

Rightly Responding to the Story of Christmas

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Luke

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Bible Text: Luke 2:1-18
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We're going to have a resource that is available out in the foyer over in the education building as well. It's a "My Sermon Notes." When James saw this, he thought this was actually my sermon notes. It's not, I promise, even though you can't draw a picture there. This is something that we want to give to the kids, something that they can use during the worship service. It has things like who's speaking, the date on it, where in the Bible are they, what's the sermon title. They can draw something out, all sorts of stuff. I see a few of them already. This is a wonderful resource we want to give to you. It gets your kids involved in the worship service, helps them to learn how to take notes, jot things down. And parents, it gives you an opportunity to be able to talk with them afterwards about the things that they have seen and heard and trying to help them understand it.

So I recommend that to you and the reason why I recommend it this week of all weeks, is because the passage we're in is going to be very familiar to these kids. During the Christmas program, they memorized quite extensively and amazingly Luke 2:1-18. Now part of that was Jennifer Guthrie sitting up and doing some glorious hand motions. If you didn't get to see that, you missed out, but walking them through the story of Christmas, helping them to memorize that passage. So this is the passage we're going to be in this morning. I thought it would be good if we're introducing sermon notes to give them something that they know, something tangible for them to be able to think through. So we are going to be in Luke 2:1-18. We have that resource available to you every week from now on.

I want to open and I didn't bring it up with me because I already have enough stuff coming up with me, it's actually the beginning of the narrative on the Christmas story from the Jesus storybook Bible which is another thing that I recommend to you. But it opens this passage that we're going to be thinking through this morning in this way, "Everything was ready. The moment God had been waiting for was here at last. God was coming to help his people just as he had promised in the beginning. But how would he come? What would he be like? What would he do? Mountains would have bowed down, seas would have roared, trees would have clapped their hands but the earth held its breath. As silent as snow falling, he came in and when no one was looking, in the darkness he came." This is the story we're thinking about this morning. We are thinking

about the anticipation of Jesus Christ's birth. We are looking at a glorious picture of God's faithfulness in keeping his promises ultimately in the birth of his Son on the earth.

Now if you're a parent in this room, you'll remember the birth of your firstborn child. You'll remember everything that went into that, how you found out, the announcements that went with it. My sister, her most recent one who is now three, which is unbelievable to me, when we found out that she was pregnant, it happened in a very strange way. So she knew and it happened actually at Christmas time. She knew the whole time going into it, had kept it from us for quite some time, hid it away, and then, me, being the hero that I thought that I was, she came up to me during our family Christmas time and said, "I need you to go home. I forgot something at home." It's important. So I thought I was saving Christmas. She sent me home. I went to their house. Unbeknownst to me, she was telling my parents that she was pregnant. She did so through we have Christmas ornaments that go out every year, we give them all sorts of different celebrations, first Christmas, so on and so forth. This one had all of the family members on there and then just another spot that we weren't expecting. It said, "Baby to be born," whatever the date was. I'm a great uncle, I don't remember that exact date. Just winning brownie points there. I wasn't there, though. I went to her house to go pick up this special gift that had to be picked up.

So when I come back, everyone has quieted down, they're not talking about it, they're pretending like nothing had happened. Have any of you ever, and I don't remember the name of this game, I think it's Speak Out or something like that, you put this evil dental thing in your mouth and it pulls your lips back? It's a tortuous game. My sister decided it would be clever to have us play that and that's how she was going to tell me.

So we played a couple of rounds going back and forth, a lot of screaming, a lot of yelling, and me trying to figure out what in the world she was saying while she's just mumbling at me. Had no idea what was going on. Then the last one came, the last one came and what she's trying to say is, "You're going to be an uncle." I'm not picking up on any of it at all. We went for 10 minutes, 10 minutes of her just mumbling at me, incoherent speech while I'm just screaming, "I'm gonna be a what now?" Finally got it nailed down and I said, "I'm going to be an uncle." And then I just stared at her because I knew I got it right but I didn't get the significance of it. It took about 45 seconds for that to settle in and then I realized what was happening.

Now if you know me, when I get exciting news I get excited. I jump around. I'm screaming. I was very excited in that moment. When Jesus was announced to be born, this should have been a really exciting moment, it should have been an overwhelming moment but Mary and Joseph did not find out in the way that most parents find out. They did not find out through a pregnancy test or a doctor saying, "You're pregnant. Your suspicions are right." They found out through an angel of the Lord and it was a terrifying moment for them. An angel appears and says, "Fear not," which by the way, angels are fearful creatures, we know this because every time they show up, they say, "Fear not." So he shows up and tells both Mary and Joseph, "You're going to have a son." What's incredible about that are two important details. 1. Mary was a virgin. She had not yet

been with Joseph. So incredible right there but it gets even better, "Your son is going to be the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior to come." This is how they found out.

