

The First Coming of Jesus - Christmas Eve

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[0 : 0 0] We've been going through Advent the last few weeks as a church, and we've been looking at kind of what's going to happen when Jesus comes again, which is what Advent's all about. It's about looking forward to the second coming of Jesus. And we've been looking at how when he comes back, he's going to judge the world. The church is going to win, and he's going to make all things new. And so that's been really good to do, but now we're going to focus on Jesus coming the first time, Christmas. When heaven first came to earth, kind of what happened? What does it mean for us? Not just what will happen one day, and what will that mean for us, but what happened, and what does it mean for us now? I'll tell you the challenge I feel year after year doing this is just you come into the room, and you kind of already know the story. I mean, any given week, if you come to One Harbor from Sunday to Sunday, we're going through books of the Bible, and I know we're hitting scriptures that you may not have heard before or may not have heard in a long time, but when it comes to these moments, like Christmas and Easter, a lot of you know the story. I mean, maybe I'm going to blow someone's mind with it tonight, but I bet most of you have heard about this. And so that the challenge is helping you and I to appreciate the significance, really, in an ocean of sentiment. It's trying to find that significance, trying to help us see that.

That's the challenge. And so when we come to the birth of Jesus, maybe there's no other kind of aspect of the Bible where sentiment more wants to dominate. It's like you think, like simultaneously, Jesus is born, sausage balls, eggnog, like, oh wait, it's Jesus. Oh wait, it's like, and I know I admit it, I'm a fan of eggnog, and if you're not, well, maybe this is not the church for you, you know, like, I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding. All right, so we don't want to just like lay in that sentiment. Like there's good things about it, but man, the reality is we're going to miss the significance of Jesus's birth if we do that. And so I'm going to walk us through the nativity story. I'm going to walk us through Jesus's birth, and I want to encourage you to try to hear this with some fresh ears in the next few minutes together. Luke chapter two, verses one through seven. 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, and all went to be registered each to his own town. 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 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was engaged to, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth, and she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swathing cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for him in the inn. Now, I'm just going to push pause on the story. I want to say already, I bet for some of us, we're like, we got sucked right in that. There's a lot of triggers for sentiment. There's Nazareth, there's Bethlehem, there's swaddling clothes, there's a manger, there's an inn, there's like all that stuff that kind of, we can get lost in that. But what's really going on in this passage? Like something has happened, and we need to see it. Because this thing that we just read about that happened, it had been promised for thousands of years through prophecy. God's people for thousands of years had waited for that thing that just happened in those few verses we just read. And so the first thing we see here is that Christmas is about God coming to be with us. That's what just happened in that passage.

God came to be with us. Past all the familiar sort of nativity scene stuff is God laying there. God, the King of Kings, the God who made the whole world is laying there. And he didn't just appear, he was born. Now, there's a lot of kids here, so we're going to leave it at that. But this is a crazy story. And if just being born would have been crazy enough, but he chose to be born with a bunch of shameful aspects. He's born of a virgin birth, which would be a sort of a haunting thing for his whole life. People would joke with him about that, questioning that. Who believes that? He's born in a disgusting manger. It's not this cute little nice straw, little baby animals everywhere. It's most likely a little kind of cave, a little small cave with a bunch of animal feces in it. It's a gross spot. The God of the universe born in a cave. Why? Well, Matthew puts some more skin on it. He pulls from the book of Isaiah, and he says in Matthew chapter 123, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. He's God with us, but he's not God with us in a gated community, not God with us on a throne, not God with us on a stage,

God with us in the lowliest form he could be found in, God with us. We have stories like that, you know, stories where people come from really humble beginnings, and they really make it into like big celebrities, and it's kind of happenstance. That's not this story, though.

You know, this is not one of those stories. This is a story where God could have chose anywhere for Jesus to be born, and this is the exact place on planet Earth that he wanted Jesus to be born.

[5 : 29] Why? Well, not just to make a visit, not just to pop in and say hi, to dwell with us. As John 1 tells us, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory. Glory is of the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth. Verse 18, no one's ever seen God, the only God who was at the Father's side that he has made him known. So this is what Christmas is all about. It's about God choosing to get low, to be with us, to stoop down to be with us, and to be born in such a lowly, shameful way.

