

The Servant in the Stable

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[0:00] None of us would be Christians at all. Likewise, a Christmas with no behold in it is no Christmas at all. But unless you think I'm beholden to behold, let me explain.

The word behold, as it's used in the Bible, is used to draw our attention to an event in such a way that although it seems like an ordinary, mundane, daily event, isn't what it seems to be.

But God is at work. So we have a newborn baby. It's an ordinary, mundane event. These things happen all the time.

But behold, in the case of the birth of Jesus, things are not what they seem to be. God is at work in his world.

Shepherds in their fields at night looking up into the sky. It's just so ordinary, so mundane. But behold, in the case of those shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago, things are not what they seem to be.

[1:15] God's at work in his world. For those who lived with and followed Jesus, it all seemed so ordinary and so mundane. But behold, things are not what they seem to be.

God is at work in his world. And Christmas is just this. Behold, things are not what they seem to be. There's a lot more going on here than at first meets the eye. This child born in the stable and laid in the manger, there's far more to him than you might think.

Well, humility, that's obvious. Glory, yes, but not so obvious. Weakness, well, that's clear.

But power, yes, but that's not so clear. Poverty, well, that's plain. But kingship, that's not quite so plain.

[2:18] Well, as today we enjoy another Christmas feast with Isaiah, this time in Isaiah 42. That's exactly what I'm asking from all of us. That as Christmas Day approaches, we would all behold again the child born in the stable and laid in the manger.

Things are not what they seem to be about him. And this child is greater and more glorious than we could ever think. More kind and loving than we could ever dream.

I want to consider three things with you from this passage this morning. Christmas servant, Christmas meekness, and Christmas justice.

Christmas servant, first of all. The passage begins with Isaiah, With God announcing through Isaiah, Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.

Things are not what they seem to be. There's a child. And he's born in a stable. And he's laid in a manger. This child lying in his mother's arms, surrounded by the animals.

[3:36] This child of humility. This child of lowliness. Things are not what they seem to be about him. Because here is the servant of God in whom the soul of the living God delights.

Yes, God delights in the birth of every human child. But this child's on a different level. He is the chosen one. Since the very beginning, all history's been waiting for him.

And now he comes forth from the womb of the Blessed Virgin. If you had been a bystander in Bethlehem that day, All you would have seen would have been an ordinary looking Jewish couple with a newborn child.

You wouldn't have given them a second look. Especially since they weren't staying in the Jerusalem Hilton, But they were squatting in a Bethlehem stable. They weren't the glitterati of Jewish culture.

Nor would their faces have been printed upon the front page of Jerusalem's equivalent of Time magazine. They were to all appearances just ordinary people.

[4:48] And their baby looked just like every other baby. There were a thousand others who looked just like Jesus. As Isaiah would go on to say in Isaiah 53 too, He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, And no beauty that we should desire him.

The world around him took no special delight in him. But he is the servant of God in whom God delights. Herod the king did everything in his power to kill him. But he was upheld by God. He had to flee to Egypt with his family to escape the rejection of Israel's leaders. But God had chosen him.

And yes, to all appearances, they looked absolutely ordinary. Things were not what they appeared to be. The child in the manger.

The baby Jesus. He is God's servant. Whom God upholds. God has chosen. And in whom God delights.

[6:05] Now, I want you to notice that he was born a servant. He was born a servant. We make much of how even as a child, Jesus was worshipped as king.

Shepherds worshipped him that way. The wise men who came from the east bowed before him. And truly a king he was. New Testament experts have conclusively shown that the title Christ means king.

That the two words basically mean the same thing. When we talk about Jesus Christ, we're talking about King Jesus.

That's what he is. That's what he was born to be. A king. But at an even more fundamental level, Jesus was born a servant.

He was born into servitude both to us as his covenant people, but most importantly to God as his father. The apostle Paul makes that very point in Philippians 2 when he says of Jesus, who, being of any nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.

[7:25] Even more fundamental than Jesus' sovereignty is his servanthood. And that's who we celebrate at Christmas.

The servant of God, born as a servant, in a servant's condition, with a servant's purpose, to serve us and serve his father.

From the very beginning, he was serving us by making himself nothing and taking the form of a servant, by becoming incarnate of the Virgin Mary, by being the child Emmanuel, God with us. And as he grew, he grew not just in stature, as every child does. He grew in service, serving the blind and the deaf, the lame and the mute, the demon-possessed and the demented.

He loved them and he served them. He served the people. He fed them with bread when they were physically hungry, and he fed them with the gospel to meet their spiritual need.

[8:46] He loved them. And he served them with bread and wine in the night before his death. And then, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the very end.

He served them by dying on a cross for them. He served them by bating all their sin and shame, all their guilt and all their condemnation.

He served them by being crushed by his father on their account. He loved us, and he served us.

He loves us still, and he continually makes intercession for us with his father. He's our great servant king. And at Christmas, when we're celebrating his birth, we need to remember that.

The king has been born. Oh, yes. But the king who has been born came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

[9:57] Behold the child on the manger. Behold the servant God sent to seek and save his people from their sins. Will you let him serve you this Christmas?