So like my family when we found out my sister was pregnant, Mary and Joseph awaited eagerly. They waited on his arrival. They went through the full term of pregnancy waiting and thinking, "What is this going to be like? Who is this baby that we're going to have? Who is he going to really be? What's he going to do?" They eagerly awaited and anticipated but they are not the only ones who had been waiting for this moment. All of human history and specifically all of Israel had been waiting on this particular moment. In Genesis 3, there is a promise at the fall of mankind that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. It started there. Then there's a promise to Abraham that from his line would be a great nation, it would be a blessing to all of the nations and through his son, ultimately through that line, would come the Savior. Then there is a promise to David that from him, his throne would last forever, the Messiah would come. And throughout all of the prophets there are numerous messianic prophecies saying, "The Savior is coming, the Savior is coming."

But they are waiting, eagerly anticipating his arrival and then God goes silent. For 400 years he is silent. No prophecies are happening. History carried on, obviously, but God was not speaking to his people during this time. He is building towards something. He is building the anticipation for what's about to happen.

So if you're a kid in here and you were part of our Christmas program, everything I have just said should make a whole lot of sense because this is exactly what our Christmas program was about, a covenantal Christmas, how God was building through his promises up towards Jesus Christ who is the fulfillment of all of those promises. That is what we'll be looking at this morning.

So we're going to read through the passage, Luke 2:1-18, pray, and then since we're a little shorter on time, we're going to move quick. Luke 2, starting in verse 1.

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.

Let's go before the Lord in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time that you have given us to study your word, to sing praises to your name. God, we thank you for the blessing of what we have just heard, that the Savior has come. Lord, I pray that you would allow us to focus on the beauty of this Christmas story this morning, not being distracted by all the things that are going around us, the stress of Christmas shopping and family coming in, but we would be only focused on the glory of your name. Be with us in this time as we study your word and think through this beautiful story. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So it is the week leading up to Christmas. For some of you, that is a terrifying statement. Saturday is Christmas and you probably have a lot to get done. It's going to be a hard week, a tiring week. I know I have talked to a lot of people over the last few days who are just worn out. But there is rest found in this story. There is rest found in Jesus.

The first question I want us to think through: how would you prepare if there was an extremely important person coming to your home or coming to your workplace or coming to your town? How would you prepare? What would you do? Would you pull out all of your fine china? Would you roll out the red carpet for them, make sure there's nice flowers in your home or wherever you're at? What would you do?

Now several years back, I actually in my retail world in which I no longer work and it's great, I was just starting off in my store up in Kentucky and we found out that the CEO was coming. Now I worked for a massive billion dollar company so when the CEO is showing up to one of the 700 stores that he has to your store, that's a fearful thing. So we found out a couple weeks ahead of time and they sent everybody to our store. Managers were there. Retail associates were there. If you had a pulse, if you had breath in your lungs, you showed up at our store to help us get ready for it. We were preparing for it which meant cleaning everything, resetting everything, making sure every little item was pulled forward on the peg. We were ready to go. Now I had heard about this man, that he was a strictly business, no nonsense, serious kind of guy so I was a little bit nervous going into it because I knew I had to work that day. When I looked at the schedule and found out I had to work that day, I was very upset.

So the day arrives, we're all prepared, all of the store managers from our region have shown up, we're all dressed as nice as we can be for retail sporting goods work. I have one coworker, had one coworker that he always wore the same boring beige fishing shirt. I knew it was an important day when he wore a blue shirt. He was dressed and ready to go. The day arrives, the CEO shows up. He walks in the door, one of my coworkers thinks it's clever to get on the radio and say, "The eagle has landed," as if the President had showed up. He walks in the door, in walks this short, soft-spoken man who was there for a total of five minutes and I'm looking around going, "That's it?" We're building towards this moment, I'm expecting a big crowd of people to show up, roll out the red carpet, everyone celebrates him, he's scary, he asks all these hard questions. He came up to me and said a few words, they were really nice, and then he left. It was nothing that I had expected, nothing that I had planned for.

And the arrival of Jesus, the Son of God, does not happen the way that people were expecting. All of Israel had some sort of expectation in their minds, some sort of anticipation of how this was going to go. They thought, "Maybe he's going to show up in a chariot and just overthrow the Roman Empire. Maybe he's going to come down from heaven with fireballs all around him, the glory of God shining around him, and he's going to take over and establish the kingdom now." They had all of these expectations as to what it was going to be and God's plan was completely different than that. You see, we have our expectations and then God has his plans and his plans always win over our expectations.

