

The God Who Wrote Himself In

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, amen. You can be seated. Well, good evening, everybody.

So great to be here, isn't it, in church, celebrating Christ's birth. A special welcome if you are visiting this week. I'm going to preach a shortish sermon tonight.

I was hoping to get your sad noises then, but I got one from the person who's coming up straight after me. Now, what we're going to be doing is we're going to be, I want to preach from Luke 2, 6 to 20, which we haven't heard read this evening, but it's going to come up on the screen.

Like magic. Look at that. Now, we haven't read it yet in the service, so it's up on the screen so you can track it there, but you know this passage. It's probably the most well-known and loved Christmas story ever.

So let's start by just asking this story a very simple question, just a very simple question. What is the focus of the story? What's the focus of it?

[1 : 1 2] We ask that question. It reveals something very, very interesting. And this is it. Okay, the birth, manger, no room at the inn. You know those things, right? There's very famous elements of the story that launched a million Christmas cards and children's books.

That scene is dealt with in what? One verse. One verse. Verse 7. And she gave birth to her firstborn and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place in the inn.

The following 12 verses. The following 12 verses. That's more than 10 times the amount. That space is given to people's responses to that story.

Now, what does it tell us? Well, it tells us that the major concern of the passage is how are we supposed to respond to the news that the Son of God is born? I think as we read it, the passage tells us that if we really hear the good news of the birth well, when we really hear it well, something happens to us.

One of the things I'd like us to see in the story is this. That there is a big difference between hearing well and just hearing. I mean, you can listen really well to something and mull it over in your head and love it and think about the implications of it.

[2 : 3 3] Or you can just sort of hear something and it doesn't do much in your head and heart. If you were here and you were married, you know the difference between those two things. Between hearing well and hearing lazily.

Let's imagine a couple. Aaron and Amy. And just a great couple. Let's say it's a Thursday night.

And Amy says to her, spelt but muscular husband. She says, I don't know, I just came up with this example. It's incredible. She says, babe, which is what she calls him.

Babe, get the kids dressed. And we've got to get the house tied. Remember, Condoleezza Rice is coming over for dinner tonight. And Aaron says, what are you talking about?

I planned on watching an important sporting event this evening. And Amy says, what? I've been telling you this for weeks. She's coming tonight.

[3 : 33] Didn't you listen? And in my head I'm thinking, yes. Well, yes and no, I guess. I remember you saying something about this, but I guess it didn't really go in.

I don't know if you've had that experience, right? I mean, you probably don't have to be married to identify with this. I mean, people can say things to you repeatedly. And you can be physically listening to it, but you're not really hearing it.

So in the passage here, what we have examples of people, beings who hear well, who really get it, who hear it. And these are the shepherds and the angels and Mary.

And they're all held up as models for us. So let's have a look at them. Firstly, the shepherds. So the shepherds are being visited by angels. And at first they're scared, which is the right response to God's presence, I think.

And they hear the news delivered. A child is going to be born. A savior. You'll find him in a manger in Bethlehem. Verse 15 says, the shepherds say, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

[4 : 37] So when you hear the gospel, well, what happens? It results in doing. They did something. It literally moved them. If they had stayed in the fields, if they had kind of heard lazily and just stayed in the fields, salvation would have remained just words.

They would not have encountered Jesus. But they really heard the news, didn't they? And it did something in them. And that's the expectation of the passage. When you hear God's preached or you hear God's word read to you or you read God's word, does it just inform you?

Here's the challenge. Does it just inform you? Or do things change in your life? Do you know God's expectation is that you will move spiritually towards him? God came to us, a child, wrapped in rags, in a feeding trough, in animal housing, born to a teenage mother, a teenage girl, a few years older than Ellie, who read this passage just immediately before.

God came a long way. We need to move towards him. So, folks, you'll hear the Christmas story a lot over the next few weeks.

