

Relishing Christmas

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[0 : 0 0] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, Amen. Amen. Please be seated for this shorter than normal sermon, in which we'll be looking at this remarkable story we've been hearing about in Luke 1 and 2.

And I'm going to touch on some stuff that we haven't read yet, so is there a scripture behind me? Great. Great. I'm going to talk a little bit about that and a little bit about the stuff I've already read.

And I want you to notice something first of all. We're just jumping straight into it. Verse 7. Verse 7 there. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the end.

Have you heard about this before? Have you heard about that part? Of course you have. That's huge, right? That's like, that's just like the big stuff. That's the beloved parts of the story. The manger and no room at the inn and a baby.

Very famous elements. It's the elements of the story that have launched a thousand Christmas cards. And yet, these very well-known and beloved elements of the Christmas story, what do they get?

[1 : 1 6] They get one verse. Isn't that interesting? Don't you think that's very interesting? That the stuff we kind of know about, stuff we think is really cool, kind of just gets just the one verse there?

If you stop thinking about Christmas cards for a moment in nativity scenes and ask yourself, Okay, and you sort of step back and read chapters 1 and 2 and ask yourself, Okay, when telling the story of Jesus' birth, what does Luke seem to focus on?

I think he focuses on two things. He focuses on the news of the birth, like the actual story, like the message. And the second thing is how people responded to the news.

So I think those are the two focuses, and that's what we're going to spend our few minutes on this evening, looking at those. So, we'll begin by looking at the responses to the angel. And you see that the angel came and brought some extraordinary news to lots of different people, to a very important man called Zachariah, to a teenage girl called Mary, to some working class shepherds, to a choir of angels, and to some random bystanders, which we'll get to sort of towards the end there.

So how do these folks react to the angelic messenger? It's a very big part of the story. We'll see. Let's start with the shepherds. So the shepherds, so they're visited by an angel in chapter 2, and the angel announces to them and says, What's great about these guys, what I love about the shepherds, is they heard the news, and it resulted in what? It resulted in action.

[3 : 1 0] That was their response. They did something. It literally moved them. Now, if they'd have stayed in the fields, secure in their work, secure in their lives, if they'd have just stayed there, salvation would have remained words, just words to them.

They would not have encountered Jesus. But these guys, they heard the message, and they really heard it well. And we know that. We know they heard it well because something changed. It literally moved them.

And I think that's the litmus test for whether you've really heard the good news of Jesus or not. It moves you. So movement. I think that's the first response we see in the shepherds there. Now, the angels.

Let's look at the angels' response because that comes immediately after the shepherds here. So the big angel delivers the message to the shepherds. And then what happens? Verse 13, it says, So suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

So suddenly this messenger is joined by this massive choir of angels, all praising God. And remember these angels. These are creatures that are in no need of salvation. But they are praising God for the amazing thing that God has done in Bethlehem.

[4 : 27] I think J.R. Packer sums this up very well. He says, Theology should always lead to doxology. And what that means is that thinking well about God should always lead to praising God.

It's good to think well about God. It's good to have robust theology. It's good to have gospel clarity. But you know that you really understand those things if it alters the affections of your heart.

If you want to praise God because of what you've heard. So our response is so far. It's the shepherds. It literally moves them. The angels praise God.

Movement and praise. Now Mary. Mary will spend a little bit of time on it because she's just fantastic. Isn't she? She's just amazing, Mary. So the angel appears to Mary in chapter 1.

We're going to bounce between chapter 1 and 2. So the angel appears to Mary in chapter 1 and says, Greetings, favor one. The Lord is with you. And her response is she didn't go, Oh, right, yes. I've heard about such things.

[5 : 36] No, verse 29. She says she's trying to discern sort of what's going on here. She's turning it over in her mind.

Why is this angel speaking to just this teenage girl in this backwater town? The angel tells her what's going to happen, that she will conceive a child.

The child will be the Messiah. And her response is, How will this be since I'm a virgin? Which is, you know, this is a very reasonable question. And the angel says, Well, nothing is impossible with God.

And then there's actually, if you went back to chapter 1, you'll see there's actually quite a lot of dialogue going on here. So we get one verse for the manger, but a lot of dialogue with the angel here.

