

SERMON NOTES
Luke 1:26-45; 2:1-20
“Luke’s Nativity Story”

Intro:

- Bruce Thielemann:
- Christmas is a time of surprises. There was a lady who was preparing her Christmas cookies. There was a knock at the door. She went to find a man, his clothes poor, obviously looking for some Christmas odd jobs. He asked her if there was anything he could do. She said, *"Can you paint?"*
- *"Yes,"* he said. *"I'm a rather good painter."*
- *"Well,"* she said, *"there are two gallons of green paint there and a brush, and there's a porch out back that needs to be painted. Please do a good job. I'll pay you what the job is worth when the porch is done."*
- He said, *"Fine. I'll be done quickly."*
- She went back to her cookie making and didn't think much more about it until there was a knock at the door. There was the man, and the obviousness of his painting was evident: he had green paint all over his clothes.
- She said, *"Did you finish the job?"*
- He said, *"Yes."*
- She said, *"Did you do a good job?"*
- He said, *"Yes. But lady, there's one thing I'd like to point out to you. That's not a Porsche back there. That's a Mercedes."*

- **Clear communication is important.**

- *"The best way to send an idea,"* said scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer, *"is to wrap it up in a person."*
- The theological word for that is incarnation, meaning *"in the flesh."*
- *Jesus was the incarnation of God: Jesus was the way that God sent His "idea" – His truth -- to humanity – namely, in the flesh – in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth -- there was and is no better way!*

- Christianity is not a philosophy of life or a set of laws or a religious belief system
- *Christianity is the Good News of what God has done for our salvation in the historical deeds, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ*

Frederick Buechner:

“The claim that Christianity makes for Christmas is that at a particular time and place God came to be with us Himself.”

It's natural to want to think of Jesus as being someone just like us
-for example, Ethelyn Peterson:

My 5-year-old daughter was helping set the table one Sunday near Christmas. She stopped for a moment and announced, "*Jesus was a Swede.*"

More than a little surprised, I corrected her, "*Oh, no, dear, Jesus was Jewish. I'll read it to you from the Bible after lunch.*"

Pensively, she laid out the silverware. Then her face brightened. "*Mommy, I can prove it to you! We sang about it in Sunday school this morning.*" Triumphant she sang, "*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his Swede head.*"

Actually, Jesus Christ was born a Middle-eastern Jew - *not a blond-haired, blue-eyed Swede / not a German / not an Indian / not an African / not a Latino / not a Chinese / not an American / not a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant / not a Hindu / not a Buddhist / not a Muslim / not a woman - but a male Palestinian Jew*

Ever since the birth of Jesus Christ, it is no longer possible to make of God whatever we want him to be

God is not an idea that we can play with and shape to our liking in our minds
-God became a Person - a Specific, Particular, Real, Tangible Man - his name is Jesus / he was born in Bethlehem / his mother was Mary / he was a Palestinian Jewish man, with a specific genealogy going back to David and Abraham

- Patrick Morley: ***The turning point in our lives is when we stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is.***

Many people like the idea of believing in God in a general way as long as they can define God and approach God on their own terms

--But here is the problem with seeking the God you want rather than the God who is:
how do you ever know when you have found him?

-the advantage of an abstract, malleable God is that He can be whatever you want Him to be

-but the disadvantage is: *how do you ever know that you are connecting with the real God rather than just a creation of your own imagination, opinions and prejudices?*

- ***The God Who Is has revealed Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ – and this is the story of how God's Son entered our world***

I. THE ANGEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO ZECHARIAH

- *The story of Christ's birth is history – not myth or legend*

Luke 2:1 (NIV) ¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

- *Luke sets the Nativity Story in the context of secular history*
- ***The historicity of Jesus Christ is as certain as the historicity of Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire***
- Luke actually begins the Nativity Story with a relative of Jesus' – a priest named Zechariah

