

Luke 2:1-20 - Why Christmas?

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Date: 11 September 2016

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- [0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- Amen. Thank you all. Y'all like Christmas songs as much as the rest of us? Oh, good. Good. I'm glad. Thank you for humoring me this morning. We are going to be looking this morning at a passage that will be very familiar to many of you.
- It's just usually a bit colder outside when you're hearing it read, so I'll have to adjust a little bit. It's the classic Christmas story in Luke 2.
- I'm glad that it's familiar to us. It's a great passage. But one of the dangers of something becoming so familiar, I'm used to hearing it read with like greenery around and candlelight and presents and so it can be caught up.
- It's just part of kind of this experience for me. I'm such a Christmas guy. I love the Christmas experience. And so this passage can be just a little bit of a warm, fuzzy feeling.
- [1 : 0 6] That that's a little bit fanciful. And so I can almost hear it and feel like it's a fairy tale that starts out once upon a time and I get this nice warm feeling when in fact it starts quite differently.
- It starts in those days with some very concrete historical detail. The life of Jesus of Nazareth is one of the most widely attested in all of recorded history.
- And this is the story of his birth. As with all of Luke's stories, carefully researched and very detailed in its description.
- So I'd encourage you this morning as I read it to think about the impact of God showing up in the midst of very real, normal people. What would the impact have been of God showing up in the flesh?
- What ought the impact to be for us? Hear God's word at Luke 2 and verse 1. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.
- [2 : 1 7] This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, to Bethlehem, the 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 room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.
- An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Lord, this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

[3 : 23] And suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger.

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. This is God's holy word.

Let's pray and ask for his help as we look at it together. Father, we thank you for this familiar passage, for the joy of considering the birth of your son and particularly the chance to consider why he was born.

[4 : 35] Father, would you take something very familiar and by your Holy Spirit, speak it to us in a new and fresh way that we hear the old, old story with hearts that are full of a new joy because of what you have done.

Would you speak by your spirit that we might hear and that we might be different forever. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. If you've been here for the past few weeks as we've walked through the first chapter of Luke's gospel, you'll know we've seen the excitement build.

The anticipation is building. It's like a drum roll or crescendo through the opening stories of angels coming and delivering promises to people and them responding with songs of joy and there's increasing excitement.

It all culminates in chapter two. Christmas, the coming of Christ, God actually coming into the world in the flesh.

[5 : 46] Instead of just one angel, as we've had multiple times in the first chapter, we now have a multitude of angels celebrating and heralding this great event.

Heaven is coming to earth. God is becoming man. The creator is entering into his creation. This is an unparalleled event in all of human history.

It's into a world much like ours, obsessed with human power and resourcefulness to people who love to help and improve ourselves.

That God's going to come. Some people at this time, under the direction of a ruler, Caesar Augustus, who says that he's divine.

That he is a son of the gods. In fact, the savior of the common people, he's called. Others, Jews, who felt they were on the true God's side because of their birth.

[6 : 53] Or the religious ceremonies that they participated in. Who were finding their identity and their security and religion and ritual. In that world.

In a world with people who are looking to themselves one way or the other for help. God enters in. He shows up in the flesh, surprisingly, in some weakness and humility.

Right? A baby in a manger. Perhaps an equally surprising message for both kinds of people in this world.

It's astonishing, really, when you stop to think about it. God showing up, being born as a baby. Now, of course, we make a big deal about that every year at Christmastime.

I'm a sucker for anything Christmas, anything that looks at all like a manger scene. I would like to have one of them. I love all of that. But I think for whatever reason, even though we love the season and we love to celebrate and sing, we struggle to realize the impact of this unparalleled event.

[8 : 07] We're celebrating, perhaps, but if the reality of the incarnation of the Son of God is something we only get excited about in December, I think we're missing the point.

We're missing the joy and the excitement of what is really happening. So let's ask Luke this morning, why Christmas? What's the big deal?

Why did Christmas happen? The answer will be no more complex than what I told the kids, just without candy. But it's still a really important one for all of us.

Why Christmas? Well, first, we all know very well Jesus is the reason for the season, right? We're good Christians. We're aware of that. If Jesus is the reason for the season, our sin is the reason for Jesus.

