

Nine Lessons & Carols PM

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[0 : 0 0] If you weren't here when I was welcoming, y'all, my name is Jordan. I'm one of the ministers here at St. John's. It's great to have you. I moved to Vancouver for my second stint about 14 or 15 months ago.

One of the things I appreciate about living in Vancouver is that there's lots of thinking people in my experience. Like getting to know my neighbors, many of them don't want to settle for simple answers to life's questions.

Illustration. My neighbor was just talking with my wife a couple days ago. The neighbor's not a Christian. And the neighbor was telling my wife how she was wishing schools were more honest and upfront about what Christians really believe and why they believe it.

That was interesting. And it was in the context of I wish the school was actually told my child, who's not a Christian, why Christmas is actually a season in our culture and what that's about.

I found that really fascinating. So I thought to myself, well, you guys have given me 10 to 15 minutes. Why don't I try to answer that question? How can I be as clear as I can about what Christmas is about and why it's important to Christians?

[1 : 0 8] And so if you would join me in Matthew chapter 1, it's going to be the reading after the sermon, but I kind of want to explain it and then you can hear it read again. So Matthew chapter 1, this is on page 807 of that Pew Bible, if you are willing to open it or you can find it in your service sheet.

Starting in verse 18, this is one of the first biographies of Jesus' life. And this is the first telling of the story of his birth that we are aware of. And it begins in chapter 1, verse 18.

Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way. When his mother had been betrothed or engaged 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. Verse 20. 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.

[2 : 2 2] 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.

This is the word of the Lord. At its simplest form, Christmas is about the coming of God into the world. The author of history writing himself into his own story.

God drawing near to us but not stopping there. God becoming one of us. And the focus of the angel's announcement to Joseph in Matthew chapter 1 is giving two names for this Christ child.

Two names that are given before the child is ever born. The first is in verse 21, the name Jesus, which is a traditional Jewish name with a long pedigree that simply means God saves.

And then the second name in verse 23, another Jewish name, but this one a little bit more unique, Emmanuel, which means God with us.

[3 : 25] God saves and God with us. And so as we consider this simple Christmas story, I want us to view it from three angles. The fact that God came, why God came, and how do we respond to his coming.

So first, that he came. I mean, this is one of the utterly unique things of the Christian faith when compared to other religions and faiths. It is simply this Christmas story that God became fully human while remaining fully God.

Think about that statement for a second. This is the weightiness of the second name that's given, Emmanuel, God with us. And this is why twice, Joseph has to be told by the angel twice that the child in Mary is from the Holy Spirit, from God himself.

It's what Matthew wants us to see as plainly as possible, that this Jesus is God with us. Now, in other faiths, God may interact with humans.

God may even appear as a human. God may even come down to dwell in a temple with humans. But in no other faith does God ever become a human. And this is central to the Christmas story.

[4 : 35] And this is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. God becomes fully human while remaining fully God. No aspect of his divinity is diminished. And no aspect of his humanity is compromised.

At one and the same time, he upholds the universe by the power of his word. And he depends on Mary and Joseph for food and warmth and protection. It's what Christians call the incarnation.

God becoming embodied. Now, there's this wonderful little novel. It's a mythical retelling of the Christian story in the 20th century by an author named Calvin Miller.

And it's entitled The Singer. Because it retells the Christmas story in a poem about a singer whose song cannot be silenced. Think about that as we're in this service.

We are singing a song that cannot be silenced. In this mythical retelling, Earthmaker is God the Father and his troubadour is God the Son. And they sit down on the outer rim of outer space to look down at the planet and behold what is going on with the creation that they have made.

[5 : 44] Earthmaker, the Father, holds the planet to his ear and he says, Troubadour, my son, they are crying. They cry so helplessly. And then he gives the tiny planet to his son.

And his son holds it up to his ear and says, Oh, yes, Father. Year after weary year, they keep crying. It seems as if they are born to weep and die.

Then with his nail, they scrape the atmosphere of the earth. And both of them behold the hurting planet.

And the Earthmaker, the Father, sets the earth spinning in its way. And he says to the son, Son, give me your vast infinity. I'm now going to wrap it in a bit of clay. It's this image that God does not save us from a distance.

He enters into the lives of those he is going to save. That's what Christmas is about. According to the Christmas story, people are not saved through mystic meditation like, say, Buddhism.

[6 : 51] People are not saved through moral perfection and religion like Islam or Hinduism. People are not saved through the acquisition of material possession like capitalism. People are not saved through political revolution like Marxism.

Salvation is not a ground-up thing. It is a top-down movement where God stoops down to dwell among his people. It's not us moving to God.

It's God coming to us. And this Christian view of God is so different than anything else we see in the world. Because it's not just that he delights to be near us. It's that he delights to be one of us.

Irenaeus, in the second century, said, the glory of God is a human being fully alive. In no other faith do we have God and humans wed together in such intimacy and permanency.

God entering into the lives that he is going to save. This is the first fact of Christmas. It is an astonishing one. It's simply that God came. Emmanuel, God with us.

[7 : 54] And the second fact is equally astonishing. God didn't just come be with us. Why did he come? He came to save us. And we see this in verse 21.

Jesus, the name Jesus, literally means God saves. And unless we weren't Hebrew and we didn't understand that about the origin of his name, Matthew spells it out for us. So he says, Mary will bear a son.

And Joseph, you shall call his name Jesus. Why? For he will save his people from their sins. Now in the scriptures we get many images of what this salvation is going to be like.

We get an image of Jesus like a doctor coming to mend the brokenhearted. We get an image of Jesus like a shepherd coming to seek and save his lost sheep. We get an image of Jesus like a warrior who comes to free prisoners who are in captivity.

