

Matt. 1:18-25 "The Christmas Story is a Story"

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[0 : 0 0] Standing, let's just bow our heads in prayer. Father, we give you thanks and praise that you have spoken to us in your word. And Father, we know that you have spoken to us in your word, desiring us to understand your word and to allow your word to come into our lives to form us.

And so, Father, we ask for your help because we need your help. We ask that your Holy Spirit would help us to use the best of who we are to listen and pay attention. But you would do that greater work of bringing your word deep into us and forming us.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated. So, I have a confession to make. I made a big mistake between yesterday and today.

So, many of you have probably heard the old rule of thumb. Never try a recipe for the first time when you have company coming. You've all heard that rule? Don't try a completely new recipe when you have company coming.

So, those of you who know me know that when I preach, you might not know this. I use an outline. I don't actually use a written text. I use an outline. But I thought to myself, I think this time for Christmas Eve, I'm going to do a written text for my sermon.

[1 : 1 9] So, it could be really, really well organized. And, well, here's the problem. I did the service at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. And that sermon soared like a lead balloon.

Just didn't get off the ground whatsoever. And I had company this afternoon. So, I now have a semi-useless written text for my sermon.

So, just bear with me. I'll do the best I can. Sort of looking at my text a bit, but also just doing my points. At the end of the day, we have a wonderful story. And part of the big point of my whole sermon this morning, this evening, is that the Christmas story is a story.

And if we think about it for a second, it will help us to understand both what seems sort of weak about it, but what its true glory and beauty is.

Not only the content of the story, but the fact that it's a story itself. You see, for most Canadians, and I think Canadian Christians as well, you know, so if we were going to, I don't know, if we were going to figure out whether or not to become the 51st state of the United States of America, let's say, something which would be a very, very big decision for us to make, we'd want something pretty substantial before we made a decision like that.

[2 : 4 1] What we wouldn't want is a story. We think, like, really? A story? We're going to make a decision on something as big as becoming a 51st state in the United States on the basis of a story?

Well, if you think about it for a second, Christians are making these very, very, very large and far-reaching claims that God, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, took on human nature and was born as a baby boy to live a fully human life in space and time in history, and that the entire fate of humankind, each human life, depends upon how you react to it.

Well, that's actually a far bigger thing than becoming the 51st state of the United States of America. How do we know about it? A story. The nativity of Jesus, the birth of Jesus, is told as a story.

It's a very short, simple story. I just read it. We're going to read it again in a couple of minutes. It just takes a couple of verses. It can be drawn quite, if you had that ability, you could draw it quite simply and maybe draw it if you had that skill.

It would be an interesting, I wish I had that skill. If you do, you should try sometimes, maybe with your kids or others, just going from line drawing to line drawing to line drawing and just having the story unfold before you.

[3 : 53] But, as I said, with a question like the 51st state, for many Canadians, both those who are Christians and those who are not, Christians just don't want to acknowledge it, okay?

That's the thing about Christians. We're not always as honest about ourselves as we think, and Canadian Christians are way more Canadian than we realize. If you don't think about it through, we have some people who are immigrants to Canada and just ask them if they get comfortable with you.

How Canadian are Christians in Canada? And they might tell you just how Canadian we actually are. And so for Canadians, the whole category of story sounds weak, not very serious, not even third best.

Why can't we have a catalogue of facts? That would be better. Why don't we have a flawless philosophical argument? That would be better.

Why don't we have a thoroughly documented academic work of history? Why don't we have a summary of scientific findings? Why don't we have a fact-checked autobiography?

[4 : 57] Why don't we have something like an authoritative report from the most eminent scholars and experts in Canada and have them give us this authentic, authoritative report?

That's what we Canadians think would be far more substantial and meaty than a story that can be shown and told quite simply just with some lights and some little bit of artistic work.

Because if you think about it for a second, a story is something that you read to children. A story is something that the busy businesswoman picks up to pass the time on her flight from Ottawa to Los Angeles, or the harassed dad brings to the beach in the summer when he's supposed to be looking after the kids.

