

Caesar and the Baby

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 December 2015

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 01] Well, good evening. Let me add my welcome to Jordan's. One of the great ironies of a modern Christmas, I think, is this, that the story of Jesus should blow our mind.

It should expand our paradigms, but a modern Christmas with all its busyness and commercialism, I think, can do the opposite. It can narrow our thinking. It can narrow our thinking to things like finding the perfect gift or being the perfect host.

You know this. I'm trying to find gifts for my kids and finding some piece of plastic nonsense on Amazon. My wife says, I've got to get a wooden version of this and something that doesn't have lead paint.

Apparently, lead paint is bad for children or something. And it's got to support somebody. I don't know. And I get really anxious about this stuff. So it could be Christmas Day and I'm supposed to be thinking about Jesus.

My mind is filled with all these anxieties about how untidy our house is. And have I got the right gifts for the right people? And will our kids behave? No, of course they're not going to behave.

[1 : 12] And people will think that I'm a terrible parent. And Christmas should change our hearts. It should reorient us to Jesus. And often it just, I don't know if this is your experience, but for me it just brings up all these silly anxieties.

I think the antidote to that is to dive into a passage like Luke 2. And this really is a Christmas greatest hits text, isn't it?

I mean it's got the angels, it's got the shepherds, manger, baby, Joseph, Mary. It's got it all. It's the passage that launched a thousand Christmas cards. But we need to get behind these very well-known bare facts and ask ourselves two questions.

What is it really saying about the baby Jesus here? And how do we respond to him? And those are the main sections of the short sermon, by the way. Why the baby Jesus?

And how do we respond to him? So first, what does our text say about Jesus? About this child?

Well, have a look on verse 11 there. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

[2 : 24] So to understand Christmas, you've got to understand the incarnation. What is that? The incarnation means this. It means that the invisible became visible. It means the incorporeal became corporeal.

It simply means God became human. And why did this have to happen? I mean, that's a big question, isn't it? Why did that actually have to happen?

I mean, God becoming human, that's a big deal. Why? Why did it have to happen? It's because you and me, we can't get to heaven on our own merits. We can't get to God on our own merits.

We'll never be good enough. We can't get to God on our own. So God had to come to us. Now, let me give you a sort of a good parallel to this. I want to tell you about a woman named Dorothy Sayers, who I love.

Dorothy Sayers was a mid-century English writer. She was a Christian, a very committed Anglican, like an amateur sort of theologian. She thought well. She was a good thinker. Now, she was one of the first women to graduate from Oxford.

[3 : 27] By her own reckoning, she was not very attractive. She was also a famous crime writer. Now, Dorothy wrote a series, a long series of books about a guy called Lord Peter Wimsey.

And he was a detective who solved crimes. Halfway through the series, she introduced a new fictional character called Harriet Vane. Harriet Vane was one of the first graduates of Oxford.

She was not very attractive. And she wrote crime novels. Doesn't that sound familiar, right? In the series, Harriet Vane meets Lord Peter Wimsey and they fall in love.

And they get married. And they solve crimes together. Isn't that lovely? Isn't that brilliant? Now, here's what people think. Let's think about this a bit better here. Here's what people think. Dorothy says she looked into this world that she had created. The world of this book. And she looked at this man she'd created.

[4 : 25] A lonely man. She fell in love with him. And so what did she do? She wrote herself into the story. Now, some of you are going, oh, that's so sweet.

Isn't that just sweet? But do you realize that this is the claim of Christmas? That God looked into the world he created. The people he made. He loved us.

He saw the mess that we're in. And so he wrote himself into the story. That's who the baby Jesus is. It's God. It's God entering our world to rescue us.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. That's what that means. Isn't that remarkable?

Now, let's dig deeper into this here. What does this passage want us to know about this child? And I want you to notice verse 12 here. The angel of the Lord spoke to the shepherds and said this. And this will be a sign to you.

[5 : 23] You'll find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. So the writer John gives us a sign to help us understand more about what's behind just the BFX here.

And the sign is this. A baby in a manger. A baby in a manger. Three times, actually, in the text, it reminds us it's a baby in a manger, which is an animal's feeding trough.

It must be important. There's something about this. There's something important about this. It's trying to tell us something about God who became man, who became this child. Now, to work out why it's important, you've got to look at the context that John gives us for this birth, which we didn't read.

