

# Advent: The Vulnerability of God - Sunday 3rd December 2023

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[ 0 : 00 ] So we're doing Advent, but we're also fast-tracking through the Holy Story. So who is ready for the birth of Christ? Are you all ready for the birth of Christ?

No, but we are pretty much there, to be honest. So the thing that we do in Advent is we imagine how the world will be when God comes again.

So we look at the world as it is. We remember how God came into the world last time. And we think, how will it be when God comes again? How will the world change then?

So last week, Matt was talking a bit about angels and their appearance and all of the different flavours of responses that we had from those who heard from them.

And today we are going to talk a bit about God being born, why God appeared in the way that God did, and what we can take from all of that.

[ 0 : 57 ] So we're going to look at a passage you will all know really, really well. A passage from Luke 2. And here it is. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem, town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

And she gave birth to her firstborn. A son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Now, throughout all of Luke's gospel, the thing that Luke, as a gospel writer, really likes to do is to say, here's a contrast.

[ 2 : 35 ] Look at this thing, and then look at this thing, which is completely different from that thing. You're going to look at this thing and see how different the thing that God is doing, because you're going to look next to it, that thing. And in Luke 2, we see Luke setting up this contrast between what's happening in the Roman Empire and what's happening with the Holy Family in Bethlehem.

So we see Caesar Augustus say the word and the whole world uproots itself. Whatever is going on in your family life or anything else, everyone is moving to take part in this census.

We even see couples like Mary and Jude move around the due date for giving birth for their first child, which is absolutely nuts when you think about it. I mean, we were very lucky in our case, but when I was expecting my first, James didn't even go into the office for a whole month before we had the baby so that he wouldn't miss it.

And yet we see poor Mary on a donkey, like dragged throughout the desert. And why is it that everyone moves in response to Caesar? Well, partly that is just because of fear.

It's fear that Roman soldiers will come in the night and force you to move if you don't move when you choose to. Fear that not doing exactly as you're told, exactly when you're told it, will put their loved ones at risk.

[ 3 : 56 ] And to be honest, they are taking risky behaviours because they are afraid of Caesar. I mean, Mary might have given birth on the road or in the cold of the desert to the extent that it was dangerous for the baby.

She would have been far from her family and her support network, but they still move when Caesar says move because Caesar personifies the kind of particular kind of power, the power of the big military leader who can force people to do things out of fear of pain and suffering.

And then we look at Mary and Joseph. Mary, trugging along on her donkey, nine months pregnant. And the way that Christ comes into the world.

And we see this very different picture of God. Because God is nothing like Caesar Augustus. God does not make people put their loved ones at risk for pain of suffering.

God does not make people act out of fear. And I think when we look at the way that God does act, because he is getting Mary and Joseph to do a scary thing out of love, we can learn a lot from the way that Mary and Joseph go around and about things.

[ 5 : 07 ] Because they don't make a fuss, really. They just get on the road on their donkey. They don't call a big fanfare or force a thousand people to work around them. Instead, they get on with it.

They quietly birth God into the world. And giving birth alone in an unknown place must have been a struggle. Being very pregnant, riding a donkey a long way across the world must have been horrendous.

It makes you shudder to think actually. Caring for a small baby on the road must have been a struggle. Having to flee as refugees to Egypt, where they didn't have any family or any resources as a new family, must have been very hard.

And yet God came into the world. God survived in this family, grew strong and was loved by these two remarkable parents. And when I think about Mary and Joseph, I do think a bit about this church. Because in this church, there are a lot of quiet church angels who just go about life and quietly birth God into the world today. Without fuss, without fanfare.

[ 6 : 13 ] Who turn up time and time again, even when they've got a lot going on. Even when they're in pain. Even when they're struggling to make everything balanced.

And those are extraordinary people to know. And when I think about them, I think in this church, there are so many people who just show up and make things happen. Without fuss, without glory. And I think those people show us a lot about how God's kingdom will come on earth. Because they just kind of quietly nurse it into being. Nursing the kingdom of God, even when it seems precarious or vulnerable.

Turning up and loving people, even when they're difficult. I can think of a few of those people. Well, I'm sure that all of you can think of a few of those people today. In fact, I can see a lot of those people in the room today.

When we first see God born into humanity, born into our world, born into this humble family of quiet angels, they couldn't be more unlike Caesar in all his glory and his armour.

[ 7 : 17 ] Because God comes into this world as one of the most useless and defenceless and frankly stupid of creatures. I was quite shocked when I first met babies. And, you know, they are quite stupid, aren't they?