But the triune God in his wisdom saw fit to communicate to us, at least in regards to the nativity of Jesus and the key doctrines of the Incarnation, primarily in the form of a story or several stories, all telling one story.

What on earth was he thinking? Didn't he know that when it comes to far-reaching claims, we advanced, modern, well-educated Canadians who know how to use TikTok and Instagram and demand something far stronger than a story, or at least something which has good vibes?

[6 : 16] Hold that thought. The next thing about the story is this. It's a very unique claim, is that the story of the nativity of Jesus is a true story.

I used to read stories to my children. Full disclosure, my wife was the overwhelming principal reader of stories to our kids, but occasionally I would read stories to my kids.

And after reading something about PJ Funny Bunny or something by Dr. Seuss, I would read them a Bible story. However, I always said something like this to the children before I read the Bible story.

I'd say it's, you know, good to read these stories, Santa, PJ Funny Bunny, whatever. But you need to know that this story that I'm about to read to you is a true story. I want them to understand the difference between the two stories.

Because we, for too many Canadians, we have Santa stories and Jesus' birth stories, and they are both equally just stories. But Matthew tells us that he is telling a true story.

[7 : 21] In fact, Matthew put his, I was going to say his money where his mouth was. He did, he put his life where his mouth was because at the end of his life, he died, he died sort of by torture because the authorities wanted him to recant and say that the stories that he had written, the story he had written about Jesus wasn't true.

He'd made it up. And Matthew went to his death rather than denying the truth of the story. Regrettably, in our life, we know many people will die for causes, but not many people will die for facts.

But Matthew died for a fact. Now, of course, the story of the nativity of Jesus being true, the virgin birth and all of that, is, of course, highly contested.

And that sometimes really bothers Christians when we find out that something's highly contested. It makes us go, oh, I don't know what I should be thinking about this. It's highly contested. But we should really just say, so what?

Not to be flippant about people who don't agree with this, but just to think, if you think about it for a second, one of the things that defines a human being is that they can contest anything whatsoever.

[8 : 31] So just because it's contested doesn't mean anything. Anybody who reads Matthew and Luke, the two places who tell the stories of Jesus' birth, if they read it in an open-minded way, they'll see that they both claim to be writing an eyewitness-based biography of Jesus, something which actually happened.

And they wrote these eyewitness-based biographies of Jesus when many, many, many eyewitnesses were still alive. So people can say that the stories aren't true because they're impossible, but they shouldn't ever say that the authors didn't intend to write a true story.

I think the evidence is there that the story is true, that it is historically, factually, emotionally, morally, spiritually, and aesthetically true. The truth in the nativity stories is multifaceted and deep.

If you have a chance to watch on YouTube, there is a woman by the name of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and she's been a very fascinating woman for a long time, growing up as a devout Muslim, in fact, what we would call an Islamicist.

And she ends up fleeing her Islamic background. She enters into Europe. She becomes an atheist. She was a good friend of all of the atheists, Christopher Hitchens, Dawkins, all of them.

[9 : 56] And within the last year, she has become a Christian. And there's some very interesting interviews between Dawkins, one of the leading atheists in the world, talking to her.

And it's very interesting because she captures this aspect of the truth very beautifully, if you listen to her. He presses her on something like the virgin birth, and he's quite contemptuous.

Like, how can you believe something like the virgin birth is even true? And she remains... She has this very, very quiet and profound dignity about her. And she says, well, I don't entirely know how to answer all of your questions.

But then she goes on to talk about how the truth of the stories are emotionally, morally, spiritually, aesthetically, culturally true.

And she believes, and she has some reasons to believe that they're also historically true. And that's the fundamental claim of this story. These stories are true.

[10 : 56] Christians say, God, the Son of God, actually did take into himself our human nature. And he actually was born as a human being and walked among us.

That's what we claim is being told in these stories. But the death of Jesus isn't just like this weird, random thing that happens. It happens in the context of centuries of laws and worship and poetry and prophecy and profound wisdom, like the books of Ecclesiastes and the Psalms and poetry and Song of Songs.