But as we continue the story, we see even more. We learn even more. In verses 8, it says, 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. And this will be a sign for you. You shall find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest.

And on earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased. 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. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, sorry, when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told to them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

Now again, pause on the story. More kind of sentiment triggers. We've got some shepherds. We've got angels. We've got peace on earth. We're thinking of songs. We're thinking of nativity scenes again. But again, there's so much significance here. Think about it like this. The first people, the first people who angels invite to come see Jesus are, drum roll please, shepherds, right? Christmas doesn't just show us that God, you know, he came to be with us. Christmas shows us a God who didn't just come lowly.

[7 : 56] He came to the lowly. He didn't just come in a lowly way. He came to lowly people. Now, shepherds in our day are kind of hip. There's like a resurgence of local farming and all that, which is awesome.

We love it. There's a lot of YouTube channels where, you know, there's kind of farming influencers. And so that can mess with our head a little bit. We can imagine these shepherds kind of like these hip, young people, you know, blessing everyone in the land with their delicious organic meat and produce, right? That's not who they were. They were straight up scoundrels. That's who they were.

Rabbis, there were phrases and writings of the time, to buy wool or milk from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it was stolen property. That's who these guys were. There's another rabbi wrote this. No one should ever feel obligated, listen, to rescue a shepherd who has fallen into a pit. People hated these guys. They were outcasts. They were criminals. They were scoundrels.

They were the rejects of society who everyone assumed the worst of. And it's what makes this so crazy. It's honestly, it's like the angels got the wrong address. Like they showed up at the wrong house. They invited the wrong people. Why would God decide to invite them first? Another aspect is that this is a birth announcement. That's kind of a big deal. Like who you tell first that you're having a kid or that a kid's been born. That's a precious little text, right? That's like a, that's a few people who get to hear about it first. Like if Jill and I were, we're pregnant, we're not. But if we were, right, imagine that we like, you know, like we just roll up at like a prison and just, hey, everybody, we want you to know first. We want you to be the first people to know we're pregnant.

All right. We just want you to know we thought you should know first. It's an odd thing when you understand who these shepherds were. And I'm not trying to be ugly, but I want to tell you they were the kinds of people you keep away from babies. They're the kinds of people you don't want around your babies. And God says, they're the first people I want to know. I want to know about Jesus being born.

[10 : 05] Look at our God giving unworthy people unbelievable grace. Who else showed up? Sure, there's some respectable people. Well, in Matthew 2, we read about some folks. It says, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod, the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and come to worship him. After listening to the king, they went on their way and behold, the star they had seen when it rose.

Went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. More triggers. We got wise men. We got stars and looks like essential oils. We got like, you know, we've got some like triggers here that want to just suck us back into sentiment. But what's really happening? Well, you've got God who comes to be with us, God who comes lowly to be with the lowly. And now you've got a God who draws near to those who are far.

Now they don't show up for a couple of years. Okay. So I hate to just destroy all the nativity scenes you might have set up around the house or in the yard where they're present. They're not there yet. Okay. He has to get a little bit older, but it wasn't out of disinterest. They walked like 800 miles across a desert to see Jesus. And this phrase wise men is a bit misleading too, because you might be thinking about a college professor. Now they were brilliant, but they were pagan astrologists. They were more like mystics, magicians. In fact, some evidence seems to indicate that they were involved in demonic activity. So you've got the opposite of the shepherds who are poor and uneducated, but you've got a bigger difference than that. These guys could not be further away from the kinds of people who would be interested in the God of Israel.

So it looks like first God stops by the bad part of a town and invites the shepherds. And now it's like he interrupted a group of people playing with Ouija boards and told them to come along. And I'm saying this because I don't think the story would be as sentimental if we knew all this, if we considered all this. It wouldn't be as sentimental. But while it would be less sentimental, it would be a lot more significant. Because between shepherds and these wise men, we have a picture of a God who's after all kinds of people. He's after all kinds of people who may not even be after him, who may not fit the mold. He's after the smart and the unintelligent, the close and the far, the rejected and the respected.