It's John 2, but I'll tell you what it is. The beginning of John 2, verse 2. Do you know in movies, they have what's called an establishing shot in a movie?

It's like the opening scene, and it tries to set up the whole movie. Like in the beginning of Star Wars, the original Star Wars. It's space, this little ship flying overhead, and this massive ship firing on the little ship.

[6 : 25] It tells you a lot about the movie. It's an establishing shot. Well, the establishing shot for the birth of Christ is verse 2 of chapter 2. Let me read it to you. Just one verse. In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

So we're introduced to Caesar. This is the establishing shot. We're introduced to Caesar. I'm sure you know. He was a pretty big deal. In fact, they found an inscription about him with his official title. Let me tell you what his official title was. Augustus, son of God, Caesar, emperor of land and sea, benefactor and savior of the whole world.

That's a fairly impressive thing to have on your business card. You know. I don't even have a business card. If I did, it would be like Aaron Roberts, Anglican middle management.

This guy, this guy sounds amazing, doesn't he? And of course, it wasn't just impressive words. His power was very real.

[7 : 34] I mean, verse 2 tells us he just decrees the whole world, which is his known world, pick up all their stuff and move to the place of their birth. And people did. Everyone had to head back to their hometown and have their name written down, collected for a census.

And what was the point of that? Well, he was trying to account for everyone so he could collect more taxes, so he could become richer. That's our establishing shot. Caesar Augustus standing astride the great pillars of power and money, and no one was higher or more powerful than him. No one was richer than him. There was one name atop of the org chart in Rome, and it was Caesar Augustus. There was one name at the top of the Forbes rich list. It was Caesar Augustus.

Anyway, that's Caesar with his power on display. And it's the backdrop to this story, the story of Jesus. Let me remind ourselves of what happens here.

The angel of the Lord comes to shepherds, people. These are the people at the bottom of the org chart. And the angel says, go find your saviour who was what? A baby in a feeding trough, in a stable, in some backwater town.

[8 : 48] The passage is presenting this incredible contrast here. Why? Because, goodness, we long for power and status and money.

And sometimes, perhaps we fantasize about being like a Caesar-type figure. Wow, imagine that. Wouldn't that be incredible? Now, power and status and money, these things aren't inherently bad. But our hearts are slippery things. And we think that they can deliver on things they actually can't. Deep things like joy, peace, acceptance.

And so Jesus comes into the world, and the way he comes into the world, he comes into the world to subvert that way of thinking against the backdrop of the all-powerful Caesar, ordering the world around to line his pockets, against that story we have God entering the world as a baby.

Do you see the message it's conveying here? Salvation, folks. Salvation, which we all need, is not going to come through power, but it's going to come through humility. So deep joy, peace, salvation are all products of humility, not power.

[9 : 59] The humility of God in becoming a man, a vulnerable human child, and the humility of people, rightly responding to what God has done. Now, that's the end of the first part of the sermon.

The second part, God writes himself into the story in an incredibly unexpected way to save us from things that we think will save us. Part two, how do we respond to that?

It's very interesting, actually, that the most famous elements of the Christmas story here, birth, manger, no room in the inn, you know they're dealt with in one verse in the Bible, just one verse, verse seven.

As she gave birth, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, laid him in a manger. There was no place in the inn. And then there's 12 verses, 10 times as much, 12 verses after that, given to people's reactions to the news of this birth.

And what does that tell us? It tells us that how we respond is very important. It's one of the major concerns of the passage. And I think as we read it, we'll see something. Well, this is what we're going to see. We're going to see, if we really hear the good news of this birth, if we really hear it, something happens to us.

[11 : 13] And you probably know this. There is a big difference between hearing well and just hearing. I mean, you can listen to something and think through the implications and let it really impact you.

Or you can hear something in it that does nothing to your heart and your head. So in the passage, we have examples of people who hear well. Now the shepherds, the angels, and Mary.

And they're held up for models. They're models for us. So let's have a look at them before we finish up. So example one, the shepherds. So they're visited by angels. And at first they're scared, which is a reasonable response, I think. They hear the news delivered.

A child is born. He's the Savior. You'll find him in a manger in Bethlehem. And then verse 15, the shepherds say, let's go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

When you hear well what happens, it results in doing. They did something. They literally moved. If they had stayed in the fields, salvation would have remained words.