Why Christmas? Our sin. The story of Jesus' birth is going to remind us that on our own, we are more lost and helpless, hopeless, than we even realize.

[9 : 17] It's going to force us to take an honest look at our own hearts and see if we really understand our need for Christmas. The verses that this whole story centers around are the announcement of the angel to the shepherds.

He explains to them the import of what is happening. He's told us the facts up to this point. There's been a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem and then the angel says, here's what's really going on.

Verse 10, the angel said, don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. What is it? What's the news?

Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. There's good news of great joy for all people.

This is really at the heart of the gospel of Luke. It's what Luke's about. It's why Luke is so intent on writing about all that has happened. Because there's good news of great joy for all people and he wants them to know it.

[10 : 20] What is it? What's the content of the message? What's the good news? The gospel message is simple. A Savior. Good news of great joy for all people.

A Savior. Today in the city of David, a Savior born to you. A Savior comes. Why? To bring forgiveness of sins.

To rescue us from the brokenness in our hearts and in our world as a result of our sin. So if a Savior is going to be good news of great joy, we must be deeply aware of the depth of our sin.

It's the only way a Savior could be good news. Let me explain it this way. If you're scrolling down the headlines in your news feed and trying to decide if you'll click on any of these articles and you come across a headline that says, cure discovered for Irish Dalmatian rhinitis, you probably won't even slow down.

That is, by the way, a disease I made up this week where your nose swells and is covered with green spots. Irish Dalmatian rhinitis.

[11 : 33] I hope no one suffers from it. I made one up to make sure I didn't offend anybody. But if you see that headline, it's not going to cause you to jump off your sofa or to scream with excitement.

And the reason is that not only do you not suffer from Irish Dalmatian rhinitis, no one you know suffers from it. It's not a big deal to you that there's a cure for it, is there? Imagine if you keep scrolling down and you see the headline, Peace Treaty Signed Between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

Peace treaties like cures for diseases can be a pretty big deal, right? I mean, a peace treaty is certainly an exciting thing, but you probably weren't aware that those two nations were even hostile to each other at all.

You certainly didn't have someone involved in the war that you knew. And so, you might yawn and just keep scrolling. Likely, you wouldn't describe either of those headlines as good news of great joy, would you?

Why? Because they don't impact your life. You haven't been longing for that news. You don't have a need for it in your life.

[12 : 50] So here's the deal with Christmas. The angel announces that Christmas is good news of great joy for whom? For all people. Today in the town of David, a Savior is born to you, is to be good news of great joy for all people because all are desperately wracked by sin.

This headline does impact you and me. We need a Savior. The fact that there could be peace between man and God, verse 14, is remarkable because we are all by nature His enemies, not at peace with Him.

We're at war with Him and we have no way to make peace. We must see this devastating reality that's true for all of us.

The Bible is clear from cover to cover about this overwhelming sin problem that we face. Isaiah 53 says, all we like sheep have gone astray.

We've turned every one of us to His own way and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. And it's not just that we've made a few bad choices here and there in our lives.

[14 : 11] Psalm 51 says, it's been a problem since before we were born. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity. In sin did my mother conceive me. From our very conception, we've been in rebellion against God.

And so, Romans 3 says, as a result of that reality, there's no one who's righteous on his own. Not one. No one understands. No one seeks for God.

All have turned aside. Together become worthless. No one does good. Not even one. That's the problem where we find ourselves. It's not just that we lack righteousness, that we don't do enough good things.

Colossians 1 says, we're actively hostile. Against God. Verse 21. It says, we are alienated from God and hostile in our mind, doing evil deeds.

We're at war with Him. Paul says in Ephesians, we're dead in our sins. By nature, objects of God's wrath.

[15 : 13] He's out to get us in our sin because we have scorned His holy person and His law. We're without hope and without God in the world.

In other words, because of what we've done, we've put ourselves in a situation with God where we can't rescue ourselves. The story of Scripture from the very beginning is a story of our rebellion against God who means good towards us.

He creates us in His image to bless us and be in relationship and we push away from that. We earn judgment instead of blessing. We bring ourselves under a curse from the Creator of the world.