So God's sovereignty in this is on full display. Make no mistake that everything that unfolds in this passage was by intent. God had planned it and had planned it for a while. As we had seen in the very beginning of this where I was reading from the Jesus storybook Bible, everything was ready. God had been building towards this. He had been waiting for this moment. So everything that unfolds here is by his sovereign plan.

Now there are a couple of details in this first part of the passage, verses 1 through 7, that I want us to hit on that are both sovereign and surprising. So our first point is sovereign and surprising, the nature of this story.

The first thing that is the sovereignty of the Lord in all of this is the census that occurs. So we see in verse 1, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." So this decree goes out. Caesar Augustus says, "Everybody has to be registered." Now whether that was just the Jews or the entire Roman Empire we're not 100% sure. What we do know is a lot of people were moving; a lot of people are picking up from where they were at and going somewhere else for the purpose of taxes. So they're told, "You have to go to your hometown. Wherever your ancestors are from, wherever your family is from, you've got to go."

So now all of a sudden you've got not only Joseph and Mary having to pick up and go to the city of David, you've got all of the families whether Jewish or all Roman moving, either hundreds of thousands of people or millions of people. God has picked them up

and moved them and he's moved them for a purpose. Everyone has to go to their hometown. Hundreds of thousands if not millions are moving so that two people, two people, Joseph and Mary, could go to one city to give birth to the Savior. Okay, don't miss this. This is a significant thing, right? Because people like to look and say that, "Well, maybe it just happened by accident. Maybe it was a happy accident. It was a good thing that happened but it's not according to plan." God's been planning this since way before anyone was born. Before the foundation of the world, God had a plan for all of this. He was unfolding all of this. This is exactly according to his sovereign plan. He moves everyone so that his Son could be born.

The second thing in the sovereignty here is we see in the city of David. So not only have they been picked up and moved, they go to a very specific place, the city of David which was Bethlehem. Now Joseph and Mary had to pick up and move a long way. It's not like they got in a plane and flew overnight to get there. It's not like they had a car or anything like that. This was about an 85 mile to 90 mile journey that they had to make to get there, probably on foot. This was not a fun journey and then, oh, by the way, Mary's nine months pregnant. That's not a good situation for a pregnant woman to be in but she picked up and went with her husband for the census. She is moving toward the city of David.

Now why Bethlehem? Of all the places in the world, of all the expectations, you would think it would be a more important place than Bethlehem, this small insignificant town on the map. But again, God is sovereign in all of this. He has all of the little, tiny details that we would overlook nailed out. Joseph is from the line of David, right? So we remember that the covenant was made to David that, "Your kingdom will last forever. Your throne will be established forever." And from his line we get all the way to Joseph which is what you see in the genealogy in Matthew 1. Matthew 1:1 talks about the fact that Jesus comes from the line of David and the line of Abraham, right? So we're working towards this fulfillment of the promise. Matthew 1:1 lines that out. It is the covenant to David that is being fulfilled. Bethlehem means the city of David. God is not making mistakes here. It's not just by happy accident. He has a sovereign plan in the birth of his Son. It might not be what everyone else expected, it's exactly what he planned.

It also fulfills one more thing. Turn over really quickly to Micah 5:2. So not only is the city of David a fulfillment of the promise to David that his kingdom would be established forever but it's also a fulfillment of a very specific prophecy. Micah 5:2, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah," notice "too little," small, insignificant, something that we would overlook, "who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days." God's not making mistakes here. He had a plan. He had a promise that from Bethlehem the ruler of Israel, the Savior would come and, huh, Jesus is born in Bethlehem. There's no mistake here. God has sovereignly brought all of this together for his glory, as we will see in just a moment. And what it's important that we see here is we check our own expectations. The Israelites had their own expectations of how it would unfold but God had a different plan.

So as we approach Christmas time and as we approach life in general, check your expectations. Check what you think should happen and the way that you think it should happen. You know, we're the type of people that when things don't go the way that we want, though we're mostly adults, we still throw our tiny little hissy fits. Like, "It didn't happen the way that I wanted it to happen." But God's standing in the background saying, "It's gone according to my plan, though." And that's what we're seeing unfold here. This isn't what people expected but it happens according to his sovereign plan. It is unfolding how he had planned it to unfold.

