and destroy the church. And it's because of their very actions that the church has flourished. They can try, but they will fail.

Time and time and time again in history, God makes it very, very plain that the most powerful, the most absolute authority is just a pawn in his providential plan.

And here we have exactly that with Caesar Augustus. He's just a pawn. It doesn't mean he's not a powerful person. It just means, compared to God, who is he?

Who is he? It's remarkable. If we had time to go through all of Luke 1 and 2 and just Luke 1 and 2, not to mention the rest of Luke, we'll see even more fulfilled prophecies, but never in a way that seems to be straightforward from human perspective, but completely and perfectly fulfilled in God's way and in his time.

And yet no other story could be, no other way this story could be kind of told would make it come to pass in the way that it did.

[15:01] There's no other choose-your-own-adventure. God could have done it this way, or this way, or this way, or this way. This is the way that God has chosen.

It's magnificent. It's spectacular. The greatest emperor of the greatest empire is completely upended by God through a child born to peasant parents in a lowly backwater town in a very, very contentious land.

And this is God's doing. The emperor of peace pales in comparison to the king of peace. Caesar Augustus ushered in the 200 years of Roman peace, but it was never truly peace.

I mean, it definitely wasn't eternal peace. It lasted for 200 years, but it was a peace that was brought about by subjugation and slavery and a lot of bloodshed and taxation and heavy-handedness.

It was peace, but it wasn't the peace. So he is the emperor of peace, but he's not the king of peace. And Luke here is showing us this in a very subtle way in the text.

[16:30] This is why, friends, we ought to strive for good governance in our country, but not put our faith in it. The war to end all wars lasted not even a generation.

It was a very short-lived maxim. Time and again, our best attempts at peace and prosperity never last. They never last. It's not as though we shouldn't strive for peace or strive for the ending of war and strive for good governance.

It's just that we ought not to ever put our faith and ultimate trust and hope in those things because they don't have true, eternal, everlasting integrity.

They always fall apart. So what about the peace that God would bring? Would it last forever?

Remember, keep yourself in the story.

Feel the angst. Let's continue. Verses 8 to 14. And in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night.

[17 : 39] And the angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was, with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom he is pleased.

Consider how magnificent this is. At night, the shepherds see the sky light up. This declaration that this angel says is befitting of an emperor.

Again, these subtle jabs at Caesar Augustus' absolute power. Because this declaration isn't given to him.

[18 : 42] It's given to Jesus. It's a grand announcement. A Savior, a Messiah, a Lord. All very technical terms that are full of meaning.

Savior, somebody that will literally save. The Messiah, the Christ, someone that is anointed by God to be a Savior. And the Lord is a regal title.

And it's all given to Jesus. I mean, if they would have said in Rome, in the halls, the great halls, you will find this one.

That would be fitting. But you will go to Bethlehem and you'll find this, the Savior, Messiah, and Lord wrapped in swaddling cloths. It doesn't fit, but it's right.

It's right. And it's also interesting that the announcement isn't made to dignitaries. It's not made to important people.

[19 : 44] It's not made to religious leaders. It's made to shepherds. And although in the Bible, shepherding, especially where we see shepherding with Moses and with David, it has a good connotation about it.

Shepherding, by the time Jesus' day comes to pass, it fell into disrepute. Urbanization happened so that the rich people were not so much the rich shepherds that tended their own flock, but they got the poor people to attend their flock.

And these poor people, by virtue of tending a flock, couldn't engage in religious life, couldn't engage in social life. There was a suspicion around shepherds in Jesus' day.

They were lowly people. And yet, they are the first people that hear this declaration of the Christ.

The first people. Luke writes this true account of the shepherds with the blue-collar man in view, the down-and-out single mom in view, the my serb payment just ran out father of three in view.

[20 : 58] And because it is for the shepherds, it means it's for us. It's for us.

It's for you. Our ears are hearing this with the shepherds. The first announcement of the Christ who will come. Because at the very core of what it means to be a human, and you might be put together, and if you are, that is good.

There's no judgment. But there is a brokenness about humanity. There is. There's pain. There's broken relationships.

There's betrayal. And if we're real about who we really are, we are lowly people. And God declares His salvation to us.

It's wonderful. It is wonderful. It gives us great hope that this is who God has declared His goodness to. And here's the bit that speaks about peace.