It's in the context of this profound history of teachings out of which science emerged and the belief in human rights emerged and human dignity emerged and the idea of progress emerged.

And all of these things emerge out of that and it's in this context of this long story that the nativity of Jesus happens. And you can see that if you go back later on, most people when they read the Gospel of Matthew, they sort of skip over the first 17 verses because it's all these, you know, then there was this and then there was this and then there was this and then there was this and Hezron was the father of Aram.

But what Matthew is telling you is he's telling you there's this long story that all these things that God has done and then at this culminating time there's the birth of Jesus.

[12 : 21] And it's not just a true story, it's a true story about God. Like listen again to the story if you have your Bibles, Matthew chapter 1, 18 to 25. Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph.

Before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Now it's going to be said twice that the baby within Mary's womb, Mary had never sexually known a man.

And you go back and read in Luke, you'll see the story about it, that God comes and asks her if she is willing to allow the Holy Spirit to do a miracle within her where God by an act of creation creates a zygote within the womb of Mary.

He creates it out of nothing, in a sense, not out of nothing in that it reflects Mary's physiological heritage. If you were able to go back in a time machine and you saw Mary and you saw Jesus, you would see the family resemblance.

You might say, oh look, he has Mary's nose. And oh, look at that. Like, you know, he has Mary's eyebrows and stuff like that. You would see that that's that connection there.

[13 : 41] But that God creates within the womb of Mary this zygote that goes through normal gestation. We'll talk about that in a moment. That's the claim which is being made here.

And then it continues. And her husband, Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. Just to make it a bit, you might not know this, but an Anglican, the way Anglicans work, if you get ordained as a deacon, most Anglicans who are ordained as deacons, it's called the transitional deacon.

And so the moment you're ordained a deacon, you can be called reverend. But you're only a deacon for six months to two years, depending on where you are. And then you get made a presbyter.

I'm a presbyter. So I was ordained in May 15, 1985, 100 million years ago, I was ordained a deacon. And I could call myself the Reverend George Sinclair at that moment.

But the implication was that within, in my case, it was about seven months later, I was made a presbyter, which is what I am today. And that's how engagement worked then. In a sense, Mary could have called herself Mrs. Joseph at that point in time.

[14 : 52] But they weren't actually married. It was a transitional state. And that's why Joseph had to divorce her. But here's the thing. Verse 20. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared before him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

The second time, it's said that the baby within Mary's womb, the incarnation happened. God created out of nothing this baby within the womb.

Mary never had any sexual knowledge of a man. And it continues. Verse 21. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

To even say save his people, you can't say that about me. I couldn't save my people throughout the world. I can't save people in China and Kenya and Rwanda and Singapore and Taiwan and Buenos Aires.

Like, only, that can only be said of God, that he could have people all over the world and all over time. But that's the claim which is made here. And then in verse 22, all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

[16:06] Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us, for the third time. It's emphasized that that's what God is doing.

That's what this story, that's this huge claim that is being made in this story. The nativity story is a true story about God.

Now, you know, here's the thing about this story. I'm going to use this phrase. You might not have heard of it. I call it the normal human religious imagination.

And for the normal human religious imagination, this cannot possibly be a story about God. Like, what's just being described here cannot possibly be true. It's implausible.

People might say the science doesn't work. That's not true. The science has nothing to say about this. It doesn't contradict a single tenet of science properly understood.

[17:01] the normal human religious imagination projects onto God what we would do if we were God. Like, imagine if all of a sudden one of you became a billionaire.

Would you buy the cheapest, crappiest Fiat you possibly could to drive around in? Very unlikely. Some of you, being very good Canadians, say, well, okay, I don't think I'll go for the flashy, hot, pink Lamborghini.

But I'll go for a sedate, respectable, gray, Bentley, or something like that. Or maybe if you weren't even that much into cars, you know, you'd at least get a Subaru or something like that.

