

Christmas 2018

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”
(Luke 1:46–47 ESV)*

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a
horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David”
(Luke 1:68–69 ESV)*

*“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”
(Luke 2:14 ESV)*

Pondering Jesus
December 30th, 2018
Luke 2:1-21
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning. Please open your Bibles to Luke 2:1-21, that’s on page 857 in your pew Bibles. This morning we are going to read the ACTUAL Christmas story. There really isn’t a lot of narrative detail about the birth of Jesus in the Bible. Matthew narrates the actual birth of Jesus in just two verses. He says:

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24–25 ESV)

Mark doesn’t say anything at all.

John says simply:

the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14 ESV)

So in terms of actual narrative detail – Luke is it! Church historians suggest that this is probably because Mary was one of Luke’s major sources in writing his Gospel, so obviously, we get more of her perspective on events. So hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was

with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 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 inn. 8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

21 And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:1–21 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now, as I said, that is just about all we know about the details surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Matthew tells us about a few things that happened 18 months to 2 years later – he tells us about the visit of the wise men, the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem and the flight into Egypt – but in terms of the details surrounding the birth of Christ – this is it. And therefore, as you would expect, over the last 12 years I have preached sermons in this church on every single aspect of this story. I have preached about the city of Bethlehem and why it was significant that Jesus was born in the City of David. I've preached about the significance of the humble surroundings into which Jesus was actually born – be it a stable, a cave or the bottom floor of a nearby home. I've preached about the shepherds and the angels and the song that the angels sang. I've preached about Mary – what she knew and what she didn't and if it matters.

So this morning – I feel like the details of this story have been very well covered and so instead of revisiting another aspect of the story – I want to actually DO what the story means for us to do. You see, I don't think that we are supposed to MERELY WONDER over the details – as marvelous and magical as some of those details are – I think we are supposed to FOLLOW the example of Mary and press through the wonder and to ACTUALLY PONDER the significance of these events.

Look again at verse 19. Keep in mind, Angels are singing, shepherds are visiting – baby is crying – with all due respect to silent night – this was a chaotic, marvelous, magical time – and YET –

this is what the Bible says about Mary:

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Luke 2:19 ESV)

I think that's what we are supposed to do. I think we are supposed to press through the wonder – not reject it – just press through it and actually PONDER the significance of what we have seen and heard. I love what I. Howard Marshall says here about Mary in verse 19. He says:

“The sense here is that Mary continued to think and ponder over the events as a whole so that she was able to discern their meaning.”¹

That's what I think we are supposed to do and I think today is the perfect day to try and do that. Before Christmas – during the lead up that seems to get longer every year – we are overwhelmed with the sense of wonder. From December 1st – December 25th – we are busy FEELING the magic of Christmas – but it's December 30th today. The wonder is past – the credit card bills are coming – your pants are stretching at the seams – and the magic of Christmas is starting to wear off just a little bit and so now I think are we perfectly positioned to do as Mary did. Today is a good day to PONDER the significance of the incarnation.

Very simply, today we are asking the question:

What Should We Think About The Incarnation Of Jesus Christ?

What does it MEAN that God took on flesh and dwelt among us? What is the significance of the Second Person of the Trinity becoming A HUMAN BEING? What does THAT MEAN? That's what I want to try and get at today.

1. It means that God desires to be known

I think that would be the first thing that Mary would have thought as she stared at the baby at her breast. I think the intimacy of that moment would have been almost overwhelming. That is the definition of a private, personal, intimate moment and Mary was having it WITH GOD.

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel Of Luke* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 114.

Think about that.

You see no one had ever THOUGHT THAT WAY about God before the coming of Jesus Christ.

Of course everyone thought about God, but nobody thought THAT about God.

People thought about God as the Creator. They thought about God as the Judge. They thought about God as the Prime Mover in the universe – and of course he was all that – and he IS all that.

But there is much more to God than that.

But how could he make us see that?

I've been working through the Book of Job for our Into The Word podcast. We'll be releasing those episodes in February so I've been working on them for the last month or so. The Book of Job presents a long conversation about who God is and how his ways can be known by men and women on the earth. The specific occasion for the conversation is the extreme suffering of Job – but that's only because Job's suffering challenges everything they think they know about God. They think God is a WISE and JUST DESIGNER and JUDGE. They think that the universe is a perfect moral machine designed to punish wickedness and reward righteousness – but Job's situation forces them, ultimately to deal with the limitations of human wisdom. Over the course of the dialogue they discover that they don't know God well enough to make sense of Job's situation and the matter isn't finally resolved until God shows up to SPEAK.