Now it's important for us to then note some of the surprising details. We've seen that God is sovereign in this, that he has had a plan, he's unfolding it. He is good in all of this but there are some surprising details that we really really would not have expected. Take note of who his parents are. Right, so if you're thinking the Messiah is going to be born, you'd really want it to be from a great royal family, like one of the kings is going to have the Son of God. I mean, it's the Son of God. You would want him to come from a big massive line and then in walks Joseph and Mary. Unexpected. Overlooked. Just like Bethlehem that was unexpected and overlooked. This isn't really who we would have had in mind, a lowly carpenter and his virgin betrothed. Like this is the way that the story is unfolding, this is a surprising detail. They are not royal or famous or well-known but they come from a royal line. God is working out this plan. It is surprising parents.

Note the surprising place. Not only are they in Bethlehem, right, the city of David, God is fulfilling that promise, but move a little bit further down to verse 7, actually verse 6, we'll back up there. "And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth." So they have arrived in Bethlehem. It is time for them to give birth. Verse 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." Now way back when when I was in college, which it feels weird saying way back when but it's been quite a few years at this point now, when I was in college, we took a New Testament class and when we were going through the gospels, one of my professors handed out a test that we all had to take on the story of Christmas. Everyone had to take it and it asked all sort of questions like how did Joseph and Mary get to the city of David? What type of inn was it? What did the innkeeper say to them when all this happened? How many donkeys were there? How many sheep? All of these crazy details. Everyone failed. Everyone failed it because we have all of these pictures and portrayals in movies and our storybooks and all of this of how it went down that night, but they are kind of just worked in there and one of them is the inn, right? We have this awful picture of this evil innkeeper that just sent them away and said, "Nope. No room for you. Go somewhere else." That's not really what's being portrayed here, right?

So they have traveled to the city of David. They've traveled to their hometown. They're trying to find a place to stay. It's dark when they get there so lodging is going to be hard to find, and the word that is used for "inn" there can also be translated as "guestroom," and honestly I think in my personal opinion it should be translated as "guestroom" because it's used one other time in the story of Luke to refer to a guestroom when Jesus is having the last supper. So I think if we're going to translate it as that there, we should

translate it as that here. What's important about it being a guestroom is that would have been the side room of any home, right? So you have your main living quarters and then you have a side room where your guests would sometimes stay, and if you didn't have guests, you would put your livestock in there for protection. So it's not like this is the most important room in the house. Now we don't have an innkeeper just sending them away but there's no room for them anywhere. There's nowhere for them to go, nowhere for them to be able to sleep except for this overlooked, possibly dirty, empty guestroom. This is where they have shown up. This is a surprising place. This is not what we would envision the Savior of the world, the Son of God being born into.

And the last surprising detail is the bed that he is in. It doesn't say that they put him in a nice cradle like what you probably put your children in when they were born, or a nice hospital bed. He is put in a manger and we're not talking about the nice little wooden one that we have in our nativity scenes. We're talking about a feeding trough. That's really what it was. They put it in there for the livestock to be able to feed out of. Now they probably cleaned it up as best they can to keep it as sanitary as possible but this is not the most hygienic day and age. They put him in a feeding trough.

So what we're saying is the Savior of the world, the Son of God is born to unknown parents, in a city that is overlooked, something that most people would not have thought of, in a guestroom or in a stable, in a manger. This is where the Savior was born and when we approach the story of Christmas, we don't think about those details. We don't think about how lowly and humble our Savior was. We read the story of Christmas and then we immediately run to opening presents and opening up gifts, forgetting everything that has just unfolded. But this, this is something important. These details matter. God was sovereign in laying out all of this so we should pay close attention to it.

Why? Why would God do it this way? Out of all the ways that he could have done it, he had a long time to plan this, why would he have done it this way? I think, first of all, it establishes the humility of Jesus' ministry. It shows him as this humble servant. You look and the prophet Isaiah talks about the coming of the servant of God. He is a humble servant. He would be rejected and beaten and mocked and scorned. So it's setting that up. Jesus is born in a humble, lowly place, unexpected, fulfilling everything that was said about who he was.

Now remember, the Israelites had their expectations of what he would be like but God's been saying from the very beginning this is who he's going to be and he's fulfilling those promises here. It's establishing the humility. The Son of man has no place to lay his head, as he later on says, right? These are all important details because it sets up what Jesus is going to be throughout his life. Ultimately he will also die a humbling and humiliating death. He is laid in a rejected place, a humiliating place. You don't want your baby laying in a feeding trough. That's humiliating. But ultimately he goes to the cross which is even more humiliating. The Savior of the world is born in humble places and he dies in humble places. The cross was no good place to be. It was the worst death imaginable.