Will you let the Christmas servant wash your feet, cleanse your heart from all that sin and guilt? But then you say to me, he's a king, and I'm a sinner.

It is not right that he should stoop down to serve me. And he says to you, I came not to be served by you, but to serve me.

To serve you, rather. And if you will not let me serve you by washing your feet and cleansing your heart, you will have no part in me. If you will not abandon your pride and let me serve you in this

way, then you will remain forever guilty.

Join today with the Heavenly Father in placing all your delight upon his servant, Jesus Christ.

[11:12] Your delight, your pleasure, your joy. Christmas servant. Second, Christmas meekness.

Meekness. If the life of Jesus is characterized by service, then surely also by meekness. He is the servant of God in whom God delights.

And part of the reason his Heavenly Father delights in him is because of his humility and his meekness. I think we can clearly see the theme of meekness in our passage.

He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, make it heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break. A faintly burning wick he will not quench.

Here's the manner in which Jesus, the servant King of God, will carry out his ministry. The way he shall serve, the way he shall live with meekness, gentleness, and humility.

[12:17] So this week, we're celebrating the birth of a child. A child of weakness. of dependence. The first minister of the Milton section of our congregation, John Robbie Duncan, once said of the baby Jesus that at the very same time he was lying helpless in the manger, he was sustaining the universe by the word of his power.

such power vested in the frame of this newborn child. The power of creation. Yes, even the star which guided the wise men from the east to where Jesus lay, he created that also.

The infinite power of God which was his by right vested in that child in the manger. And yet, such is his meekness that even at this stage, he had made a conscious choice to divest himself of that power and choose the path of meekness.

The definition of meekness is not weakness. The word meekness is used in the Bible in the context of a powerful animal which has been tamed or broken.

It's like a mighty rodeo bull which has power far greater than its riders. But when finally it is broken, its great power is under the control of its rider.

[13:53] Meekness is not weakness. Meekness is power under control. It is the ability to strike out and destroy but rather using that ability to reach out and heal instead.

It is the strong hand on the shoulder bringing comfort not pain hope not terror.

And if you were to look in the dictionary for a definition of meekness you wouldn't find words. You'd find a picture of a king King Jesus.

the servant of God who for all the power that was his by divine right made himself nothing and served us instead.

He could have been born in the pomp and pageantry of the emperor's palace in Rome but he chose a stable in Bethlehem. He could have caused the earth to stop spinning on its axis and aligned all the planets in our solar system to point to the place where he was laid.

[15:08] He could have announced his birth with the fanfare of a million angels appearing in the sky but he chose to reveal himself to shepherds chose to be born in a stable chose for everything to be to be so very normal that day.

And throughout his ministry he could have chosen to amplify his voice beyond that of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He could have boomed his voice out over the whole universe every word written in the sky with clouds and sounding from the heaven with cymbals and trumpets but he chose not to cry aloud or lift up his voice.

He chose to harness his power and to keep it under control. Since the end of November our next door neighbors have competed with each other to see who can have the loudest most impressive and brightest Christmas decorations outside their house.

We've got a massive inflatable gingerbread man next door hanging with a meter long candy cane hanging from his hand.

We've got six foot high Victorian lanterns on the house on the other side of ours. You know I'm fairly certain that there are astronauts on the International Space Station today and they're looking down in Branklin Place where we live and they're saying oh look at that it's Christmas time.

[16:51] I'm not trying to compare Jesus with Christmas decorations but if I was going to I would say that he looks nothing like the flashes and

bangs variety. Just ordinary simple modest in fact so simple so modest that no one would take a second look at him.

And then there follows as far as I'm concerned anyway some of the most wonderful words in all of scripture a bruised reed he will not break and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.

The Roman army practiced a certain kind of punishment called decimation decimation. If one of its legions had through cowardice or incompetence lost a battle they would position all the troops of that legion in one long line and every tenth soldier would be killed.

They would decimate the weakest of them. They would root out the weakest of the legion. Yes that's the way that every human organization works along the lines somewhat of Darwin's survival of the fittest.

Break the bruised reed. Snuff out the smoldering flax. Human kingdoms in whatever sense we use that word whether organizationally in business or even in the church sometimes choose the brightest and best and they leave the dullest and weakest behind.

[18:34] But Jesus chooses the bruised reeds to be his people. And he favors those whose wick is faintly burning.

The servant of God in whom God delights in great meekness and humility considers those whom the world calls foolish and weak.

Those whom the world would happily decimate along with the cowards and the incompetent. Those whose exclusion would be no great loss to the gene pool of humanity.

And so you'll find Jesus as he goes through life tending to the wounds of those who have been bruised by the world's ceaseless demands. You'll find him breathing new life into those who have been exhausted by their own merciless standards.

You'll find him dying on a cross for the sins of those who know how far short they fall of the glory of God and those who were caught in a vicious cycle of fear and guilt and shame.

[19:40] Christmas is a great time of year for many if not for most of us but for some it's a time of great weakness and fragility.

We don't have the strength we once did. We're filled with many fears. Our relationships aren't as strong as we'd like them to be. We feel guilty about the past and we're desperately anxious for the future.