Not the crappiest little Fiat. I have no idea, by the way, what the cheapest car is. Some of you can tell me afterwards. I should have looked it up before I came to this. So you see, here's the thing.

We can't imagine that we would do anything like this if we were God. We would not belittle ourselves and become little. God becoming a zygote? God going through gestation?

[18:07] God having to go through birth? God being a baby? God being poor and human and unrecognized and part of a conquered people? No self-respecting God would ever act like this.

I wouldn't act like this. How can something so outrageous and counterintuitive be true? You see, it's not that anything in the nativity story is opposed to reason or evidence.

The story is just implausible to us. And so even then for, if you're talking to somebody, you can say, I can deal with that. You know, Dawkins says, it's absurd to talk about a virgin. No, I can give you a simple explanation for the virgin birth.

No, no, I can simply, you're making a mistake. I can simply clarify this. And you could go on and on and on and on and on. But at the end of the day, it just, it just cannot, it's just completely and utterly implausible to us.

Another thing that our skeptical friends will say, well, here's the thing they'll say. They love to harass people like us and say, oh yeah, you all, all you religious people, you have your Bibles, your scriptures.

[19 : 11] Yeah, I mean, why do you think your Bible is more true than some other scripture? You know, the people, Muslims think the Quran is true. Some Hindus think the Bahava Gita is true.

Some Buddhists, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, you know, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And, you know, just think about it for a second. They will say to me, how on earth do you think a puny person could ever describe a no God or even a God with a small g?

How can someone see the invisible? And then they'll pause and say, you do realize that invisible means it can't possibly be seen. How can you hear the inaudible?

You do realize inaudible means it can't literally be heard. You know, you can't even figure out yourself. You can't figure out your wife or your friend or your kids. What makes you think you could figure out God?

Well, Christians believe that the nativity story is a true story from God about God. That's what we believe. In fact, to the surprise of skeptics, I often tell them I agree with virtually every single thing they said.

[20 : 16] In fact, I feel like saying amen to them. The fact is that the aunt about to read a nativity story to her niece can clearly say amen to most of that because the biblical claim is the same as the claim made by Jesus, that the Bible is not a repository of human words about God, but is God himself speaking to human beings.

Only God can understand God. I accept that. I believe that. Only God can understand God and I will only understand God to the extent that he makes it clear to me.

The Bible is ultimately from each word to the whole the triune God speaking to us. Why believe this? Well, I can give you lots of reasons but very simply put, the resurrection of Jesus changes everything.

The resurrection of Jesus changes everything. The death and resurrection of Jesus authenticates and vindicates who he is, what he accomplished on the cross and his teaching.

I believe in him. I believe him. I believe what he says and he is the one who teaches us to come to understand that the Bible is a true story, the nativity story is a true story come from God ultimately about God.

[21 : 33] He used Matthew. So, this, we're almost finished. The nativity story is both true history and it's also miraculous from start to finish.

I don't know if you noticed when I was reading this story, God drives the action. Angels speak as God's messengers. A young woman who has never sexually known a man becomes pregnant. And it's, we Christians shouldn't be embarrassed about miracles in the Bible.

We should revel in them. We should meditate upon them. We should delight in them. We should be excited about them. I remember, it's so, my wife will remember this as well.

My grandfather who was quite elderly, I guess this would be four or five years before he died, and I remember being in the house when he was sitting reading the Bible. And all of a sudden he would start reading, stop reading the Bible, he'd look up and he'd just chuckle.

He'd say, look at this, this tells you that God did this, isn't that? And he'd just have this big smile on his face. He just delighted in the miracles. We should delight in the miracles. They're wonderful. Christianity is the only religion that does things in history to help vindicate its truth.

[22 : 47] It not only has profound philosophy, profound poetry, profound worship, profound stories, but it has these miracles. You can look and there is much historical evidence to accept that the grave actually was empty on Easter morning.

Jesus really did rise from the dead. They never found his body. He appeared alive. He rose. And if that happened, it changes everything. It's why we read this story. Why I believe in the virgin birth.