[12 : 16] They would not have encountered Christ. But they really heard, and it did something in them. And I think that's the expectation for us, folks. When we hear this good news, God expects spiritual movement towards them.

That's the appropriate response. Example two, the angels. They heard well. In verse nine, we see the angels, they come to visit the shepherds. They bring the good news of Jesus' birth. And what happens? Verse 13, And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God on the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

Suddenly this angelic messenger is joined with this choir, massive choir of angels praising God. So these are beings who have no need of salvation praising God for the amazing thing he's done here in Bethlehem.

This theologian, J.R. Packer, says, Theology should always lead to doxology. And that means thinking well about God should lead to praise him.

So it's good to think about God. It's good to think well about God. But if we've really heard him, if we've really heard it, it changes us. It alters the affections of our heart.

[13 : 30] We want to praise God. That's the experience of the shepherds as well. In verse 20, it says, The shepherds left glorifying God. A real hearing of the gospel leads to praise.

Example three, Mary. The teenage mother of God. How does she respond? This is very interesting. So the shepherds visit her. They share what they've been told. In verse 19, it says this.

It's very interesting. She treasured up these things, pondering them in her heart. Those two words. Treasured and pondering.

They're great words. To treasure in the Greek, which is the language of the original here, is treasure means it's to keep something safe. It's to protect it. It's a very emotional word.

It's like keep a fire alive. To savor something. To relish something. So that's the first response. Then it's just she ponders it. What is that? The ponder word in Greek, it's like meet together. Like two people meet together.

[14:26] It's more of a cognitive word. It's like she's connecting the dots in her brain. So Mary doesn't just listen to the shepherds. She doesn't just receive information. She turns it over in her head.

She tries to make sense of it. And she relishes it. She enjoys it. She treasures. She treasures it. And what a contrast to the other people who hear the good news.

There are other people here. We don't know who they are, but there are other people. Verse 18, it says this. All who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. So the shepherds came to Bethlehem.

They told Mary, and it indicates the shepherds told a whole lot of other people. Mary treasured it. The others wondered at it.

Now that word in Greek, it means admire. That's nice. It's a response. But it doesn't mean faith. It doesn't really mean they got it. It's sort of like a, wow, and then move on.

[15:26] Luke's gospel uses this word a number of times later in the story. And it's always in places where a crowd has a positive brush with Jesus, but nothing really changes for them.

So what a difference between them and the angels and the shepherds and Mary. And that's a contrast. The story wants us to see. So there really is a difference between hearing and really hearing the gospel.

Folks, I don't know what you think about what I've just talked about for the last 15 minutes, but perhaps you are not very religious, but you like a Christmas Eve service.

You like the singing, and it's peaceful. You like it. And it's wonderful. I'm glad you're here. For you, I would really encourage you to really hear the story of Jesus' birth well.

And you'll know you've heard it well, because like the angels and Mary and the shepherds, if you begin to understand the claims of the story, the remarkable claims of the story, you will move spiritually toward Jesus.

[16:33] It will be news that you relish, that you cherish. You'll turn it over in your mind. You'll actually go away, and you'll think about it some more. You'll try and make sense of it, and you'll know you'll hear it, because you'll want to thank God for it.

I'll finish with this. In 1961, the Russians launched the first man into space, and you know the story. The cosmonauts said, I've been into space. I didn't see God. It was propaganda, of course.

C.S. Lewis was still alive at the time, and he responded with an essay called *The Seeing Eye*, and he said, looking for God in outer space is like Hamlet looking for Shakespeare in the attic of Hamlet's house, as if God slash Shakespeare was this guy upstairs, and Hamlet could just pop up and see him.

That's not really how it works, is it? Hamlet could only meet Shakespeare if Shakespeare wrote himself into the story. And if we're to know God, God must write himself into our story, and he did, like Dorothy Sayers did.

And that's the amazing claim of Christmas. It's an incredible claim. It's a remarkable claim. So folks, don't just have a brush with Jesus this Christmas. I mean, it's very easy to happen. Christmas is completely mad and busy.

[17:47] But don't let it happen. I say that because the story is just too big for that. It's too important. Treasure the story, and it will change you.

And you know one of the best things it can do for you? It's this. It's what I talked about at the start. It will subvert the inclinations of your heart to seek salvation and things which just simply can't be the weight of that.

The story will do this. You'll see salvation. And that can only come when you humbly trust in Jesus. And that's what I encourage you to do this Christmas.

Amen.