And we get this image of Jesus as a comforter who comes to speak words of comfort and good news to those who are mourning because of their own sins and the sins of the world around them. Here we learn that Jesus comes to save his people from their sins, something that we ultimately see on the cross.

[9 : 03] Notice that word, a people. It's not just that he cares about individuals and oh he does. It's that he makes himself deeply and personally present to individuals because he wants to bring them into a society.

He wants to bring them into a community. He wants them to bring them into a people of grace. This is why at St. John's, for example, our vision is we want to be a community, of contrast, gripped by the gospel of grace.

This is why I love the genealogy of Jesus that happens right before this birth passage in Matthew 21 because it tells us who is part of the family of God, who's part of the people that Jesus has come to save.

And there's some interesting things in this genealogy because when you read the Psalm 47 names in 42 generations, which can be a little boring, you discover that alongside Abraham, David, and Joseph, we find Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary.

They are men and women. And Ruth and Rahab were Gentiles. Tamar was likely a Gentile and Bathsheba was originally married to a Gentile. So not only do you have men and women, you have Jews and Gentiles.

[10 : 20] And Tamar was somebody that struggled for justice and was called righteous in the Bible and yet she slept with her father-in-law. Rahab appears on the stage as a prostitute. And Bathsheba commits adultery with King David.

And then you have Ruth and Mary, a little more saintly of the lot. They're upheld as models of faithfulness in difficult circumstances. So not only do you have men and women, Jews and Gentiles, you have sinners and saints.

And all these people, Matthew's trying to say, are the people that God has come to save in Jesus Christ. The point is really simple according to Matthew. God's grace can grip anyone and firmly place them in the steady stream of salvation history.

When I lived in California, I had a lot of people coming up to me and saying a couple years in, you don't want to be on the wrong side of history. I started thinking that it was their subtle way of making judgments on the decisions I was making as a leader.

You don't want to be on the wrong side of history, Jordan. You better change your mind about this soon. But it was a really interesting phrase because it had this sense implicit in it that we should make decisions in life now based on the perspective of the future in mind.

[11 : 39] How will the future generation look back and evaluate my life and my choices and my actions? There's a sense that history is heading somewhere definite, that there is a moral arc to the universe, that it has a salvation trajectory.

And I think that's something that Matthew is bringing into clear focus at the beginning of this Christmas story. He's saying the Christmas story is not just a parochial story of some backwater country.

It is the story of the entire world. All human history prior to Christ was leading to Christ. And all human history since Christ is defined by Christ.

And your place in history is determined by your response and relation to Christ. And that's why the first truth of Christmas is not that he came, and the second truth is why he came, but the third truth is how do we respond to the fact that he has come?

How you respond to Jesus, I think Matthew wants to show us, especially through Joseph, determines the meaning and the purpose and the trajectory of your life. I mean, in Luke chapter 1, which we just had read before, Mary responds to the news of Jesus' birth with awestruck wonder.

[12 : 51] She's flabbergasted, and all she can muster is a simple word of obedience, let it be to me. Let it be to me according to your word. But in Matthew, Joseph never can muster up a word.

He's never shown to be speaking, he just acts. He acts without speaking, he acts swiftly and simply, and it's almost as if his form of speech in response to the Lord is simply to do the will of God.

He simply does what God asks him to do. He takes Mary as his wife, he supports the work of God in Mary's life, and he names her son Jesus. And so in Mary, we have this image of contemplative faith.

She receives the word of God into her life, quite literally, and she worships, and she ponders what she has received. And in Joseph, we have this image of active faith. He responds to the word of God with wholehearted obedience.

He doesn't hold anything back. He just does what the Lord has asked him to do, and he does it promptly, and he does it simply, and it seems by all intents and purposes that he does it joyfully. Both show us an aspect of what true faith looks like.

[14 : 05] The willingness, on the one hand, with Mary to joyfully receive, and with Joseph to actively respond to what we did not ask for or prepare for or work for, the presence of the Son of God in our lives and his reign over us.

Now, for some of us who have been here for a while, we find this a really compelling view of life. I know I do. Emmanuel, God with us, yeah, he's significantly interrupted my life, but he's also dramatically transformed it.

I know I have been saved, and I am being saved, and that I will be saved from my sins, and that is a really compelling view of life. But I know there are, for others, that we're not yet in the place of Mary's kind of active reception or Joseph's active trust.

We're not yet in that place of wanting our lives to be that interrupted by God. Maybe we're not ready for the Christmas story actually to be the defining story of our lives.

Maybe we're a little more like Joseph before Jesus showed up. How can I politely find a way out of this uncomfortable and undesirable situation? Which maybe some of you are asking right now.

[15 : 14] And if you're in that place, I just want to say two things to you right at the end here. The first is an encouragement. You are in good company. You're not the first or the last to be confused by Christ and to feel uncomfortable by his claims on our lives.

But the second is an invitation. I would invite you not to settle for simple answers to tough questions. I'd invite you to pursue the truth about this Jesus, this baby born in Bethlehem.

Could he really be God with us to save us? Because if he is, that may be the most significant question you'll ever ask or answer in your life. And if what you've heard tonight piques any of your interest, I'd simply invite you to this course, Come and See, that we have next month, starting January 17th.

We just want to provide a hospitable place for people to ask the questions that they are exploring about the meaning of life and to see if Jesus actually may be the hope that they have been looking for all along.

Brothers and sisters, this is Jesus God saves. This is Emmanuel God with us. This is the song that will never be silenced. He is the King of Kings.

[16 : 30] He is the Lord of Lords. And it is our privilege to sing his praises tonight. I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.