Why I believe in the nativity story. It's a wonderful story. It's spectacularly true. And it's a story about God coming to save you and me.

Canadians think that the best stories are the ones where the hero or the heroine gets to save themselves and others. We look down, in a sense, on the person who has to be saved by somebody else.

They should save themselves. We think that as Canadians that the best thing that God could do for us is to get out of the way while we save ourselves. Or if necessary, he can provide a few pointers or maybe a magic wand or something so we can save ourselves.

[23 : 52] And this, of course, feeds into the normal religious human imagination which determines not only what is plausible but also what is best. The best religion is the one where I save myself.

Frankly, it is a disappointment to the average Canadian to discover that God does not really care about your criteria for plausibility. He doesn't give a hoot.

Your criteria for plausibility is your problem, not his. You think about it for a second. How many people care about the plausibility structures of people 500 years ago? Well, you think they're ridiculous.

They think you're ridiculous. Why do you think God should care what you think about those types of things? But on the other hand, we all agree that the best stories have a twist. In this case, the twist is the joyful news that you can never save yourself and that salvation comes as an undeserved and unforeseen gift when you lay aside the burden of being your own savior.

It's crushing. It only depresses you to be your own savior. It is so much lightness to get that burden and throw it away and to allow God to do what only he can do, which is save those who trust in God, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary in a simple stable.

[25 : 21] That's the wonderful news of this story. Look again. We see it in the names. Look at what the name is that they were to give the boy, verse 23, Emmanuel.

It's such a wonderful thing. It says that God is with us. You know, the Down syndrome child can put their faith and trust in Christ and God is with him.

The elderly person who'd lived maybe a very full life but is now lost in dementia, God is with that person. The person who's born with severe handicaps, God is with that person.

The person captured in sexual slavery or some prison camp by some corrupt routine and they give their life to Christ, God is with that person.

The billionaire who gives their life to Christ, the soccer mom who gives her life to Christ, God is with them. God, the Son of God, came and went through the normal process of birth and life.

[26 : 21] He is with us in our mess. He is with us in our sin. He bears the sin upon his body. He dies in my place so that I can be made right with him. He is with us. He does not despise us.

He does not think we smell. He does not think we stink. He does not think we are losers. He does not think we are filled with shame. He looks at us and he loves us. He came from heaven to seek us.

He is with us. He is with you. That is the story of Christmas. And it is seen in Emmanuel and it is seen in his name. His name, Jesus, means the Lord saves. The Lord is salvation.

He is with us to save you as undeserved gift. So friends, as we come to the end, we are going to have one more video.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Yes, stories are weak, easily mocked, and easily dismissed. But the weakness of God is stronger than all human strength.

[27 : 20] And the foolishness of God is wiser than all human plausibility and reason and wisdom. The triune God himself chooses to impart these profound and necessary truths in the form of a story.

A story so simple but so profound that a parent can read it to their two-year-old, their 18-month-old, to their PhD neighbor, a street person, or a soccer mom, and all can receive the story and be formed by the profound truths in it.

Stories form you in a way that nothing else forms you. And God chose the weak and the lowly to shame the wise. He is with us.

Father, we thank you for the story of the birth of Jesus. We thank you for Mary, for her being willing to allow God to do that miracle within her womb. We thank you for Joseph, that he believed you when you spoke to him through the angel.

But most of all, Father, we thank you for Jesus, that God, the Son of God, would take on our human nature, would come and enter our world as a zygote in the womb of Mary, and that he would live a normal human life except without sin, culminating in his death upon the cross.

[28 : 38] to reconcile us to you as he bore the sin and shame which is properly ours in himself. Father, we thank you that he has done this for us. We ask, Father, that you grant us a true confidence in Christ.

And Father, thank you that he came in meekness and weakness. And we ask that as we think about this weak little baby being born so many years ago, Father, help us to know that you are with us in our weakness and that we have all of the weakness we need for you to work within us with all of your strength.

And we ask these things in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen.