

Carols by candlelight talk

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Preacher: Andy Meadows

[0 : 00] Great, so our third reading is from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 1, verses 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. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to 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.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophets.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

[1 : 11] He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. Well, good evening, everyone.

My name is Andy. It's great to see you here. I am acting lead pastor at Grace Church. Let me start with a question. Who is Christmas for?

With the Christmas juggernaut hurtling non-stop down the tracks, perhaps some of us feel it's hard to catch a breath. Presents to buy, parties to go to or avoid, families to see or avoid.

But it's good to pause and think. Who is this all for? We might think Christmas is for retailers. PwC predicts that Christmas spending on presents and celebrations this year to be around £20 billion.

We might think Christmas is for children, with the lights and the presents and the nativity plays up and down the country. Apparently, at Mayfield School in Sussex, a tradition dating back to the 1950s, sees Mary and Joseph journey through the village with a donkey.

[2 : 35] They are turned away at the local pub before arriving at the school chapel with a real baby playing the part of Jesus. That is commitment, isn't it? Well, who is Christmas for?

Who is the Christmas story for? I guess we might think that it's not really for adults. Great for a children's nativity, parading children through the streets.

But can we take it seriously as thinking adults? Well, this evening we're going to press pause on the Christmas juggernaut for a few moments.

To look at a bit of the Christmas story and ask afresh, who is it for? Who is Christmas for? Well, firstly, we're going to see that Christmas is for sceptics.

Christmas is for sceptics. If you take up a copy of Matthew's Gospel on your seat and turn to page four, if you can read it, I'm going to read from sentence 18.

[3 : 43] 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.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. Let's be honest, the Christmas story is hard to believe.

Because at the heart of the Christmas story is a virgin birth, which we all know can't happen. This is hardly a breakthrough of modern science.

Joseph himself had a good grasp of biology surrounding babies. So much so that he's filing for divorce. And if that wasn't enough for us to contend with, then comes verse 20, sentence 20.

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. Great. Now we have an angel thrown into the mix here. So we're here tonight, aren't we?

[5 : 02] It's lovely to sing carols. It was amazing to be sung to. But surely we're not supposed to take this seriously, are we? Surely these things just don't happen.

And that's really the point. They don't. Or at least they don't usually happen. But what if there really was a God and he really does want to get our attention?

So much so that he acts in a unexpected way to draw our attention to the fact that a unique event is taking place. Actually, this is what skeptics demand.

They say, if there is a God, why doesn't he make himself obvious? I wonder if someone has asked you that or whether you thought that yourself. Now, why doesn't God, if he's really there, do something so different, so out of the ordinary, that we can be sure he is there?

To which the answer is Christmas. You see, the skeptic can't have it both ways. They can't demand God do something extraordinary.

[6 : 15] But when he does, dismiss it because it is out of the ordinary. But God is drawing our attention to a significant moment in history.

In fact, a lot of planning has gone into this moment. I don't know how far in advance you plan for Christmas, whether you're already done or not even started yet. Well, God had Christmas planned centuries beforehand.

Sentence 22 in our reading. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Here is another promise from the prophet Isaiah at 700 years before Jesus, at a time where God's people were struggling to believe that God was on their side, that God is actually with them.

And God promised them a sign to show them that he was. A sign that he would come down to them. And that is the promise that Jesus came to fulfill.

[7 : 26] I suspect, like many of us, I find it weird to think of Christmas without Queen Elizabeth II. The story goes that one day, the late queen went for a walk around her Balmoral estate in her normal clothes.

And a group of tourists completely failed to recognize her. They asked her, do you live around here? And the queen said she had a house nearby. Then they asked her, have you met the queen? And she pointed to her bodyguard and said, no, but he has. What a shame to miss out on who was right in front of them.

And so it is with Christmas. If we were there roughly 2,000 years ago, roughly 2,000 miles in that direction east, well, we could have visited the stable.

We could have seen the tiny baby lying on some animal straw. who is God himself, come to earth. Well, to anyone here who might call themselves a skeptic, no one's asking you to come to this like a gullible child, but to come as a thinking adult, engaging with the evidence that we have in front of us of the real person of Jesus, who walked the very earth that we walk.

[8 : 50] Like with the Christmas story, the historical events surrounding Jesus are not normal events. They're not normal things we would expect to happen.

We wouldn't expect a man to calm a storm. We wouldn't expect someone to raise the dead.

Someone else has pointed out Jesus' miracle of having 12 close friends in his 30s.

Okay, well, that one aside, it's the very fact that what Jesus did was so unusual that reveals to us that he is God come to earth.

Now, we don't know how Joseph found out about Mary's pregnancy. Perhaps she told him about the angel's visit, and perhaps we could label him a skeptic to start with.

Yet he was given evidence, wasn't he? Yes, we don't get the same evidence as Joseph, but we don't need to because we have the eyewitness testimony written down for us.

[9 : 59] So for the skeptics amongst us, you're very welcome to take home this copy of Matthew's gospel and to read it and to ask ourselves, could it really be that Jesus was born in this way?

Could it really be that this baby is God come to earth? Could it really be that God did show himself in the person of Jesus Christ?

Who is Christmas for? It's for skeptics. Who else then is Christmas for? Well, secondly, Christmas is for sinners. So we've seen this claim.