And so it's a sinful bent toward ourselves and away from God that breaks our relationship with Him. But not only that relationship, it makes us broken in the way we relate to ourselves.

It makes us broken in the way we relate to other people. It makes us broken in the way we relate to all of God's good creation. Our sin has devastated all of our lives.

[16 : 24] We desperately need a Savior. Every single one of us. A Savior to rescue us from the wrath of God we have called down on ourselves.

from the brokenness that's playing out in all of our lives because of that sin. And Christmas is not good news of great joy.

It won't make you sit up and take notice. It won't radically transform your life unless you really need a Savior. Because that's who comes.

A Savior born to you. Christ the Lord. Now listen, most of you knew that. You've heard messages about Christmas before.

You know about the reality of your sin. The Bible talks about it over and over. But have you embraced it for yourself? Has it come home to what that really means for you?

[17 : 24] I grew up in the church in a church that faithfully taught the truths of God's Word and taught about our sin and our need for a Savior. And I lived in that church for many years talking about the reality of salvation through Jesus.

But I spent many years in that church thinking how wonderful God must be to save such terrible, awful people like that out there somewhere.

They were really bad people. Now listen, theoretically, of course, Jesus was my Savior. We all knew the answers. This was a good church. But practically speaking, I couldn't have told you much about what I needed to be saved from.

There were months and months that went by where I didn't specifically repent of anything in particular. It could go long seasons of time. When I did think of something that maybe I was forced to say, how am I a sinner?

It might have been something like taking the last cookie before my brother could get to it. And that was unkind. And so, just a series of a few unfortunate decisions here and there.

[18 : 36] Not really anything too bad. That's oftentimes how I felt. See, I thought, honestly, that I was a pretty good kid.

That's who I was. I was a pretty decent person, a pretty good kid. Theoretically, Jesus was my Savior. But practically speaking, he functioned more in my life as perhaps what you would call a mascot.

Someone just so you could identify which team I was on, who I was with. I was on this team, not another. This really good kid, you wanted to know whose team he was on.

He was on Jesus' team. Or at best, he was my trainer, perhaps. Keeping me up to speed on what it looked like to be a really good friend or pastor's kid or student.

He was keeping me in shape, you know? Because after all, if you're a pretty good kid, that's what you need Jesus for, is to just help you keep being pretty good so that you can be better than everybody else.

[19 : 42] As long as I was really good at being good, that's all Jesus needed to be for me. Someone who helped me stay in shape. Someone who kept me looking good, associated me with the right people.

Be honest with yourself this morning. Are you daily, are you regularly seeing the ugliness of your sin and your desperate need of Jesus to be your Savior?

Is he perhaps functionally in your life just your mascot so people socially know which team you're on and which ones you're not? Or your teacher who helps you know how to succeed in life or how to raise your kids on the right path because that's just really all you needed was a couple pointers.

Or your friend who just always helps you feel good about yourself in the hard times of life because life is hard and you need someone to encourage you. Now listen, Jesus can be all of those things in our lives and it can be beautiful when he is, but he is not any of those.

without first being your Savior. If he's not functionally your Savior, then it's not the true Jesus who is your friend or your teacher or your mascot because Jesus came as a Savior to save you from your sin and all its devastating effects like separating you from relationship with your Heavenly Father.

[21 : 17] and he came to save you not just once by the way but day after day as you battle against indwelling and ongoing sin in your heart, he's still your Savior.

That's who he is. That's his identity as he's introduced here at his birth. He's your Savior. He doesn't leave you just hoping you'll win the battle with sin on your own.

Have you stopped letting him rescue you from sin even as a Christian? Has he functionally stopped being a Savior in your life? I've said before that I appreciate the warning of pastor and author John MacArthur in his book which I haven't read, *The Vanishing Conscience, Drawing the Line in a No-Fault, Guilt-Free World*.

In that book he says even Christians have lost sight of sin as the primary human problem. We tend to gloss over it and come up with other explanations for what's going on and MacArthur says that's so dangerous because you remove the reality of sin and you take away the possibility of repentance.

Abolish the doctrine of human depravity and you void the divine plan of salvation. Erase the notion of personal guilt and you eliminate the need for a Savior. If there's nothing at that level wrong with me then I don't need Christmas.