[21 : 58] Look with me again in verse 14. Glory to God in the highest and on earth. Peace among those with whom He is pleased.

This peace is fleshed out in two songs from chapter 1. One Mary's song, the Magnificat, and also Zechariah's prophecy, both in chapter 1.

I won't read Zechariah's bit, but I encourage you guys to take some time and read through it, meditate on it. But here's some of Mary's prayer. And this is what it says.

This is from Luke chapter 1, starting in verse 46. And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For He has looked on the humble estate of His servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name. And His mercy is for those who fear Him.

[23 : 00] From generation to generation, that's that long-lasting bit. He has shown strength with His arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.

He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to His offspring forever.

That prayer is so packed with theological truth. But what I want you guys to hear is that this peace that God will bring will look to correct and heal and feed and mend the brokenness and the hungry and lift up the lowly and for the plans of those who are in authority that don't use their authority to serve but to subjugate.

That sounds like peace and this peace is from generation to generation. This is the peace that God is bringing that God is declaring through these angels.

Again, Augustus he couldn't he couldn't offer that peace. The Pax Romana again if you were under under the peace of Rome you still had to pay taxes and often times it was very unjust the tax collecting.

[24 : 36] A Roman garrison had authority that you had to submit to. A third of the population was enslaved.

That doesn't sound like full peace to me. And yet the peace that God offers is true peace and it's everlasting. It has integrity.

And Mary here connects it right at the bottom in verse 54 and 55 to the fulfilled promises of God. God is trustworthy.

His promises are coming true finally. He hasn't forgotten. God is God is God is God this is again why we don't put our ultimate hope in the promises made by government by health care workers by a spouse or a partner by the hope of a promotion or a salary increase.

Those things don't have true long lasting fulfill the hole in our heart integrity. They might promise that but if you've had a few disappointments you know you know what I'm saying that that integrity it's lacking because at the core of our brokenness isn't just a lack of a better job or a really thoughtful husband or wife or or a husband and wife or a really really excellent prime minister or premier or mayor or whatever but at the core of our brokenness is sin and an estranged relationship from the living God.

[26 : 25] Verse 14 at the end of it says this it says on earth peace among those with whom he God is pleased that bit with whom he is pleased is this technical biblical term that refers to God's elect those that are a part of the in group those that God has saved and just if you if you think that this is somehow an exclusive group remember declared to shepherds right and what have the shepherds done to to get into this wonderful exclusive elect group this in group what have they done they've done nothing the angel shows up and declares this wonderful peace on earth to God's elect and they just hear it they have done nothing to achieve this but they have to receive it they have to receive it so look with me in in the last bit of our section verses 15 to 20 when the angels went away sorry when the angels went away from them into heaven the shepherds said to one another let us go over to

Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us they are responding to this message it's not just that they hear it and go on their way it changes them they respond to it look continue on with me verses 16 and they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger they went with haste the idea with this haste is that they left their flocks they left their flocks where they were we looked at this in a Bible study recently we had a discussion well did they leave people to look after the flocks and take care of the flocks you know because it's not like this was a pendant area they're just literally just following the flocks in a giant giant wilderness where there's predators and everybody who knows anything about sheep like they have zero defense mechanisms so that's what the shepherds are for shepherds lead them to food and to good water and protect them well but they leave their their flocks with haste there is something wonderful about this they are overcome they have to see it they're responding with this with this passion with this fervency let's continue on verse 17 and when they saw it the baby they

made known the saying that had been told them concerning the child and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them it was likely that

Bethlehem was swollen with people for this registration I mean we know that there's no room in the inn not like they have a holiday inn but there's no place for them to have a room to have a bed Bethlehem is full of people and they're hearing this words going around but Mary treasured up all these things pondering them in her heart and the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them they are responding and their response is with joy and their response is with sharing what they have seen sharing their faith and not kind of going on their way but glorifying God it results in praise remember verse 14 glory to God in the highest this is about God's renown and God's glory verse 19 verse 18 and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds had told them but Mary treasured up all these things pondering them in her heart you can hear about the good news of

