

“Unto us is born this day”

Christmas Message 2016

(Isaiah 9:1-7)

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Introduction: There’s no biblical reason for celebrating our Savior’s birth on this particular day (Dec. 25).

- We know it was for cultural and historical reasons that the 4th-century church chose this day to commemorate that amazing high point in human history when God came down personally to stamp our race definitively with the seal of His ownership and redemption. He was declaring us to be His, the ones He came to redeem out of all creation, to dwell with Him in eternity and share His glory (it awaits only our whole-hearted “yes” by faith).
- So even if today is not the exact date, celebrating a specific day serves as a great reminder and powerful witness that the Lord of heaven really was born as a real baby with real birthdate, forever marking our history with the message of His presence, love, and salvation. Today we continue **meditating on the incarnation** – the miracle, the mystery, and the magnitude of our God coming to us as a baby!

1) Theologians have long debated **whether God could have accomplished our salvation some other way**: less painful, less traumatic, less violent. What we fail to understand is that when we human beings chose to live our lives apart from God, our Creator/Sustainer/Savior, we inevitably brought the consequence of pain, trauma, and violence into our world. We have done this to ourselves, we have no one else to blame.

- Turning our back on the Source of life had greater consequences than what we could ever imagine: it meant drudgery, darkness, and death for all of us, individually and collectively, as what would characterize our history. We may see occasional pockets of prosperity, moments of stability, brief flashes of light, but they don’t last. Death eventually catches up with everybody we love! And when I look down into that “bottomless pit,” I realize it’s also the “pit of my own sinfulness.” **Our common rebellion has depths we can never fathom.** Yet God is not a magician or a fairy godmother, but a realist, and therefore His solution to the human problem seeks to tune us in to **HIS reality**, which is glorious! We are stubbornly and foolishly resistant –

so much so that we often prefer fairy tales, games, and legends over the Gospel, or we prefer our own rationalizations over the plain truth of His Word.

- **God's solution**, the only possible solution, would have to be about **His coming personally** to the precise place where our awful dilemma sprang up and took root: in the human heart. So the solution had to be about **risking His own Son** being incarnated, localized, materialized, humanized. Putting "treasure in clay vessels" is always risky business ... because the treasure can be damaged, corrupted, or lost due to the fragility of the clay! So when God put His only Son into a clay vessel, He knew perfectly well the pain, trauma, and violence He'd be subjected to.

2) This is what's so amazing about Isaiah's prophecy! He actually foresaw the incarnation 700 years beforehand!

- King David had longed for it, the prophet Micah had hinted at it, but Isaiah actually saw it coming (with the help of the Holy Spirit): "For unto us a child is born... and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace..." Equally astounding was Isaiah's equally clear view of the passion of our Lord, God's suffering servant (Isa. 53): bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows, overcoming on our behalf, atoning for our sins. It's one of the most stunning **scriptural proofs of the truth of God's revelation**.

- But the magnitude of it was so overwhelming that in the first five centuries of Christian history it took multiple church consultations and councils to actually learn to preach it in terms that protected the biblical truth and still communicated the message relevantly within the culture. More controversy sprang up in the fifth century, again related to **how the divine and human natures could coexist in the same person**. This time it was the prominent archbishop of Constantinople by the name of Nestorius, who insisted that all the human experiences and attributes of Christ were to be assigned to "the man," as a distinct personal subject from God the Word, though united to God the Word from the moment of his conception – in effect making Christ out to be two persons!

- In opposition to this, a monk named Eutyches took his argument to the opposite extreme, asserting that Christ's human nature was in effect swallowed up by His divine nature, giving Him a single nature: that of the Word. In reaction to these views, the church fathers met and hashed through the language three more times, finally in 451 at Chalcedonia, accepting the orthodox formula: "**two natures in one person**" (not accepted by all Christians).

- Archbishop Leo of Rome wrote: "We could not have overcome the author of sin and death, unless he who could neither be contaminated by sin, nor detained by death, had taken upon himself our nature and made it his own. Therefore, with no harm to the natures and substances that were there united in one person, lowliness was assumed by majesty, weakness by power, mortality by eternity, and in order to pay the debt of our condition, the unchangeable nature was united to the changeable one ... He who could not be enclosed in space, willed to be enclosed; continuing to be before all time, he began to exist in time.... Thus, God in the entire and perfect nature of very man was born very God, complete in what was His, complete in what was ours." This union between the two natures (the "hypostatic union") was so complete that the attributes of one could be assigned to the other: "In this way, the man Jesus Christ is the Creator of the world, and God is born of a woman in the stable of Bethlehem" (*Dogmatic epistle*).