[22 : 42] I don't need the Savior. It's so easy for religious people like me growing up in a church like the Jews of Luke's day to think all they need is to just be in church some.

Be identified with the good guys. to be safe. Add in a little religion and ritual and I'll be fine.

But friends we must own the reality of our sin so that the coming of a Savior for us is the good news of great joy to our hearts that God intends for it to be.

When you hear a Savior is born to you something and you ought to say I need that. Yes! That's what I'm longing for. I need a Savior.

Our self-righteous rationalizing hearts so easily minimize our sin. But while that's a major struggle for many of us for others of us we're not so much minimizing our sin we're consumed by our sin aren't we?

[23 : 55] The despair the shame the hopelessness that we feel. Perhaps you're not overlooking your sin this morning. Perhaps you're overwhelmed by it.

If that's where your heart is this morning hear the good news. There's a Savior for you. In Jesus we are more loved and secure than we could ever imagine.

It is indeed true that all people need a Savior. It is also true that Jesus is a sufficient Savior for all. Even the worst sinner.

God shows us this so beautifully in this passage in this Christmas story through the shepherds. Listen in Luke's culture of all the people who knew that they weren't okay with God it was shepherds.

The religious churchy people reminded them of this regularly made sure that they felt it because they weren't even in worship very often. They weren't around very much where the churchy people gathered.

[25 : 05] The shepherds because of their strange work schedules because they were often having to touch unclean animals and dead things were often ceremonially unclean very uncommon for them to be able to come to worship.

They were usually absent. They were despised as a class in the community. They were thought of as thieves. So mistrusted in fact by others that they didn't even qualify as legal witnesses in courts of law.

You couldn't ask for a shepherd's opinion it was worthless. You couldn't trust him. And of all the people in the world the ones God chose to privilege as the recipients of the announcement of a savior he chose the shepherds perhaps because he wanted them to know without a doubt that the savior was for them too.

Notice the change that takes place in the shepherds through this story. The angel appears and when they see the glory of the Lord verse 9 says they're what? Terrified.

Understandably right? I mean they're not the first ones to be shocked when the angel appears to them. A bit fearful. Even appropriately I would say to be fearful before the glory of a holy God.

[26 : 30] It's utterly appropriate for sinners like the shepherds and like us. And maybe you feel that this morning. Keep me away.

God doesn't want anything to do with me. If you only knew pastor what's in my life, what's in my past, what's in my heart today, you would know that I should be full of fear before God.

And what does the angel tell them? Those shepherds who are perhaps rightfully afraid at the glory of God, he says do not be afraid.

How can he say that? Do not be afraid. Why? Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people, including you. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

He is Christ the Lord. There's reason for great joy for you. And the shepherds experience that. They go, don't they, from being terrified to then running to Bethlehem and seeing Jesus.

[27 : 41] And then what happens? Are they terrified? No, they're rejoicing and sharing the good news with everyone. Perhaps no one would believe them, shepherds as they were.

Interesting to notice that God didn't pick the most well-spoken, the most well-connected, the most well-respected, the ones everyone would believe, to be the first to share the good news.

But rather he chose the most well-aware of their need for it. Those who when they heard it and saw it were going to be exploding with joy.

That's the message, that's the response that people were supposed to have to a Savior. Whether people believed him or not, their joy was going to spill over.

They couldn't help but share it. Why? Why were the shepherds so joyful? Because they knew they were outcast from God and they had just been told they were welcomed home.

[28 : 48] That's what verse 14 means. The heavenly host, this is the word for the armies of heaven, declares not war but peace. Verse 14, glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

The shepherds hear peace from a God that they were terrified of. It's an announcement not that God has found some men out here on the hillside who are of good will here on earth, who deserve for God to make peace with them.

That's not the announcement. These are shepherds. But rather that God has declared peace toward men currently hostile and warring against him. My enemies will be my friends, God says.

Those far from me will be brought near. Those outcast sons will be welcomed home. And the shepherds hear that and they say, yes please, that's me.

That's what I've been longing for. I need that. Do you know this morning that that is you? Do you rejoice in the gospel, the good news of great joy as the shepherds did?