God and kind of go on your own way that but in verse 19 it juxtaposes Mary's good response with the response of others that didn't have the right response and obviously it's juxtaposed with the shepherds who have a good response as well it's not enough to hear about about the peace that God brings that the Messiah is coming it's not enough to just hear about it and go on your way grips you and it's not something that you have to muster up either the Holy Spirit is at work you hear something and if it grips you you by the Holy Spirit's strength act on that you can't just go back to tending the flock as if nothing happened where there's no change it seems that the shepherds went back to tending their flock it says right in verse 20 and the shepherds returned I don't know it doesn't say specifically to their flock let's say they went back to their flock it's not as if all of a sudden they were elevated to the highest throne of of of

Rome or King Herod's palace they're they're just they're still shepherds but their lives are different they're glorifying God they're they're gripped with this good news they have a little skip in their step the good news has changed their lives friends we're in the the boots of the shepherds we hear about the peace of God that will endure forever and that will satisfy our hearts that will remove the sin and fix the estrangement we have with God this is good news and it might not change where you're at but we have to remember that our hope isn't in a better life here and now although it's good to get a better life here and now our hope is to be with God in his presence enjoying his company at his table being friends with him not looking over our shoulder not feeling the weight of a taxation from

[32 : 51] Rome not having a fear of death taking a loved one or taking our own body or fear that our bodies will just deteriorate and break down or not that this beautiful city we live in will just crumble to pieces no our hope is in the eternal city where our bodies will be made completely right never breaking down again that we will be at this table with the savior himself we will be friends of his enjoying his food no more tears of pain that's what we look to that's what the peace is talking about hope is wrapped up in swaddling cloths sitting in a food trough in a backwater place that's the hope it is not in Rome it is not at

Parliament Hill it is not at Queen's Park it is not in your bank account it is not with your children or your spouse it is not with your muscles or your brain it's with nothing because all those things will break away break apart fall away this peace it's wonderful you know the thing about the first Advent is that the promises of God were fulfilled that God proved to be an integral promise keeping trustworthy God which means that as we read about the second coming of Christ whether that happens in our earthly life or not we can have sure confidence that it will come to pass how will it come to pass I don't know I would say let's be a bit wary of people that know the date or the hour and have it all kind of mapped out there was 500 6 7 800 years to discern the prophecies of God in the Old Testament and by the time Jesus comes around they they've gotten it wrong I don't trust myself to figure out the book of Revelation and map out how Jesus is going to come back but I do know he will I do know he will why because he came for the first advent he came as a baby he fulfilled the promises we we struggle with skepticism and we struggle with belief and it's very clear as we go through Luke 1 and 2 that Mary doesn't quite know everything that's going to happen she doesn't know that her son is going to go and die on a cross Zechariah's prophecy talks about how she will be pierced in the heart but doesn't say why it's shrouded in a bit of mystery but she believes skepticism and and a bit of unbelief how does this kind of come to pass is it really true historically this and that

I think it's okay to sit in that and to wrestle with that because we we don't have to understand a through z to have belief we believe and then we understand it's a commitment to the truth of God even if we don't quite understand it all I mean the Bible is far from an action plan that spells out a through z of God's providential ordering of history it's it's not that we are used to that that stuff gives us comfort but that's not what it is so you might not ever fully grasp all the promises of God or every nuance of the faith but don't let that stop you from hearing and receiving ask God to help it to drive you on a deeper search to search the scriptures to figure things out that keep you up at night or that are head scratchers or make you very uneasy that you're a Christian and this Christmas enjoy it if it's going to be a tough Christmas because you can't connect with family or maybe this is just the way Christmases go however your Christmas plays out think about how Christ has come and he has come to bring an everlasting and eternal peace and how his coming proves that God is a trustworthy and integral and promise keeping God heavenly father we thank you so much for this wonderful story that is a story it's a historically true account but it is still a story it moves us it grips us it is a wonderful account of how you have come to save that you don't just give us an information dump but you involve us into this wonderful narrative that is playing out and

[38 : 22] Lord I pray that we will look with fresh eyes at the Christ child and that we won't just look at the Christ child and smile and kind of go on with a regular Christmas but that we will look to the life that the Christ child will live we will look at the prophecies that the Christ child fulfills we will just be absolutely responsive in this declaration that you have brought peace everlasting peace to men Lord be with us help us to believe help our unbelief help us to trust in you in deeper and deeper ways we pray these things in Jesus name