Don't just listen. Hear it. Hear it. And move in your heart towards him. Example two, the angels. They heard well. Verse nine, we see an angel came to visit the shepherds.

[6 : 07] And this angel brings the good news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds. And what happens in verse 13? And suddenly, there was with the angel, the single 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 blessed.

Suddenly, this angelic messenger is joined by this whole choir of angels praising God. These are beings who are in no need of salvation, praising God for the amazing thing that has been done here in Bethlehem.

Okay, what's my point? Packer says theology should always lead to doxology. This means that when we think well about God, it should lead to praising him.

It is good to think well about God. It is good to have sound theology. It is good to have robust theology. But we know if we've really heard that theology, if it's in our hearts, the test is that does it alter the affections of our hearts?

Do we want to praise God with this knowledge? This was the experience of the shepherds as well, actually, in verse 20.

[7 : 17] After they had seen Jesus, they left glorifying God. So do we hear the Christmas story? Well, the first test is, does it move us?

Do we move towards Jesus? Second test, hearing the gospel well, does it lead us to praise? Example three, Mary, the teenage mother of God. How does she respond to the news?

Well, the shepherds visit her and share what they've been told. And she, in verse 19, it says, treasured up these things, pondering them in her heart.

Isn't that lovely? Isn't that just beautiful? The treasure word in Greek is, well, treasure and ponder are very interesting Greek words. The treasure word in Greek, it means to keep something safe, to kind of protect it.

It's quite an emotional word. It's like, keep a fire alive. It's like you relish something. You savor it. And the ponder word, it means sort of meeting, two things meeting.

[8 : 23] So it could be like two people meeting. In this case, it's more of a cognitive thing. So it's like she's connecting dots in her mind. Things are falling into place.

She's having these aha moments with it. 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 relishes it. What a contrast to the other people who hear the good news. This is a sort of a fourth sort of character in the passage.

It's verse 18. It says, all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. So the shepherds came to Bethlehem, told Mary, and it indicates they told a whole lot of other people as well.

Mary treasured it, treasured this news. The others wondered at it. This wonder word means to admire. And it's a pretty good response, I guess, to supernatural things happening.

[9 : 31] But it doesn't mean faith. It doesn't mean that they really got it in their hearts. It's like, wow. And kind of moving on. My daughter is a great example of this.

Both my kids, actually. So they can sort of be enamored by something. I could give either one of my daughters this, right? It's moist wipes, right?

I just found them out the back, right? So I could give her this and she'd be like, that's incredible. That's amazing. And then on to the next thing. That's kind of like these people, they sort of saw something and they wondered and then it was like, okay.

Well, there you go. Luke's gospel uses this word wonder a number of times later in the story. And in places where a crowd of people has a kind of a positive response to Jesus.

Kind of positive. Like they have a positive brush with him. But nothing changes. That's the difference between them and the angels and the shepherds and Mary.

[10 : 35] And it's a contrast the passage wants you to see. There is a difference between hearing and really hearing the gospel. I mean, you can listen to the story of Jesus' birth and get this temporary wave of nostalgia.

We can really hear it. That's what I want you to do at Christmas. Really hear it. Which means you move spiritually towards Jesus. It means you relish and cherish and turn over in your mind that news.

And you know you've heard it. Because you want to praise God for it. One of the great ironies of a modern Christmas, I think, is in all its commercialism and materialism and sort of kitschiness.

The story of Jesus is supposed to blow our minds. It should expand us. But modern Christmas does the opposite, doesn't it?

It narrows our thinking. It narrows it. What does it narrow it to? Well, when I think about it, what does it narrow it to? In my sort of life, it narrows it to sort of finding the perfect gift.

[11 : 42] To trying to be the perfect host. It narrows it and it sort of reveals these anxieties in my heart. Like, you know, it could be Christmas Day.

Jesus' birthday. God has come to us as a baby. And on that day, what am I thinking? I'm thinking, oh my goodness. What if my kids have a meltdown?