So the birth and being laid in a manger is setting this up. It's establishing it. It's showing who this Savior is going to be. I think the second thing that it shows is that Jesus is a Savior for the poor, needy and the outcast. We'll see that a little bit more in a second but I want to highlight this. All of these are unexpected details, not what we would want it to be, not what we would think it to be. But Jesus is establishing his ministry to the poor, the needy and the outcast because he is born as poor, needy and outcast. These are not good living conditions for him to be born into but he's going to the very people that he is portraying right now. Like if a savior was born in royal lineage, that he was born in purple robes and a procession of trumpets are all blaring around him, you're going to have the poor and the needy going, "He might be a savior for the rich but not for me." No, Jesus comes in a humble way to show that he is a Savior for all, a Savior for those that need him the most.

The second part of our passage this morning is that the gospel has come and it has come for all. We're going to read back through a few verses here in Luke 2, sorry in verse 8, "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" So if the first part that we had seen, that God is both sovereign and surprising in unfolding his plan of redemption specifically in the Christmas story, now we're seeing really the culmination of all of this, that the gospel has come, the good news is here and it's here for all people.

So if you had amazing news, who would you share it to first? Who would you tell it to first? So if you found out you got a promotion or a raise or you were pregnant, whatever it is, who are you telling first? Your friends? Are you going to tell it to your family? Are you going to put it on Facebook so everyone can see it? What are you going to do? How are you going to announce this? God does this in a really interesting way. All right, the greatest news has arrived, as we'll see in just a second, it is here and he announces it in a way that we really wouldn't have anticipated. Again, check your expectations with the Christmas story. God does not go to the great kings of this day and age. He does not go to the great political figures of this day and age nor the royal dignitaries or even the high priest. Like he goes to none of them. He doesn't go to any of them with this story. He goes to shepherds in a field. He goes to the poor and the outcast with the greatest news. The gospel has come. The gospel has come.

So I've broken this section down into two really distinct parts. First of all, the gospel, "the gospel is here," and the second one will be, "for all." In the middle of the night, so after all of this has unfolded, we see that God has been building towards this story of redemption, towards the birth of his Son, God Incarnate has come to the earth. He has arrived now and he's got to tell somebody and so in the middle of the night these shepherds are watching their flocks, they're keeping close watch of them, protecting them from probably all sorts of wild animals, from being stolen. They have the not fun job of being out there late at night when everyone else is sleeping. God goes to them. It says, "the glory of the Lord shone around them," and what more glorious news is there than the

Savior has been born? But he shows himself to shepherds, again, an unexpected detail. But all of this, all of this had happened for the glory of the Lord, even his Son being born in a lowly place had happened for his glory.

So there is news here. The angels come to them and say, "Fear not," again, a terrifying reality, angels are here saying, "Fear not," and then here is the message, "I bring you good news of great joy for all people." That section "good news" can be translated as "gospel," which is really what the word "gospel" means, it means "good news." The good news has arrived. The gospel has arrived. Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God has arrived. He is here. I bring you this good news. They are the heralds of the gospel. They bring the truth that the Savior has come.

The gospel is here and it is of great joy. Friends, this is a joyous message. The story of Christmas is joyous, it's beautiful. It should fill our hearts with gladness to know that the Savior has arrived. It is for the whole world.

So what we're describing here, a Savior has come, the Messiah has come, the Lord is here, salvation has arrived, that's the story that they're describing. Again, it's been 400 years of silence, 400 years of anticipating when would the Savior show up, and it's been longer than that because it's been since Genesis 3. When would the Savior show up? And now the angels are finally getting to say, "He's here. He has arrived. Salvation is at hand." They say, "You will find in the city of David a Savior," so salvation is here, who is Christ, the Messiah, the Lord. Those are some significant words. Not accidental words, significant words: salvation is here, the Messiah is here, the Lord is here. This is not just a man-made Messiah. This is God. God has come. God has condescended, taken on flesh to dwell amongst his people. That's why he is named Immanuel, God is with us. God has arrived. He is here and this is good news of great joy. Salvation is at hand.

Now the question is who is this for? Who is this salvation for? The gospel has arrived. Who is it for? They say for all people. All people. Salvation has arrived for all people. He had not come just to save Israel. Though they thought that that's what was going to happen, that he was going to arrive, establish his kingdom, Israel would reign forever, God had not planned that out, he had planned something different than their expectations that salvation was at hand for all people. Now even through the unfolding of the Old Testament, you see God really working with the Gentiles as well. He is saving for himself Gentiles. So he had been working in the entire world but now that ministry is exploding, it's going everywhere. It is going everywhere.