And what does God give them? A scolding? You guys should be in church. You should be reading your Bibles more. A few tips? No. He says, you know what you need? God says, you need to see my son, Jesus. That's what you need. You just need to see Jesus. And friends, that's what we need.

[13 : 13] Bunch of scoundrels in this room, I know. Some of us may look more like wise men. Some of us may be more like shepherds. All of us need the same thing. We need to see Jesus. And we don't just need to see him rightly. We need to respond to him rightly, which is what they did. You got to give credit where it's due.

The shepherds, they go, they see him, and then they return glorifying and praising God for all they'd heard and seen. The wise men, they open their treasures and they offer him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. Christmas is God saying what we need most is to see Jesus rightly and to respond to him rightly. The final act of that nativity story is so beautiful. When these guests finally show up, they worship. They leave forever changed. And keep in mind, there wasn't much to see here yet. They didn't show up and he was like just finishing the sermon on the mount. Just got done walking on water. He was a baby. He wasn't glowing. It wasn't like baby Yoda.

He wasn't moving stuff around. But what was impressive was he was there. There he was. God.

Right there. That's God in human form. Fully God and fully man. God with us. God with us. Us. I think it's fair to say that we have a lot more than they have in some ways. We've heard about this. It's a lot easier for us to hear about it. We have to walk 800 miles. We know the rest of the story. We know about the Sermon on the Mount. We know all the things Jesus did. We know he died on the cross and rose again. We know all this stuff. But man, I wonder like how often our response is so different than ours. Is it because too much of this has just fallen into the realm of sentiment? We have lost the significance of the story. It's not just a cute story that serves as a cover for getting all the stuff we want or eating a bunch of sugar. It's a story for me and a story for you.

A story for people who have no chance, who deserve no chance, who don't fit, who would never measure up. But God, but God comes in human form, shameful and lowly for me and you. Folks, there is no other religion like Christianity. Every other religion on the planet will tell you be good and hopefully something good will happen to you. Maybe. The Christmas story says, you're not good, but God is.

[15 : 46] God is. God comes to the downcast and the far off because he's good. The right response is not to trivialize this with a bunch of Christmas cheer, so to speak, or to try to earn our keep even. It's to fall on our face and thankfulness to Jesus.

Jesus. As the band comes up, if you're here, you're watching this, and you're not yet a follower of Jesus, you like them are not here because of you. You're here because of him. And his interest in you is not because you're clever or you're righteous. It's because he's good and he's full of love.

And what he wants for you is not to give you a scolding, but he wants to blow you away with how good Jesus is. We don't really know what happened to the shepherds and the magi, but man, everything starts with that moment of being amazed by Jesus. And if that's you and you're just here because family made you, or it's Christmas, it's a box you check, or man, this year has been brutal, or this, you just don't know where to go for hope. Jesus is after you. And the first thing he wants is to show you how amazing Jesus is. If that's you, we would love a chance to talk with you and pray with you. I know a lot of stuff is hard, especially if you've grown up kind of around a kind of religion where you had to do a lot of good things to try to earn God's favor. That's not the story we have.

These weren't guys all, you know, the story could have been God comes to the temple workers and the lady who never missed a Sunday, and we'd have gone, we get it. We get it. We saw that one coming. But shepherds and magi, man, there's hope for me and you.

If you're here, you're watching this, and you're already a follower of Jesus, man, Christmas is a great, great chance, a great chance to put on display the love of God in so many ways. One of the best ways will come either tonight or tomorrow, if there's going to be gifts involved in what you do, one of the best ways is to make sure that we don't lead people around us into thinking that they're getting things because they're good. Let them know they're getting things because they're loved. That points to this actual Christmas story. Because we don't have a God who only gives good things to the undeserving, to the deserving. Rather, we have a God who came to give everything to the undeserving. I'd love us to stand together. We're going to sing one last song, and we're going to do, in this moment, let's not do the sentiment thing. Let's actually imagine us. We're going to join the shepherds and the magi. We're going to join them by declaring how amazing Jesus is. Does Jesus look amazing laying in a little outcropping of a cave, a dirty, nasty cave? Does he look amazing? No, he doesn't. But he was. He didn't look amazing hanging on a cross, but he was. This is our chance to join them in declaring how amazing he is. Amen? God bless you guys. Merry Christmas.