Luke 1:5 (NIV) ⁵In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

- As a priest, Zechariah served at the Temple in Jerusalem for 2 one-week periods a year
- *He was one of approximately 18,000 priests in 24 divisions*
- A priest only officiated at the sacrifice at the altar in the Temple once in his life – being selected by lot
- On this particular day, Zechariah was chosen by lot to officiate at the altar inside the Temple
- *Had nothing else happened that day – it would have been the highlight of his life*
- But something else did happen that day
- *For this was the day chosen by God to set in motion the events leading up to the birth of His Son and the salvation of the world*
- An angel appeared to Zechariah while he was alone in the Temple placing the incense on the altar
- *Though his wife, Elizabeth, was barren and in her old age – she would give birth to a son – to be named John -- who would be the one to prepare the way for the coming Messiah*
- But Zechariah doubted the promise of the angel since his wife was past normal childbearing years
- The mighty angel asserted his authority: *I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God. I have been sent by God to give you this good news.*
- Because Zechariah did not believe Gabriel's words – he was stricken with silence and was unable to speak until the fulfillment of the angel's words
- As the angel promised, Elizabeth did indeed become pregnant in her old age

- *And her pregnancy would serve as a boost to the faith of Mary*

II. THE ANGEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO MARY

- In the 6th month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John, God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee by the name of Nazareth – to a virgin betrothed to a humble descendant of King David by the name of Joseph
- *Joseph and Mary were in the one-year betrothal period of their engagement whereby they were considered pledged to each other as husband and wife in every way except that they were not yet living together or having sexual relations*
- One of the most important choices God ever made was the choice of a woman to be the mother of His Son
- *For Jesus would learn his basic values, beliefs and attitudes from his human mother and father*
- And the young woman God chose to give birth to His Son was Mary
- *And who was Mary? Listen to her own words in this scene with Elizabeth:*
- **Show film clip from The Nativity Story – “Why is it me?”**
- Why was it Mary that God asked? *Precisely because she was nothing – and therefore the fullness of God could enter her and the glory of God could shine through her*
- *God intentionally and purposefully passed over the proud, the mighty and the rich in order to choose Mary of Nazareth*

Luke 1:48 (NIV) ((Mary): ⁴⁸ “For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed”

Luke 1:52 (NIV) ⁵² “He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.”

- Mary and Joseph the carpenter were not impoverished, but they were not affluent or influential either
- *That shows that God does not consider wealth or social status to be important – they're not necessarily bad – they're just not important in God's value system*
- *The birth of Jesus was to inaugurate the new order of God's Kingdom – a Kingdom that reverses all human and worldly values*

- Wealth and social status are viewed more as handicaps than as blessings in a Kingdom that puts premium value upon humility and poverty of spirit
- Have you ever wondered, *“If God really loves me, why doesn’t He give me more money?”*
- **God expresses His love for us according to His values – not according to the world’s values**
- *And God values humility of spirit – because God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud*
- **Because God loves you – He wants you to be as open and receptive as possible to the fullness of His grace – and He gives grace to the humble**
- I suspect some of you may be saying: *“I would like to try keeping my humility with a little more money”*
- Do we want to grow in Christ-likeness or not? Jesus was born and lived in humble circumstances – *God gave Jesus spiritual blessings and fullness of grace without measure – but God gave Jesus only a very modest standard of living*
- We parents would be wise to keep that in mind in raising our own children
- *God chose Mary for her humility // her purity // her faith // her devotion to God // and her submissive obedience to God’s Word*
- Yet, don’t you kind of wonder what the angel Gabriel must have been thinking when God sent Him to Mary of Nazareth with one of the most important announcements and assignments in human history?
- Frederick Buechner: *“Mary struck Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘You mustn’t be afraid, Mary,’ he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl.”*

Luke 1:35 (NIV) ³⁵The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

- Mary was afraid – but she said Yes to God: *“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”*

- Mary was saying Yes to becoming pregnant in a way that no one would understand
- *You see, virgin births were no more common then than now*
- The fact is, Mary was an unmarried, pregnant teenager – *a condition that carried with it much more of a stigma in her culture than in our society today*
- The only reasonable explanation for getting pregnant before getting married is sexual immorality
- *Either she and Joseph committed fornication during their engagement or else Mary broke her betrothal vows and committed adultery with another man*
- Either way, Mary’s reputation for moral purity would be ruined forever

- Furthermore, Mary stood to lose Joseph as well as her reputation
- *After all, Joseph knew that he was not the father of that child*
- All he would know is that his fiancée leaves to go visit her relative Elizabeth for 3 months and comes back pregnant
- *Even her own family would not believe that her pregnancy was the result of God’s work in her life rather than her own immorality*