The birth of Jesus was God entering this world. The natural follow-up question is why? Why would God step onto planet earth like this?

Well, it's not because he's bored or he needs to stretch his legs. Look again at the angel's words in sentence 21. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

[11:07] Couples spend a lot of effort at naming children, don't they? And if you don't know if you're having a boy or a girl, then half your names don't even get used. I'm one of three boys.

I still remember sitting around the dinner table with our parents. My older brother said, what would I have been called if I was a girl? My mum said, Rachel. And so then I piped up, what would I have been called if I was a girl?

My mum said, Rachel. And then my younger brother said, what would I have been called if I was a girl? And my mum said, Rachel. And then he said, wouldn't that get confusing?

But Mary and Joseph didn't have to argue about baby names for nine months. Joseph was given the name Jesus, which means God saves.

The reason God came to earth was to save his people from their sins. Perhaps like me, you get a lot of leaflets through your door to things that you don't really need.

[12:12] In this last month, I've been storing them up. I've had one for a hearing aid, another for a mobility scooter, and this last week, one for home care. Now, I'm not at the peak of physical fitness, but they're things I don't need, at least for the moment anyway.

And perhaps some of us feel like that when it comes to sin. That we don't need it. We don't need this rescue.

Perhaps we might not have trouble believing there are some people who are morally flawed. That much is clear when we look at the news on scroll through on our phones.

But it tends to be a problem out there in other people. Sometimes people talk about the Ten Commandments, if you can remember them. But even if we just narrowed it down to Jesus' summary of love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, well, that's a standard I know I haven't met.

You may be aware of the COVID inquiry taking place at the moment. I don't know if you watched any on the live stream. Leaders scrutinized over every action, email, or WhatsApp message.

[13:35] And there was all that hoo-ha wasn't there early in the year of are the WhatsApp messages going to get passed on? I have a lot of sympathy with those before the panel in this. I mean, how many of us would like to have our WhatsApp messages and emails read out on a BBC live stream?

Going further, what about having everything we've ever thought and done and said broadcasted? I suspect none of us would want that.

Well, the Bible says that God has already seen our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. They cannot be accidentally deleted from him. You see, when we allow the moral lens to focus on our own lives, we become deeply aware of our own guilt.

I haven't loved God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. And I haven't loved my neighbor as myself. Perhaps, like me, in your heart of hearts, you know that to be true for you too.

All because we push God to one side and want to take charge ourselves. And so the offer of a rescue from sin is not like the offer of home care to a youngish, fairly healthy guy.

[14:56] It's more like the offer of a rescue to those Indian workers trapped underground last month. An offer that is desperately needed because all of us have to face God as our judge.

Yet the great news of the angel to Joseph declared that Jesus, has come to earth as God himself. Not to tell us all off. Not to tell us to do better.

But to live the life we all should have lived all so he could save us. You shall call his name Jesus, but he will save his people from their sins.

The most expensive painting ever sold at auction is da Vinci's Salvatore Mundi, translated Saviour of the World. In 2017, it was sold in New York for \$450 million.

Well, thankfully, the rescue from sin that Jesus brings doesn't cost \$450 million. And yet it was costly. It was costly to God because it cost Jesus Christ his life.

[16:07] Matthew goes on to tell us in his account that it was Jesus' loving commitment to save us that led him to that agonizing death on the cross, taking on himself God's punishment for our sin out of his love for us.

And that he not only died, but he rose again from the dead. And he promises to share that indestructible life with anyone who would come to him for it.

That rescue from sin is the best Christmas present that anybody could receive. But it's not automatic. Like all presents, it's got to be accepted if you're going to enjoy it. He will save his people from their sins, the angel says. The rescue is not for those who just hear about the gift, but for those who unwrap it, so to speak. Those who turn to Jesus, the rescue. Some of us unwrapped it years ago. Let me encourage you again this Christmas to enjoy that rescue. For others, we've got this gift right in front of us now.

[17:21] God came to earth on a rescue mission. But will we unwrap it and enjoy Christmas afresh because of the rescue he brings?

As I close, I recently stumbled across the poem Christmas by former poet laureate Sir John Betjeman, which includes these verses. And is it true, this most tremendous tale of all, seen in a stained glass window's hue, a baby in an ox's stall, the maker of the stars and sea, become a child on earth for me.

And is it true, for if it is, no loving fingers tying strings around those tissueed fripperies, the sweet and silly Christmas things, bath salts and inexpensive scent and hideous tie so kindly meant, no love that in a family dwells, no caroling in frosty air, nor all the steeple shaking bells can with this single truth compare, that God was man in Palestine and lives today in bread and wine.

If the Christmas story is true, if the maker of the stars and sea became a child on earth for me, if God was a man in Palestine, if he was born to save us from our sins, then nothing else about Christmas or life compares.

So who is Christmas for? At Christmas, it's for the sceptic. God showed himself in the person of Jesus. And also Christmas is for sinners.

[19:09] He did so to rescue us from our sins. This is not blind optimism, a holiday from reality, but real hope of rescue our world so desperately needs.

On behalf of Grace Church, may I wish you all a very merry Christmas. on behalf of Grace Church, may I wish you...

I don't know. I wish you all the best. I wish you all a great American imitating in a Christmas.