And to all intents and purposes these don't seem to be the most blessed of people. They're shaking perhaps. They're definitely struggling. But behold, things are not what they seem to be.

God's at work and the meekness of his son ministers to them in their weakness. They are bruised reeds but he will not break them.

They are smoldering wicks but he will not snuff them out. He is so loving and gentle with us. No wonder his people adore him.

[20:42] No wonder we're all looking forward to spending eternity worshipping him. He's a mighty lion but he's also a humble lamb.

A lamb on the throne of power. As a lamb he identifies with us in our weakness and grief and he lays his strong hand upon our shoulder bringing comfort and hope.

love. But it's all so ordinary so ordinary that no one around us sees the flashes and bangs of his presence in our lives.

But he's there even when we're struggling to love ourselves he loves us. Jesus the great Christmas servant robed as he is in his great Christmas meekness and we love him for it.

And then lastly Christmas justice. Christmas justice. You don't really have to be a great student of theology to figure out the main theme of these verses in Isaiah 42 1 through 4 namely justice.

[21:54] Justice. You three times in these verses. He will bring forth justice to the nations. verse 1. He will faithfully bring forth justice verse 3.

Until he's established justice on the earth verse 4. The problem is we live in a world with so much injustice at so many levels in so many places.

In many parts of the world you know injustice has been institutionalized so it's become unjust to be just. Unjust to be unjust. The winner takes it all.

The cheat always wins. And you know we don't know the half of it or even the tiniest fraction of how loud the cries are of the oppressed in our world.

Oppressed economically, physically, socially, emotionally, yes even spiritually. Charles Dickens in his masterpiece A Christmas Carol, he allows Ebenezer Scrooge a tiny vision of the suffering of the spirits of the dead and it's enough to turn Scrooge's stomach.

[23:15] It's an unpalatable unpleasant truth but it's true nonetheless. People will suffer and people will die this Christmas day the same as they do on every other day of the year.

But behold things are not what they seem to be. The messianic rule overturns the injustice of the world in which we live and replaces it with the righteousness of God himself. the compassion and love the kindness and the goodness of God.

Look at the life of Jesus himself. Born in poverty and raised in anonymity Jesus campaigned and championed justice. He said blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Now we can if we want over spiritualize this as if Jesus merely has in mind some other worldly personal standard of morality and righteousness.

However surely he means also that at a human level his people shall desperately desire justice in society and world.

[24:31] And so this is the Jesus who touched the leper and raised the dignity of the poor and disabled. This is the Jesus of whom it was said the common people heard him gladly. Jesus a man of the people for the people.

The Jesus who condemned the Sadducees for their greed, the Pharisees for their legalism, the Herodians for their immorality. The Jesus who had a heart for the outcast and the downtrodden. The Jesus who took a special note of the world of those the world ignored. He saw through the greed of those who rather than look after their parents devoted their money to the temple calling it Korban.

He condemned those who refused to forgive others. He warned against the biased judging and faced with physical threat he refused to threaten in return.

There's the Jesus of Christmas justice. The Jesus who for no sin of his own dies a criminal's death on the cross. not just another poor boy but born to die that our sins may be forgiven and we receive eternal life through faith in him.

[25:49] At the same moment his cross is both the greatest injustice in history but also the greatest act of justice in history for there our sins were being judged and our penalty paid.

But then you say to me I'm not seeing much justice in our world today. You've said haven't you people will suffer and die on Christmas day.

I'm not seeing much of this justice. Think about it this way. On June 6th 1944 the Allies landed at the beaches in Normandy.

That was the beginning of the end for the Nazi Axis powers. When the Allies secured that beachhead and there used to be a man in this congregation called Hugh Golland sat up behind the pillar there at the back and he was on one of the beaches in Normandy on day two of the invasion. When the Allies secured that beachhead the war was all but done. Bar the shouting. Well it took the Allies another 11 months to finish it all up but really and truly the winning stroke took place when the Allies secured their beachheads at Normandy.

[27:08] The winning stroke for eternal justice took place on a wooden cross outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. And yes it's taken 2,000 years to and it's counting.

But in that stable and on that cross the beachhead of the kingdom of Christmas justice was won and now it's only a matter of time until the final fulfillment of the promises of Isaiah 42.

Behold things are not what they seem to be. God is at work. The Christmas beachhead has been secured and the day is coming when all that was wrong shall be put right. When the sufferings of the righteous shall be overturned and when there shall be a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness and justice shall dwell.

You see, there is so much more going on in Bethlehem's stable than it first appears. Heaven has come to do battle with humanity's injustice, sin, and misery.

the warrior king has come. And with him the justice and the righteousness of the infinite God. You see, behold is a very precious word, especially at Christmas where decorations and celebrations

are right in your face, as we might say.

[28:34] Things are not what they seem to be. Christ's at work in his world. The Christ who is the servant of God in whom God delights. The Christ who loves you and far from breaking you will build you.

The Christ in whom there is all love and righteousness. Behold, there is far more to Christmas than meets the eye. And there is far more to you today than meets my eye.

What matters is what meets God's eye. So the final question is this. Is there faith in you, faith in Christ in you, this Christmas?