And that's one of the most important things we learn in the Book of Job – the idea that HUMAN WISDOM can only take us so far. To really understand the world – to really understand ourselves – we need to hear from God.

And that's what Christmas IS!

Christmas is God drawing near and speaking to us in plain and intelligible language about the most important things in all the world! That's why the Apostle Paul said:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Corinthians 1:20 ESV)

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:25 ESV)

The weakness of the cradle and the foolishness of the cross say more useful things about God and about us than all the philosophers, scientists, prophets and wise men put together.

Now it's not that what those people said was wrong – much of it was right, some of it was inspired – but none of it was clear. None of it was enough. And that's why we need Jesus. Jesus gives us an intimate, personal and intelligible revelation of God.

Jesus said that about himself in John 17 – you read this just a couple of days ago in the RMM plan. Just before he died on the cross Jesus said this in his High Priestly Prayer to God. He said:

“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world.” (John 17:6 ESV)

Hear that.

I have MANIFESTED your NAMD to the people whom you gave me out of the earth.

To MANIFEST means to SHOW or to MAKE CLEAR. God's NAME refers to his essential identity and character. So put that all together. Jesus is saying that through his life upon the earth he has SHOWN certain people THE ESSENCE of God's identity and character. That's what Jesus came to do. He came to SHOW US GOD in a way that we could understand. He came to make God known.

Think about that!!

Do you want to know what God is LIKE?

Then look at Jesus!

That's what faith is! Faith is knowing that when you are looking at Jesus you are SEEING and UNDERSTANDING God. Philip one time said to Jesus:

"Lord, show us the Father" (John 14:8 ESV)

Do you remember what Jesus said back? He said:

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9 ESV)

That's what Christmas means! It means that God wanted to be KNOWN and HAS NOW BEEN KNOWN through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Secondly:

2. It means that the Kingdom is just around the corner

We've spoken a fair bit about this over the last two Sundays. Both Mary and Zechariah uttered prophecies about the impact of Christ's coming. Last week Pastor Levi talked about Zechariah's prophecy. He said:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.... that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:68-75 ESV)

So filled with the Spirit Zechariah said that the birth of Jesus would result in the redemption of his people, the defeat of our enemy and the restoration of our original design and calling.

Hallelujah!

Mary said something very similar. Soaked in Scripture and filled with the Holy Spirit she said:

51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. (Luke 1:51-53 ESV)

Remember – all of those past tenses are actually the prophetic of certainty, meaning that all those

things are AS GOOD AS DONE because Jesus has come to the earth. It is an absolute CERTAINTY that he will SHOW HIS POWER and SCATTER THE PROUD and BRING DOWN THE MIGHTY and PROVIDE FOR THE HUNGRY and TURN THE WHOLE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN.

God will do that – its as good as done – because Jesus has come to the earth.

Once the King has come – the Kingdom of God is at hand. That’s the first thing Jesus said publicly, according to Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew 4:17 says:

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17 ESV)

That expression is a very precise expression and needs to be thought about carefully. Jesus didn’t say – the Kingdom of God has come! And he didn’t say “The Kingdom of God might come!” Neither of those would be quite right. What he said is that the Kingdom of God is AT HAND. Is at the very door. Is here and not here. Here and coming.

Well, that’s a very odd thing to say.

Now in one sense, the Kingdom of God has come – everything needed for it to begin has been accomplished by the life and death of Jesus. That’s certainly the reason for Jesus’ triumphant declaration upon the cross at the very moment of his death; Jesus said:

“It is finished” (John 19:30 ESV)

Surely that means that everything that had to happen for the Kingdom of God to begin HAS NOW HAPPENED. Sin has been paid for. Our guilt has been removed. Our iniquities have been cast into the sea! There is no barrier anymore between us and God – the way is clear, the relationship has been restored! It is time for us to go home! And not as slaves or servants – no! We will go home as sons and daughters – joint heirs with Jesus Christ – RULING CREATURES! The obedience of Jesus has PASSED OUR PROBATION. We are qualified and entitled now to take our place under God and over everything else. Surely that’s what Jesus meant when he said:

“It is finished” (John 19:30 ESV)

Mary thought so.

Zechariah thought so too.

For just about EVERYONE who thought about it – that’s what CHRISTMAS MEANT!

The long awaited Seed of the Woman had come to crush the devil’s head! The son of David had been born in the City of David and just like his ancestor David had done, he would take the field against our GIANT ADVERSARY and win a great victory and permit us to share in the spoil. And then – just as David had done – he would rule over us with wisdom and justice and compassion and all would be right in the world.

Everybody who thought about it – thought THAT.