[30 : 02] Does it overflow from you to many others? Because the joy just fills up and you can't help but rejoice and share the good news. I'm no angel, but hear it announced to you, discouraged sinner, good news of great joy.

A savior has been born to you. Christ the Lord. A true ruler, the rightful king on David's throne, the one who is truly God, not an imposter king claiming divinity.

The true savior, not just of the common people, but of all people has come to you. Why Christmas? Because God is not willing to leave you in your sin, but is zealous for you to know his love and the security of being welcomed at his table forever, so he sends a savior.

That's how much he loves you. 15 years ago today on September 11, 2001, many first responders, quite a number of them from the New York City police and fire departments, went running toward the burning and crumbling towers of the World Trade Center, intent on saving as many lives as possible.

people. They rushed towards pain and chaos at the risk even of their own lives for the sake of saving others.

[31 : 42] In a similar way, but with an even greater capacity to save, God comes running toward us in Jesus, rushing into the chaos and pain of this world and of our lives, the burning, crumbling ruins of our hearts, intent on saving even if it costs him his life and he knows it will.

I love the comfort in one little phrase in verse 11 that we've skipped over thus far. It's a great verse but there's a great phrase at the end. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

Why did that need to be there? It was good news already. A Savior has been born. A Savior has been born to you.

The good news is not merely that a Savior has been born, but that a Savior has been born to you. To you who were previously unaware of your need for a Savior, didn't see your sin that big.

To you who thought you were beyond the help of a Savior. To you a Savior is born. Isn't that amazing? Isn't Christmas worth celebrating even in September that He came to save all those who trust in Him?

[33 : 10] Oh, tidings of comfort and joy. It's not just a Christmas carol, it's the gospel, it's the good news, it's your only hope that a Savior has come to you.

Isn't God's commitment to us incredible? That He would not only come to us in a manger as a baby, but that He would announce it to even the lowliest among us because He didn't want us to miss it.

That there's a Savior who's come for you. Why Christmas? Because we insist on sinning and because God insists on saving.

Think about this as you come to the table this morning. If you were the only sinner in the entire world, it would have required the Son of God, Jesus Himself, to come and die for your sin.

Your sin's so big, if you were the only one, Jesus would have had to come and die for you. And if you were the only sinner in the entire world, God's love for you is so great that Jesus would have come willingly and died for you.

[34 : 29] That's the message of Christmas. That Jesus has come and done that, has come as a Savior to you. Rejoice in that good hope even as we come to this table.

Remember the way Paul described Jesus' words to his disciples. He says, I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, this is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death. Until he comes. Jesus is coming again. He has come to us already.

That's the good news of the gospel. This table demonstrates it in a tangible way. That he doesn't remain far off from you thinking you're okay on your own that you don't need him.

[35 : 34] That he doesn't remain far off from you thinking you're too bad and he couldn't possibly associate with you. Instead he fixes that problem. He comes, lives perfectly and dies in your place so that you can eat with him not just this morning but forever.

And so we do today what we look forward to celebrating with him forever that the holy God would sit across from the table with you and me because he came and made it possible.

If you don't know Jesus, don't come to this table which is a picture of the reality of our fellowship with God. Come to Jesus. Come and meet him and know him.

We love to tell you about him. But if you know him, if you trust Jesus, not even your worst day, not even your sin that you're confessing right now in this moment and turning to him from can keep you from him.

He has come to you. Come and rejoice in what he has done. Pray with me and we'll come to the table. Jesus, thank you that you're a God who's drawn near to us.

[36 : 45] That we have a savior. Because you came at Christmas not just to be born but then to live and to die for us. Thank you for the reminder we will hold in our hands and taste on our lips this morning.

Might you make these elements which are common in themselves, would you make them used for a sacred purpose in our hearts? Would you strengthen our faith?

Would you remind us of how much we needed someone to die for us? Of how much we still today need a savior? Would you remind us that we have one? Jesus, that gives us great joy.

Thank you. Thank you for this celebration together. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

Northwood.org. Have a good week. I hope to be CHRIST showcase here. Start off ■■■■■■ when you will talk about you at good success for your focus-for learning season.

[37 : 54] College of■u so manage the following life what you