Well, I've got friends over. People are going to think we're such terrible parents. Our bathroom hasn't been renovated in 50 years. It's just impossible to clean. What are people going to think?

Our house is so untidy. I've overdone the turkey. It should change. Christmas should change our hearts. It should orient us to Jesus.

Not bring up all these silly anxieties. Folks, the story of Jesus can change us. The story of Christmas can change us. But we have to listen. We've got to really hear the story.

[12 : 41] Otherwise, that story will be overtaken by nonsense, madness, and busyness. Now, if you are here and new to the faith, or you're not a Christian at all, let me finish by just explaining what is so important.

What is so important about this that we must hear it well? What exactly is the story of Jesus' birth? Why is it such good news? Let me explain it like this. The Russians.

Okay? So, the Russians, as you know, were the first to launch a human being into space in 1961.

The cosmonaut went up there, and he said, I've been in space. I didn't see God. And, of course, this was this kind of atheistic, communist propaganda. Now, C.S. Lewis was actually alive at the time, and he responded to this 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 his house, of Hamlet's own house.

[13 : 48] As if God was just, you know, for Hamlet, if God was the guy upstairs, he could just pop up and visit. That's not really how it works. You know that. He goes on, and he says, If you really want to know God, Lewis said, God must write himself, must write himself into the story.

God must write himself into Hamlet. A really good example of what Lewis was talking about is Dorothy Sayers. I don't know if you've heard of this lady. She's fantastic. A friend of C.S. Lewis. She was a committed Anglican, amateur theologian, quite hilarious, quite funny, worth looking into.

But here's what's interesting. So she was one of the first women to graduate from Oxford. By her own reckoning and her own words, she wasn't a very attractive woman. And she became a famous crime writer.

Now, she wrote a series, a long series of books about a guy called Lord Peter Wimsey. He was a detective who solved crimes. About halfway through the series, and there were lots of books, about halfway through the series, she introduced a new fictional character, Harriet Vane.

This fictional character was one of the first women to graduate Oxford. In the book, she's described as not being particularly attractive. And she writes crime novels. And in the series, Harriet Vane meets Lord Peter Wimsey, and they fall in love, and they get married, and they solve crimes together.

[15 : 06] Now, here is what many experts think, or many scholars sort of think about this. Dorothy Sayers looked into the world she had created.

She looked at the man she had created, and saw that he was lonely, and she fell in love with him. And she wrote herself into the story. Now, some of you are going, oh, it's so sweet.

It's beautiful. But do you realize that this is, this is the claim of Christmas right here. That God looked into the world he created, the people he'd made.

He loved us. He saw the mess that we're in, and he wrote himself into the story. That's who the baby is.

That's the baby in the feeding trough. That's God writing himself into the story. That's God entering our world to rescue us. This is what God did for us. Won't you trust someone who would do that for you?

[16:12] Folks, we started the sermon with the idea that some people in Luke 2 just listened to the news of Jesus' birth, while others really, really heard it.

Isn't this a story worth hearing? Hearing well? Isn't this a story that's worth pushing through the anxieties, family dramas that come out at Christmas? Isn't this a story worth acting upon?

Shouldn't this story lead us to thank God with all of our hearts? This is my appeal to you. Here, if you're a Christian or you're not a Christian, don't just have a brush with Jesus this Christmas.

Don't just have a nostalgic experience of Christmas. It's so easy for that to happen in the madness of it all. Don't let it happen.

The story's too big. The story's too big for that. It's too important. No. Treasure. Treasure the story of Christmas. If you treasure it, folks, it will change you.

[17:17] Now, would you kneel? I'd like to pray two short prayers. Don't go back to Christmas. Thank you.ono■ it's me to greetings question. It's on to a to put times to the good serious we have hope.

We'll come to wear avait before. We will you read the sword while it Really Boys today Math