Now, why does the passage give us these details? And I think it gives us these details because it's trying to contrast Mary's response to Zachariah's response. You remember Zachariah, big guy, tough guy, very important man, doing his duty in the church there from the first reading.

[6 : 38] It's trying to contrast those two responses because they're quite different. You read them and they sound kind of the same, but they're actually quite different. If you hold these stories up beside each other, there's all these parallels. Angel comes to both.

Both people are troubled. Don't be afraid. Angel says to both, You'll bear a son. Same message. Zachariah, call him John. Mary, call him Jesus. They both ask a question. Both receive another response from the angel.

Luke is very careful when he wrote this stuff. He knows what he's doing. He uses very similar words. He uses a very similar order of events. And he's trying to say, Look at the differences. Because Mary and Zachariah are models of how to respond and how not to respond.

And the differences in their responses is this. The angel tells Zachariah that his wife, who's, you know, she's getting on, right? He says, You're going to have a baby. And you remember what he says?

He says, How will I know this? We're too old to have kids. Compared to Mary, you're going to have a baby. She says, How can this be? I'm a virgin. Sounds kind of similar. It's not similar. The difference?

[7 : 41] Zachariah, what is he asking for? He's asking for more evidence. Mary's asking for an explanation. Zachariah says, He can't be sure. Mary says, I don't understand.

Sounds like the same thing. It's not. The world's apart. And the angel recognizes the difference in their responses. The difference is not lost in the angel. See how he reacts. To Mary, Gabriel says, Let me explain it to you.

Holy Spirit will come upon you, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. To Zachariah, remember, Zachariah basically says this, I can't believe it. Give me a sign. Prove it to me. And the angel says to him, and it's such a great response, says, I can't believe it.

Give me a sign. I am Gabriel. I'm an angel. I stand in the presence of God. I was sent to speak to you and bring you good news.

You need to be quiet for a really long time now. Now, to be fair, to be fair, they were both, you know, both these guys were responding to something well beyond human horizons.

[8 : 53] It's something completely supernatural. But they did have a, they did have a choice in how they responded. Zachariah doesn't believe it. He demands a sign. Mary is bewildered, but says, help me understand.

In other words, Zachariah says, I won't believe until I have all the answers. And Mary says, I don't have the answers. I will trust. I will trust. Help me to understand this though.

Help me to understand it. And it's because of that trust response of Mary that she can say later on, verse 38, just the most wonderful, wonderful verses in the Bible. Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. Isn't that fantastic? And she would have been very cognizant of the implications of this, that this unwed teenage girl is going to start to look quite pregnant in this small, very religious town.

Now jump over to chapter two there. How else does Mary react? So the shepherds go to see, they, you know, they track her down and the shepherds go and see her and the shepherds explain to her what's going on and how does she respond to this new information and it's just fabulous.

[10 : 06] It says there in verse 19, she treasured up these things, pondering them in her heart. Great words, this treasured and pondered, treasured and pondered. Treasured, the word means in the original language, it's like, well, it's like a treasure chest, right?

It's you keep something safe and you protect it. It's quite an emotional word. It's like, it's like, like you keep a fire alive or you relish something or you savor something like a really great meal.

It's quite an emotional word. It's fantastic. Ponder is like, it's a word that can be used for two people meeting together. So it's ideas coming together in a good way.

So she's, she's connecting the dots. Things are starting to fall into place for her. So she 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 as the ideas begin to form and as things start to fall in place for her, goodness, she just grabs a hold of them.

[11 : 09] She holds them close to her heart and thinks they're the most wonderful, treasured things in her life. I just think that's such a beautiful image. And what a contrast that is to the bystanders in verse 18.

So there's these random bystanders. We don't know who they are. But the shepherds come to Bethlehem and they tell Mary what this experience and what the angels tell them.

And it appears, you see there in verse 18, and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told her. So apparently they told some other people or there's some other people around that overheard it. Something like that. We don't quite know. But other people heard it.

So Mary treasured it and the others wondered at it. Now, wondered sounds like a good response, doesn't it? It's not. It's not a good response.

It doesn't mean faith. It doesn't mean that they really got it. It's like, wow, that's cool. And then moving on to the next shiny object they come across, basically.