- **Show video clip from The Nativity Story – “I’ve broken no vow”**

- *Mary may have been highly favored by God – but it cost her dearly to submit to the will of God – as would be the case for Jesus as well*

- **Why was it necessary that Jesus be born of a virgin?**
- *Because only a virgin birth would enable Jesus to retain his deity as Son of God while also taking on full humanity as the Son of Mary – and both his deity and humanity are necessary to becoming our Savior*

- **Jesus of Nazareth was fully human, but he had no biological human father**
- *There is nothing of Joseph in the DNA of Jesus*
- The eternal Son of God took a human body – fashioned in the womb of a virgin by the activity of the Holy Spirit without the agency of a human father – and took this body for His very own as the instrument through which he was known and in which He lived – and died

-what happened in Mary=s womb is not that Jesus Christ came into being / rather what happened in Mary=s womb is that the Word was made flesh - the eternal Son of God took the form of a human baby

So, when we talk about the pre-existence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we mean that He existed as God the Creator before He was born as a man on earth

-and when we talk about the Incarnation, we mean the eternal God coming to live among us in human flesh in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth

-and when we talk about the Virgin Birth, we refer to the Holy Spirit fashioning a human body for the Son of God in the womb of Mary without the agency of any human father

- When we affirm the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, we are affirming the deity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God
--but just as importantly, the virgin birth affirms the full and perfect humanity of Jesus Christ as the Son of Mary
- The curse of death as God's judgment on human sin could not be got rid of otherwise than through death of a man as the Perfect Substitute
--yet the Son of God, being divine and immortal, as such could not die
--Even in all his divine glory and power, the Son of God could not save man from sin and death from heaven
--it was for this reason that the Son of God came to earth in the flesh -- assuming a human body capable of death – in order that he might become a Substitute for us all –paying the just penalty for all the sins of humanity
- In order to save us from our sins and the penalty of death and condemnation – our Savior must be fully human to pay the just penalty for human sin – *and he must be holy and sinless so that his death would atone for our sins rather than paying for his own – and he must be infinite so that his death would pay the penalty for all sins and not just one man's–*
- *By means of the virgin birth the holy and infinite Son of God took on a fully human body with a fully human nature like unto Adam's original nature – capable of being tempted, yet without sin – and thus through his perfect life and sacrificial death, he could fully atone for all the sins of humanity*
--with the penalty of sin fully paid by the death of the God-Man, Jesus of Nazareth, we can be restored to a right relationship with God by receiving Jesus Christ into our life as our Savior and Lord

III. THE CENSUS DECREE OF CAESAR AUGUSTUS

- Luke's Christmas story is a beautiful story: *a poor, obscure virgin comes to Bethlehem with her husband in order to be taxed // she finds there is no room in the inn // she goes to a stable and there delivers a son and lays him in a manger – a feeding trough for animals*

- Then the story is embellished by shepherds and angels and Matthew's tale of the Wise Men
- *Whether historical fact -- or myth or legend – it's a beautiful story – and that's all that matters, right?*
- Surely the noble Christmas sentiments of peace and sharing and giving and caring do not depend on the historicity of the story, do they?
- *Surely the Christmas story can be meaningful without believing in angels and the virgin birth and all that supernatural stuff, right?*
- Yet Luke does not allow us to engage in such sentimental and schizophrenic compartmentalization
- *Caesar Augustus, King Herod, Joseph, Mary, the angels, the census decree, the journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem, the birth of Jesus, the manger, the shepherds – all part of the same story // all part of real history*
- Fairy tales and myths and religious symbols may help some people feel better for a season, but they cannot possibly deal with the root problems of real needs
- *Real people with real problems and real sins need a real Savior who lived, died and arose from the grave in real history*
- If the idyllic manger scene is merely a fairy tale that makes people feel warm and fuzzy once a year – then it has nothing to offer real people with real problems and real sins and real needs
- *But the truth is – God really did enter our world and human history in the birth of Jesus – and the real manger scene was not all that idyllic*
- Do you suppose when Mary was contemplating what it would be like to give birth to the holy Son of God – that she figured she would go through labor and delivery in a stable?
- *The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was a real event in real history*
- But what does it all mean?