This is a salvation for all people. First of all, he proves it with who he appears to. So he came to redeem the entire world and he proves it through the people that he shows up to. Again, it's not royal dignitaries. It's not in the middle of the synagogue. It's not to the high priest. It's to shepherds and these shepherds were probably not loved the most by society, right? They're in a field in the middle of the night. First of all, that's not where you want to be in the middle of the night. But shepherds were not considered to be the best of people and I don't want to spend a lot of time on who these people were but they were considered outcasts of their society. They were considered unclean. People didn't interact

with them a lot. They didn't think about them a lot. When they saw them coming up, they went the opposite direction. And God goes to them first. I mean, it should just blow our minds with what God is doing here. He brings them a message first.

Jesus has come for the poor and the outcast. We saw it in how he was born and now who he goes to. He goes to the poor and outcast shepherds that are out in the field at night. He has come for them and how do I know that? Because the rest of his ministry shows that. I was actually having a conversation with Denver Clark a couple days ago talking about the beauty of the gospel and the Christmas story, and one of the things that he pointed out, one of his favorite verses is there were people that were trying to have a sticking point against Jesus and his ministry. They were trying to come at him and say, "This is what's wrong with you. This is the problem I have with you." And they said, "We don't like you because you eat with tax collectors and sinners." That's the problem they had with him and Jesus is saying, "Duh, I do. Like this is who I've come for. I've come to redeem the outcasts. I've come to redeem the poor and needy because here's a news flash, that's the entire world." The entire world is poor and needy and outcast. The entire world needs the gospel. That's who Jesus has arrived for. Jesus heals the sick which is not common to what everyone else would have done. They would have looked aside to them. Jesus touches the lepers, really not a good thing. He heals the unclean. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. His ministry is established in going to the shepherds first and then just goes from there. He has arrived for all those who are poor and needy. He has arrived for us. We are all poor and needy. We all have no standing before him.

What we heard this morning in all of the testimonies that were laid out at the baptisms was, "I can't do anything about my problem with sin. I can't fix this problem. But praise be to God, the Savior has come." Like that's the glory of the story of Christmas, the Savior has arrived and he has come for the world. He has come for all of those who would say, "I am outcast. I am poor and needy and in need of salvation." He has not come for those who say that, "I can do it on my own," because it's not going to work. We are poor and needy and he has shown up for us. This is the Savior of the world who not only did he be born in a low humble place but he died for sinners such as us, the poor and needy spiritually such as us. He arrived for us. He died for us. He laid down his life for us.

And what happens after this is praise, praise breaks out in heaven. Notice in verse 12, and they say and we'll come to this in just a second, they say, "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'" All of this is unfolded, unexpected, surprising, glorious and praiseworthy. All of this is unfolded in the most beautiful way possible that drove an army of angels to worship God. And when we come to the Christmas story, we don't just come to it thinking, "I've got to get through this so I can have my Christmas with my family." This is the story of Christmas. This is the purpose of Christmas, that salvation has come, and we get distracted by all other details that are going on around us but salvation has come and he is worthy of all of our praise. Glory to God in the highest! He is worthy of all glory because he did not

abandon us or leave us to die in our sin, but he sent his Son to die in our place. Glory to God in the highest! And you want to know how there's peace on earth? Through the Savior. This is the only way that there is peace, it is through the Savior. He makes peace between God and man. Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth! The Christmas story should cause us to break out in praise, in praise because this is a glorious story, it is a beautiful story, that God did not abandon us but he sent his Son to die for us.

It is important to remember that behind the cradle was always the cross. He did not just come to live but he came to die. This is the glory of the Christmas story. We praise him because in his death he redeemed for himself the poor, the needy, and the outcast, that in his birth he sets up for this but in his death he accomplishes this. The Savior has come, salvation is here. This is the story of Christmas. It's not just something that makes us feel good on the inside and then we go about our business. It should drive us to our knees in worship and praise because God has worked something amazing, the Savior is here.

Now I forgot to mention but I've titled this sermon "Rightly Responding to the Story of Christmas," because it's important that we respond to it. So we note all of the details that are unfolding here, that God has been both sovereign and surprising in the way that he unfolds his Christmas story. It's important to know that a Savior has come and in a way that God had planned from the beginning. And it's important to note that the gospel has arrived and it's for all people. But it's important that we also respond to it. Like if we just leave here today and hear of all of these glorious truths and we don't respond to it, I have failed and we have failed and truly seen the glory of God in salvation.

