

December 24, 2018

What Is Christmas

Luke 2.1-20 (KJV)

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“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) 3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Beth-lehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. 6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, Good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. 18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in

her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

Yesterday was the 194th anniversary of the founding of Brewster Baptist Church; the church was founded on December 23, 1824. We don't look a day over 160. For people my age and older, Christmas is a time when we often think back and remember Christmas past when we were children or when our children were little. There is something about the excitement of children that makes Christmas even more special. The first Christmas with a new baby in the family is always memorable as many of our families are experiencing this year (have folks raise their hand or their cell phone with a picture). If you were to ask these families, they would tell you that preparing for the arrival of a baby is a very important and time-consuming task – and nothing compared to what happens once the baby arrives. As everyone says, *“Having a baby changes your life.”* Having a baby changes your life in countless ways. When Jill and I were first married, we'd say strange things to each other such as, *“So what do you want to do tonight?”* - this phrase, and others like it, vanish into thin air like your breath on a cold December night when you have a baby - only to return many years later. When we have a child the pieces of our life are altered including our priorities, our commitments, our emotions, our work for pay and how we spend our money. All these areas of our lives are rearranged by the coming of a new life. The birth of a baby truly alters relationships.

The coming of a new life not only influences the parents but the wider family and friends as well. Ask any grandparent if the arrival of grandchildren or great grandchildren changes their lives. Ask new parents how the birth of a baby has impacted their lives and their family. Siblings have their own feelings as well; sometimes not quite as enthusiastic as the grandparents. A new life changes us forever. The birth of millions of babies may have little direct influence upon us, however, the birth of a child to us or to someone we love makes all the difference in the world. The same can certainly be said for Mary and Joseph. Their lives were changed forever by becoming parents, but the pending birth of their baby was not important to the Romans who still

required Mary to make a difficult journey while nine months pregnant. The new arrival was only important to the Romans in terms of how the baby impacted their taxes.

The fact that Mary was about to have a child didn't mean the innkeeper, who was overwhelmed by the crowd in town for the census, would take time out of his hectic schedule to help this poor couple to have their baby with all the mess and noise that would create when he had paying customers who wanted a decent night's sleep. The Innkeeper sometimes gets criticized but who among us would want to spend the night in a hotel with a woman giving birth in the next room? Most people don't even want to be near an *already-born* baby on an airplane.

The sentimentality we feel on Christmas Eve may cause us to skip over the parts of the story of Jesus' birth that are not so comfortable. We smile at the nativity scene, but have you ever spent a night in a barn? Or given birth in a barn? The reality is very different from the sentiment of *Away in a Manger*. Maybe it's not just that the inns were full but that Mary and Joseph were forced to take the barn because their family had rejected them. Joseph is in his ancestral home he has to have at least a few relatives or friends of relatives in Bethlehem. Why aren't they staying with them? Rather than being received hospitably by family or friends, perhaps Joseph and Mary have been shunned; family and neighbors declaring their disappointment that Joseph would show up on their doorsteps with his pregnant fiancée.

For the Romans, for the innkeeper, perhaps for the family of Joseph and Mary, and for many people today, the birth of Christ is not the occasion for any special arrangements or preparations. But Jesus is no ordinary baby and his arrival not only changed his parent's lives forever, he impacted the history of the human race.

The message the angels give to the shepherds (Luke 2:10-11) is about the life of Jesus and what it will mean for them, for us, and for every human being. **“Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”** That's an incredible birth announcement. That this message was

given to shepherds, outsiders in every sense of the word, rather than to religious insiders or even to Mary and Joseph, tells us a lot about how the gift of Jesus truly is for everyone. Tonight we celebrate Christ's birth knowing that he grew to be a teacher of great wisdom, a healer of immense compassion, a prophet of justice, a servant leader, the Son of God, our Savior who died for our sake and was raised from death to new life and who promises to be with us always. The mystery of death and life is part of the celebration of Christmas, a celebration that proclaims the victory of life over death. **It's wise to remember that we haven't been promised a life free from sorrow, but one in which joy will have the last word.**

Jesus didn't enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus entered a world of pain and violence, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness and political oppression. Jesus was born an outcast, a homeless person, and his family soon became refugees fleeing to Egypt to escape the bloodshed in their own country. Jesus is the perfect savior for shepherds, outcasts, refugees, and nobodies. That's how the church is described in scripture time and time again - not as the best and the brightest - but those who in their weakness become a sign for the world of the love, grace, wisdom and power of God.