[12 : 11] And we know that this word wondered is a critique that Luke is using because later on he uses this word a fair bit in the gospel.

And the other places that he uses it, it's always, well, it's not, it's almost always a place in the story where Jesus encounters someone and these people, a crowd, kind of has a, they just have this like positive brush with Jesus.

It makes them feel kind of nice. But nothing changes. What a wonderful difference, right? What a huge difference between them and Mary, between them and the angels and between them and the shepherds.

And it's a contrast. The passage wants us to see. Okay. Those are the responses. Now very, very quickly, just in a couple of minutes, I want to look at the content of the message.

and in just two minutes, I think, I think you could sum up the content of the message in this one word and the word is saviour. Saviour. The angels' news to the shepherds was this, I bring you good news of great joy.

[13 : 24] So in the original language, it's mega joy. It's mega joy. I bring you great news of mega joy. Unto you is born on this day in the city of David a saviour who is Christ the Lord.

So what does that all mean? Well, goodness, it means a billion things. Here's one thing it means, though. It means that God looked down at our world and he saw that we needed saving.

He saw that we were lost. And it's not like he looked down and he saw people eating babies and worshipping Satan and stuff, you know. It's not like, oh, everything's just, you know, carnage. It's just, it's mostly a whole lot of people living quite horizontally.

Like, all of their interactions are just completely sort of like at this level. There's not any of this going on with reference to God. It's a whole lot of people living like this trying to be their own gods, really.

Trying to be, trying to determine their own lives. Make all their own moral decisions. And it just doesn't really work, does it?

[14 : 31] Because there's only room for one God in this world that he created. So God sees a lost people and he sends a saviour. And the way he does that is God enters flesh.

So God didn't remain at a safe distance and, you know, go like this and sort of just sort everything out. No, God entered our story. God entered this world in flesh.

And isn't that just remarkable? And there's no other story like this, is there? That God, a God that becomes a human baby. I mean, just think about the claim that the angel makes about the saviour to Mary.

The angel says to her, the God who is the most high, it says, so that's really high. So the most high is the highest, becomes a baby.

And you don't get much more vulnerable than a baby. So from the highest high becomes the lowest low.

[15 : 36] There's no other religion makes a claim like this. This is one of the incredibly unique things about the Christian faith. Our God becomes vulnerable. This is the story of Christmas. And folks, why would God do such a thing?

Why did God become flesh and blood? Why did he become vulnerable? Well, because we needed saving and the only way that was going to happen is by God becoming vulnerable.

And he became vulnerable so he could be hurt. He became vulnerable so that he could die. And this is why we can't just respect Jesus. We can't just admire him as a great moral teacher or a hippie peace activist or a philosophical sort of conversation partner.

No, he is God and he is higher than we can imagine. And he became lower than anyone ever has so that we can become his friends and his children. And this is the gospel story.

This is the story of Christmas, folks. And it's a remarkable story. And the question the passage brings to us with these two major themes of responses and news is this.

[16 : 42] Is how do we respond to this news? This story, the most remarkable story ever told. Are we going to have just a positive brush with Jesus at Christmas time?

Like the onlookers who simply wondered about him? Or does this message move us to action? Does it cause us to change things in our life?

Does it cause us to praise him? Does it lead us to ask us really great questions? Good, honest questions like Mary asked.

Is it news? Is it a story that we treasure in our hearts? Does it cause us to surrender our lives to him? If not, none of these things you can force.

You can't make this stuff happen. You're going to go, you know, I'm going to surrender my life this Christmas. No, you can't force this stuff. You simply have to keep coming back to the story.

[17 : 44] Keep coming back to this remarkable, incredible, unique story of Jesus and ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart to the story once again. And that's this week's Advent practice, folks.

Just keep coming back to the story and let the Holy Spirit do his wonderful work in your heart. Amen. Amen. Now let me pray the collars of the day before we pray the Lord's Prayer together.

Let's pray. O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming did send your messenger to prepare your way before you, grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

Amen. In the collect for Advent, Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son, Jesus Christ, came to visit us in great humility that in the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal through him who lives and reigns with you in the Holy Spirit now and forever.

Amen. Amen. Amen.