And that begs an important question – questions actually. And these are OUR questions of course – Mary would not have thought this – not at first anyway – and Zechariah would not have thought this either because they didn’t see what we have seen. So to finish our pondering I have two more follow up questions to ask and the first one is this:

Follow Up Questions:

1. Why the long delay?

If everything has been accomplished – if the coming of the King IS ESSENTIALLY the coming of the Kingdom – then why the long delay? Why are things not NOW the way they are supposed to be?

Jesus knew that we would be asking this so he said a fair bit about it. He told us the parable about the 10 virgins who fell asleep and some of whom lost their oil – which we presume to mean lost their faith – during the long delay before the ultimate arrival of the Bridegroom.

And he told the one about the wicked overseer who began to beat the servants and laze about the

house thinking that the Master would never come – that parable ends poorly. Jesus said:

the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:48–51 ESV)

So Jesus SAID there would be a delay and he said that some people would lose faith during the long delay while others would remain faithful. Obviously we want to be among that class of people. We want to be patient and we want to be faithful so we need to think carefully about the long delay because if we understand this delay then we are less likely to be crushed and disheartened by it.

So let's ponder for just a moment.

The first thing we should understand about this delay is that it should not come as a surprise. Even before the parables of Jesus it was spoken of in Holy Scripture. In Zechariah 14 there is an apocalyptic vision of the Day of the Lord – the Great Climactic END GAME you might say. Listen carefully to what the prophet says:

Behold, a day is coming for the LORD, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley ... And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. ... And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter. And the LORD will be king over all the earth. On that day the LORD will be one and his name one. (Zechariah 14:1–9 ESV)

Ok – so that's the battle – the LAST BATTLE that wipes the enemy off the board and establishes forever the benevolent reign of the Lord upon the earth. In the New Testament that is sometimes referred to as “The Battle of Armageddon”. The battle is described in Apocalyptic terms – colourful terms – symbolic terms. It's painted theology and in this picture God has FEET and his FEET take the FIELD and when they do the night sky EXPLODES and all will be LIGHT and healing WATERS FLOW and the universe is restored.

That's the PICTURE.

That's the LAST SCENE in human history after which Jesus reigns Supreme and all returns to its original design and trajectory.

But.

Did you catch the horrific details at the beginning?

“the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. 3 Then the LORD will go out and fight”

That is definitely not how we would draw it up. It sounds like the battle will go REALLY POORLY for a very long time. Bad things will happen – horrific, unspeakable things will happen to God's people – to God's army.

THEN the Lord will go out and fight.

Are you putting all that together?

You see we are at war with a terrible enemy. We go out to fight day after day after day after day and we get SLAUGHTERED! We are loosing battle after battle after battle. And then the news spreads through the camp that God has come down from heaven and is inside the King's tent strapping on his armour. So we all go take a peak and sure enough – THERE HE IS! The God of the universe has come down and dwelt among us! Emmanuel has come! God has taken on flesh! This war is OVER!

If God is for us – then who can stand against us!

Pack up your gear boys and girls, because we are going home!

Except that, tomorrow when the trumpets blow and the army is assembled – God stays in the tent. He sits there, waiting for Who knows what. And we fight and bleed and die. And the next day we go out and do it again. And again. And again. For going on 2000 years.

That's our situation.

The King has come!

And still WE BLEED.

So why this delay?

Jesus knew we would ask this question so by his Spirit through the Apostle Peter he gave us the answer. Peter said:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Peter 3:8-10 ESV)

Jesus is slow in leaving the tent, Peter acknowledges but not because he doesn't care but because he does care. You see, when a god takes the field – when THE GOD takes the field – the battle will be over. The Lord will destroy every enemy with the breath of his mouth. There will be no contest, no back and forth, no give and take. When God takes the FIELD – IT IS OVER.

And there will be no second chances.

So because he loves - he delays.

And he can hear your cries of anguish from inside the tent.

But he can also hear the cries of all those who languish forever in the fires of hell.

So he delays.

And the devil is angry because he knows his time is short.

He knows that he is defeated. He knows that his attempt to take our place in the universe has failed. Jesus has already crushed his head. His coming shook the world and knocked the gates of hell from their iron hinges.

It is FINISHED.

And one day soon it will be over.

And that leaves us only one question still to ponder. It's a simple question with a simple answer.

The question is:

2. How should we respond to this good news?

The answer is simple.

Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. (Psalm 2:11-12 ESV)

When the Lord comes out of the tent – history will come to a close. Even now his hand is on the canvas. The angel holds a trumpet to his mouth. All is ready. The kingdom of God is at hand.

And:

Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2:12 ESV)

Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.