I still watch *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* even though some parts of it aren't aging well. I think the island of misfit toys where all the unusual toys live is a decent picture of the church. The church is not a gathering of people who have it all together, who look and act alike, who have no problems to speak of. The church is a community of people who are broken and needy, who in their weakness trust in the grace of God. This is the kind of church that Jesus the outcast has created. The gospel that acknowledges brokenness, pain, and the tragedy of life is good news for us all. There is hope for all who find this season tinged with despair or pain. Perhaps we mourn the loss of a loved one. Perhaps our lives are full of struggle. Perhaps we despair over the state of our world. The violence, war, bloodshed, death and shattered lives and the struggle for power that never ceases can cause us to become as despondent as Jimmy Stewart's character George Bailey in the film, *It's A Wonderful Life*.

At the heart of that film so many of us watch at Christmas time is the message that each person's life touches many other lives and when that person isn't there it leaves an awful hole. How has your life touched the lives of others in the past year? How have you been a source of comfort, joy, love, or friendship? What will you do to make next year a better one? Each of us has a tremendous capacity for good and the potential to touch many people with God's love. Christmas is a present, not a past. Christmas should not be just a historical date to remember, but a gift to be lived.

When you decide to love those around you, that day is Christmas.

When you take the first step to be at peace with a loved one, that day is Christmas.

When you meet someone who asks for help and you assist them with all your heart, that day is Christmas.

When you take time to talk to someone who is lonely or sad, that day is Christmas.

When you understand that resentment can be transformed by forgiveness, that day is Christmas.

When you let go of something to give to someone who needs it more than you, that day is Christmas.

When you realize that love, service and authentic concern are the best gifts, that day is Christmas.

When you decide to live with hope and resilience rather than surrender to fear, that day is Christmas.

Tonight we thank God for the birth of Jesus who was born because God wants to have a relationship with you. How has the gift of Jesus changed your life? How would your life be different if he hadn't come? How has the arrival of this baby, this Messiah, impacted your priorities, your commitments, your emotions, your attitude, how you do your work, even what work you do, and how you spend your time and your money?

The irony is, there was no room for Jesus to be born in, but he comes so that there might be room for us in God's family of love. Have you any room for Jesus? We all choose whether we will be like the Romans who couldn't have cared less about Jesus being born, or the innkeeper who was so overwhelmed running his inn that he offered a lowly place as an afterthought or like Joseph's relatives or friends who refuse to extend hospitality to the couple in their moment of need. We may be like the shepherds who were so surprised to be told they were included in God's good news that they left what they were doing to welcome Jesus and to acknowledge him. Will we be like expectant parents who make a room in their home and a place in their hearts for the baby who will turn their lives upside down forever? The baby has arrived, what do you intend to do with him?

Agnes M. Pharo asked and answered the question, "What is Christmas?" ***"What is Christmas? It is tenderness for the past, courage for the present, hope for the future. It is a fervent wish that every cup may overflow with blessings rich and eternal, and that every path may lead to peace."***

Nativity Prayer of St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Let Your goodness Lord appear to us, that we made in your image, conform ourselves to it. In our own strength we cannot imitate Your majesty, power, and wonder nor is it fitting for us to try. But Your mercy reaches from the heavens through the clouds to the earth below. You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of eternal love. Caress us with Your tiny hands, embrace us with Your tiny arms and pierce our hearts with Your soft, sweet cries. Amen.

Blessing

A Prayer for Christmas Morning by Robert Louis Stevenson

The day of joy returns, Father in Heaven,

and crowns another year with peace and good will.

Help us rightly to remember the birth of Jesus,

that we may share in the song of the angels,

the gladness of the shepherds, and the worship of the wise men.

Close the doors of hate and open the doors of love all over the world.

Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting.

Deliver us from evil, by the blessing that Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clean hearts.

May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children,

And the Christmas evening bring us to our bed with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus. sake.