There are, just to give you an idea of what's going on in the world around you, because it's really easy to sit in our walls, in our nice, comfortable, heated, air conditioning building with wonderful sound, I mean, God has blessed us tremendously but it's so easy to wall up in here and not think about the rest of the world. So let's think about the rest of the world for a moment as we're building towards this Christmas season. Right now around the world or throughout this day around the world, there will be people worshipping underground. We do it freely right here. We are gathered freely right here. There's no pressures on us, no persecution coming down and what little persecution you might have is tiny in comparison to what other people are tasting. They are underground hiding the truth of what we're talking about right here. There is fear that the police will come in and raid their home churches or underground churches, that they will be arrested or beaten for it.

I shared Wednesday night during our men's Bible study this story and I think it's worth sharing here again. There was a pastor many many years back in a closed off country. He was in a country that hated the gospel, hated Jesus, did not want him there, did not want him preaching. And in the early stages of his ministry, he really wrestled with, "Well, how do I handle this?" Because there is this tension, do I do all of it in secret and share it when I can but hide it away so I'm not killed for it, or do I just publicize Jesus? And for many years he wrestled with this saying, "What do I do? How do I evangelize to this country that hates me and hates the gospel?" And one day he just said, "Enough with it. I'm preaching the gospel."

So he started proclaiming the truth, he started publishing his sermons out there and, sure enough, he had a knock on his door. The police showed up and said, "If you do anymore preaching, if you say the name of Jesus anymore, you're going to be arrested and probably killed." So he responded by preaching the gospel. He published his sermons. He continued to put them out there. One night the police came in and raided his home, arrested him for preaching the gospel and put him in chains and in prison for many years, and during his time there, he tried to share the gospel with all of the inmates that were there with him, with all of the guards that were with him, and the more that he shared, the more they beat him. They beat him within an inch of his life but he would not relent in preaching the gospel. And one day the guards came up to him and said, "You know, you'd think by this point you'd just give up, you would just quit." And he said, "No, here's what I have realized, here's what I've realized, if I continue to preach the gospel and you kill me, my sermons will have even more power because I died for this message. Or you're going to release me and I'm going to keep preaching the gospel." And it was in that boldness where he looked them in the face and said, "I'm not stopping preaching the gospel," that they said, "All right. Go freely." They didn't have anything against him, like they didn't have anything that they could hold him down and say, "You're going to stop now."

But this is persecution that's happening around the world for things like what we're talking about this morning. All around the world people are being beaten and abused and killed for this story, for believing that the Savior had come and died in our place. So it's important that we put that in perspective and knowing that all around the world right now people are hiding because of their faith or being persecuted because of their faith, that we realize that this story, the Christmas story calls us to let go of comfort and follow him. There's nothing comfortable about the story of Christmas. We get comfortable in it but there's nothing comfortable about this. Like Mary and Joseph traveled while she was pregnant, 90 miles on foot to go to a cramped city where there was no room to give birth to the Savior who was born in poverty, born in a lowly place, placed in a feeding trough. What about that is comfortable to you? Our Savior did not come to live a comfortable, easy go lucky life. He came to live a hard, humbling, humiliating life and he calls his people to do the same. He calls us to let go of our comforts, to let go of all of those things that we hold onto and say, "I'll follow you but I get to hold onto this. I'll follow you but if it costs me losing this comfort, I'm choosing the comfort."

The story of Christmas says, "Let go of the comfort. Follow me. Pursue me." How do we know this? The shepherds dropped everything. It says in the passage they made haste. They took off running. Everything that they had just heard, they take off running and saying, "Okay, if this is true, if there really is a baby lying in a manger right now in Bethlehem because the army of angels just said so and I'm not going to doubt them right now, if this is true, we're going to go find out." So they run to Jesus. They make haste and lo and behold it's exactly what they had heard. It's exactly what they had heard.

When Jesus calls his disciples, he says, "Drop everything and follow me. Let go of everything, follow me." The picture of discipleship that is laid out here through the

shepherds, through the disciples and through the life of Christ is a life of humility, a life of rejecting comfort and pursuing him. We let go of the things that we hold onto. First and foremost, we let go of our own sin because some of us like to coddle our sin and say, "I'm going to keep this one but Jesus can have the rest of me." We let go of our sin. And why do I say that, in comfort? Because sometimes we find comfort in our own sin. We think, "Well, this is all I've ever known so I'm going to keep going with it." Jesus says, "Let go and follow me." We think about the really nice homes that we have which if God has blessed you with a nice home, praise be to him for his blessings, but if you're hiding in your own walls and refusing to share the gospel out of fear that your life might change and you might lose it all, let's have some perspective here. Jesus humbled himself to the point of taking on his creation so that he could die for us, that the cost that we can pay for following him are nothing in comparison to the cost that he paid.