IV. THE ANGEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE SHEPHERDS

- Angels are as real as Roman Emperors – and Palestinian shepherds – *it's just that most of the time they are invisible to our senses*
- Sometimes we tend to think that the only reality is that which we can detect with our senses

- *Yet we know that there are animals who can detect scents that we cannot smell and can hear frequencies of sounds that we cannot hear and can see colors that we cannot see*

A humpback whale communicates with beeps and calls that sound like songs. A whale miles away can hear the song.

Bloodhounds can follow a scent that is nearly four days old. The membrane in a bloodhound's nose that detects odors is fifty times bigger and a million times more sensitive than a human's.

Eels' sense of smell is so well-developed that they can detect a thimbleful of an artificial scent diluted in a huge lake.

A bald eagle can spot a mouse in a field from high in the sky. Eagle eyesight is four times as sharp as that of a person with perfect vision.

** Just as humans cannot detect much of physical reality with our senses, so also we cannot detect much of spiritual reality with our senses*

- *Just because you and I cannot see angels all around us at this very moment doesn't mean that they are not there*
- Angels are part of the unseen reality created by Jesus Christ -- invisible spirit-beings far more intelligent and powerful than humans – who occasionally appear to humans either as ordinary young men or women or as god-like creatures who would take your breath away

And the birth of Jesus was heralded by angels who came straight from the throne of God with the Good News of Great Joy

- **The angels had known the Son of God for millennia in heaven prior to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem**
- *The angels knew the true origin, identity and mission of the baby born in the Bethlehem stable*

Jesus' birth announcement was of heavenly origin because Jesus was of heavenly origin

-what was the content of the announcement?

-*what is the core truth of the meaning of Christmas?*

Luke 2: 10-11 ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*” ¹¹*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*”

“A Savior has been born to you”

That is the heart of the Christmas message

-the name Jesus means “Savior” or “Jehovah is Salvation”

-Salvation is the reason for the season

That is exactly what Christmas is all about: *the eternal Son of God taking upon himself mortal human flesh in order to save us from sin and death and condemnation*

John Stott: “*Because in no other person but the historic Jesus of Nazareth has God become man and lived a human life on earth, died to bear the penalty of our sins, and been raised from death and exalted to glory – there is no other Savior, for there is no other person who is qualified to save.*”

People separated from God by their sin are lost and perishing – yet still loved and valuable to God. The Cross of Jesus Christ is their only hope of salvation.

--God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life

-- Jesus died on the Cross to pay the penalty for our sin so that we might have eternal life.

If people are not perishing in their sins, then Jesus came into this world and suffered and died on the Cross for nothing.

--He could have just stayed in heaven and let people live and believe and practice any religion any way they please.

-- If people can be saved apart from the Cross, then Jesus died for nothing.

But the truth is: people are perishing in their sins, and the Cross of Jesus Christ is their only hope of salvation.

■ ***Therefore, God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish.***

● **And therefore, we as a church send out missionaries so that lost and perishing people can hear the Good News of the Gospel and be saved**

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

-Both of the terms Christ and Lord point to the uniqueness of Jesus

-Christ refers to the One Whom God has chosen to be His anointed ruler and Savior

-Lord is a divine title used of deity

-thus the baby in the manger – come to be the world’s Savior – was heralded by the angel to be none less than God himself in a human body

Charles Wesley put it this way in his great hymn: *“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”*
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail th’ incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel

- And this angelic birth announcement of the Son of God was delivered to humble shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem
- *Not to the religious elite // not to the high and mighty // not to Emperors or Senators or Priests – but to ordinary – even less-than-ordinary people – shepherds*

Bruce Thielemann:

I came across a collection of letters that children wrote to Santa Claus. Some of them were pretty good.

My favorite went like this: *“Dear Santa, there are three little boys who live at our house. There is Jeffrey; he is 2. There is David; he is 4. And there is Norman; he is 7. Jeffrey is good some of the time. David is good some of the time. But Norman is good all of the time. I am Norman.”*

But we aren't Normans. We're shepherds.

- If you’re good all the time – you don’t need a Savior
- *But if you’re only good some of the time – if you are a sinner like the rest of us in this room – then you need a Savior*
- ***Jesus is that Savior***

Salvation Prayer

“How Great Our Joy”