Like, you know, they don't really even know, like, you know, how to drink or any of the basics. And God comes into this world, not as Caesar Augustus, but as a baby.

And anyone who knows that babies will know that they are very delicate. They can't really see. They struggle to eat even when it's offered to them. They can't support their heads. And when they're very young, they're very susceptible to illness and even the slightest fall.

And this is how God chose to be born. As an infant who needed help supporting his own head, who couldn't clean up after himself, who couldn't survive alone, as a baby who needed other people. And honestly, that's quite extraordinary. I mean, it's God coming into the world. God could come into the world in any way that God chooses. God could walk in as Caesar Augustus, as a fully formed adult at any point, because that is an all-powerful God that we believe in.

[ 8 : 31 ] But God comes into the world and transforms it by being born as one of the weakest, most dependent and most vulnerable of creatures. born into this colonised nation ruled by the Roman Empire, into this oppressed Jewish people.

And this is how God's kingship works, how it should be made known, how we should expect it when it comes again. God does not step confidently into the world as a fully formed adult.

God doesn't peer with the fanfare and armour of Caesar and just order the world to change. Instead, God comes as a baby. So that happened then.

But what does it teach us about God now? Well, firstly, it reminds us that we always need to check the images that we have of God.

And I know I go on and on about this, and I know you find it quite boring, but it is very, very important to me. It's very important that we look at the images we have of God and we see, are they

more Caesar or more Jesus?

[ 9 : 42 ] Because it's very comforting to imagine an all-powerful kind of Zeus figure that zaps people that you don't like. Sometimes it's comfortable to imagine God ordering people around and making them move out of fear because you just want things to change.

Sometimes it's nice to imagine God smiting our enemies and championing the times we crush other people and win. And sometimes it's even comfortable to think of God as making us do things out of fear because then we don't have to take responsibility for our own actions.

But that's not how God is. God does not ever make people act out of fear. God does not just come in and rip up the existing order aggressively, forcing people to change at gunpoint.

Instead, God is born into this picture of vulnerability and dependence. God grows with people, helping them see wonders that they wouldn't see if they didn't have this person walking alongside them and realise the kingdom of God in ways that wouldn't be possible if God just forced people to do things out of fear like Caesar did.

So when Jesus appears in all his baby-like vulnerability, we see a God with a vulnerable side. A side of God's heart that leans on others, perhaps on other parts of the Trinity.

[ 11 : 11 ] Who knows? It is impossible to know or even speculate about that. But perhaps this teaches us that if God acts like this, there is no shame in leaning on other people.

It's okay to be weak and vulnerable. After all, that is how God was born into the world. It is okay to rely on other people to get basic tasks done.

There is no shame in being washed or fed or clothed or cleaned up after. After all, God was. God chose to be in his human form.

There's no shame in the vulnerability of illness or old age or of poverty because the way that God is teaching us to build the kingdom of God requires vulnerability.

It requires people who need other people and who can trust and rely on other people because God is building a world where people are interconnected, woven together and that's okay.

[ 12 : 15 ] that's what love and care and cherishing look like sometimes because God's power is not the kind of power we love in the world, the kind that has a fanfare people can't ignore, that forces people to do things.

Instead, we see God reach out a tensive hand and our fingers slowly find our way into God's grasp and then somehow the world has changed.

And we see this absolutely when Jesus is placed in the manger, such an unclean, uncomfortable place to put a new baby. But God is there in the weak, unclean, uncomfortable places of the world. And if we are looking to hear the voice of God today, it is the voices of those who are weak and vulnerable and lonely and unclean that we need to listen to.

Listen to and reach towards so we can find our finger held by God in God's vulnerability and be transformed from our love of money and influence and power over other people to a place where we too slowly weakly can reach out a hand and grasp the finger of the neighbour next to us.

[ 13 : 36 ] Because we see in God in the manger, we see a God who longs to feed people and not to frighten them. To end hunger perhaps by reminding us how dependent we all are on each other even if we pretend we are not.

After all, in our world with its distant farms and sweatshops and endless supply chains, we can pretend that we are independent and self-reliant. But really, we all need each other in our weakness so that any of us can be fed at all.

So let's pray. Loving God, you came to us in the past in such a challenging way in this defenceless, vulnerable baby.

and yet, in coming in such a small way, you changed our world forever, teaching us a new way to be that is completely different from the structures of power our society relies upon.

Help us to keep hearing you in the weak and the vulnerable today. Help us to keep reaching out towards you and make us into little children so that we too can share your wonder and your message of love today.

[ 14 : 58 ] Amen.