So let's have a little perspective here and reject comfort. We cannot fully follow Jesus while clinging to the comforts of this world. We can't. We cannot hold onto all of the things that we want to keep that make us comfortable and keep us in our own bubble, that make us feel good about ourselves and reject sharing the gospel with other people, reject pursuing other people. So we have to let go of comfort. We look to the example of Jesus. He modeled this in his life by rejecting comfort. He was born and placed in a lowly feeding trough. He ministered from place to place having nowhere to lay his head. He was rejected by his own people. He was beaten for speaking the truth. He was killed in the most humiliating way possible to ransom us. That's our Savior. That's the Savior we're seeing be born here in the Christmas story. This is no Savior of comfort. He calls us out of it.

The second thing it calls us to in response is pursuing the world. He calls us to pursue the world. How did the shepherds respond after seeing it? So they made haste. They ran to the city and they found everything that was told to them, everything that the angels had said was true. So they don't respond by going back to work. They don't go back to the fields and go, "Oh, that was really cool to see." Life as usual. Because when you experience the Savior, life does not stay the same. It is not life as usual anymore. We don't go back to the same way of life that we knew before. The shepherds don't go back to the field, they go tell everyone. They run to everyone else and say, "You have got to see what we just saw." They tell everyone.

Here's something interesting that I noticed this week, the life of Jesus bookends a commissioning service. At his birth, the shepherds go out and tell of all that they had seen of Jesus. What happens after his resurrection? Matthew 28:19-20, "Go and make disciples." He sends his disciples out and says, "Tell them of all that you have seen and heard." His ministry begins with people going out and saying, "The Savior is here," and his ministry ends with the disciples going out and saying, "The Savior has accomplished. He has brought salvation."

The Christmas story is a call to lay aside all of our comforts, to let them go, to stop hiding in our own walls and hiding within the walls of this church. It calls us to go out to the nations. It calls us to pursue the poor, the needy, the outcast, like Jesus pursued. Now that

doesn't mean that everyone here is called to be an international missionary. That's not what I'm saying but what I am saying is there are unbelievers, there are the needy around you right now, in your own homes maybe. Your children might be unbelievers. You have an opportunity to minister to them. Friends, family members. Christmas time, perfect time to do it, everyone is together. And if you're afraid, "Well, my family is not going to like the message that I have," let go of your comfort because the world rejected Jesus and you're going to be rejected too.

But he calls us to be faithful even within the walls of our church. Did you know, to quote Bethany and Heather, that we have a large gathering of unbelieving people in our children's ministry? Like we have so many kids back there that don't know the truth of the gospel, haven't believed in Jesus. There's a ministry opportunity right there. Student ministry. You have so many opportunities to tell of all that you have heard not only in the Christmas story but in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and how dare we sit in our own comfort and say, "I'm not going to do it." He has called us to go. He has called us to be obedient to him. You cannot minister to the poor and needy while hiding away in your own personal bubble. There are billions of people around the world, billions of people who do not know who Jesus is, never heard his name, and I just encourage you and almost dare you to go online right now to the Joshua Project or International Mission Board and start looking at maps of the unreached people groups. Your heart will break when you realize there are billions of people around the world who do not know that the Savior has come and that salvation has been accomplished.

What will we do? Will we hide in our comfort and say, "Well, that's a good story, it's a good message, I'm going to keep going life as usual." Or will we forsake all comforts and pursue the world? What will we do? The story of Christmas is this: God has been silent for over 400 years but on that silent night as it was just sung, God breaks his silence in the most amazing way. There in the darkness of that silent night the light of the world was born. We have that light within us and how dare we sit in our own comfort and refuse to share it with the world. Far be it for me that I should hide this truth from the world. May we run with haste like the shepherds did and the disciples did to the world saying, "The Savior was born. He has come and he has accomplished salvation for all people." May we not hide in our comfort.

Let's go before the Lord in prayer.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the story of Christmas, that you did not leave us to our own devices but that you sent your Son, that you came to your creation to redeem a people for yourself through the humbling of your servant who lived a hard and humiliating life, who died a hard and humiliating death but accomplished salvation for all people. This is the message of John 3:16, that you so loved the world that you sent your only Son that whoever believes in him will not die but have eternal life. This is what we have heard in the Christmas story. I pray that you would not allow us to sit comfortably, not being changed by what we have seen and heard, but that we would run to the nations forsaking all other things for the glory of your name and the advancement of your kingdom. The Christmas story is a missional story, Lord, it sends us to tell

everyone. Lord, would you give us boldness as a church at Providence Church to refuse to sit by while the rest of the world dies and goes to hell while we have the light of the world within us. Give us boldness. Give us a desire to glorify your name in this. Lord, be with us for the glory of your name. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.