- Their reflections can't compare with Isaiah's, but something they did understand of the **awesomeness of this Truth** that moved them to write volumes about it. Of course, maybe that was part of the problem: too much theory and not enough practice. It can happen to us too, can't it?

3) As we try to reconcile all the violence and tragedies of our day with the birth of the Prince of Peace, we may be inclined to question **what difference His coming has actually made** as we theorize about all the evil in the world.

- Terrorists attack what we hold most dear: this past week, a Berlin Christmas market was attacked by a terrorist in a truck, killing 12, injuring 53. Another terrorist plot planning a major attack on the heart of Melbourne, Australia, was also discovered and foiled (four arrests have been made). So the Christmas holidays have become another opportunity for terrorists because they know how special these days are to those in the West. If we're not safe at Christmas, we won't be safe any time of year. That could put a damper on your holiday spirit!

- So in this world we too may be casualties of the violence. Are we OK with that? Well, not really, but what's the alternative? There is NO good alternative. So someone may ask, "Why can't God just make our world safe?" A more relevant question would be, "Who made it so unsafe?" If God overrides all our bad decisions, what happens to our responsibility? So we do the best we can to put safety measures in place, trying to "secure" our lives in this world (financially, politically, personally, etc.). God would not have us unduly expose ourselves to needless danger, but neither does He want us to obsess over these things. He wants us to understand that in this world we WILL have affliction, tribulation, trials and suffering (Jn. 16:33), because we have set in motion something that transcends us, and it's evil (Scripture refers to this transcendent dimension of evil in terms of "principalities and powers"). It's why **Jesus Christ is our only real safety**, our only real Refuge, our only authentic Hope.

- Catholic priest and professor Henri Nouwen, in his *Return of the Prodigal*, admitted his "resistance to living a joyful life," simply because he became "accustomed to living with sadness," and thereby "lost the eyes to see the joy and the ears to hear the gladness" that is ours in God. Maybe many of us feel that way sometimes as we contemplate all the bad news. Is melancholy the only proper state of mind for a Christian?

- C. S. Lewis (in *The Great Divorce*) will have none of that! He says it's like saying that "none in heaven should be happy if souls are perishing in hell." Why should "the loveless and self-imprisoned be allowed to blackmail the universe"? Till they consent to be happy (on their own terms), shall no one else taste joy? Should theirs be the final power and should Hell be able to veto Heaven? No way! Jesus didn't come to earth to explain evil and suffering, but to share our burdens and shoulder the consequences. He came precisely *because the world isn't safe, knowing he would become a victim* of our violence. Falsely arrested, accused, tortured, executed in the vilest manner possible – He did all of that to give this world's fallen inhabitants an opportunity to be forgiven and restored by God's grace. Hebrews 12 says, "For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross." The night before He was crucified, He spoke to His disciples about His joy, which couldn't be canceled in the face of tragedy.

4) Tragedy is no respecter of persons or seasons – we have a number of people in our congregation who have lost loved ones at this season, and several others dealing with loved ones who've had a stroke or diagnosis of cancer.

- In late November, a forest fire spread through eastern Tennessee, destroying thousands of acres of forest, and over 1,700 buildings in the town of Gatlinburg, including several Baptist churches. Thousands had to flee their homes (many lost everything); 14 people were killed and hundreds injured. Among the dead were the wife and two young daughters of Michael Reed. On Dec. 7, two juveniles were arrested on charges of arson.
- Last week, Reed published an open letter on his Facebook page; he had no idea it would go viral, saying he didn't post the letter for recognition, but just to get those feelings off his chest: "To the two teenagers who started the wildfires ... People stop me on the streets every day and ask me the same question: 'What can we do for you?' My answer has been the same every time: Love those closest to you a little stronger. Hold them a little tighter. Don't take a single moment for granted. As I learned of your arrests last week I sat in silence for a very long time. You may be too young to understand this, but even through this tragedy I can feel God with me and my son." Reed went on to express his sincere forgiveness to the youth because of Christ's forgiveness in his own life, promising to pray for them and their families every day.
- The point of Christmas is that **the bad news cannot outweigh the good!** No matter what sorrow or challenge you're facing this Christmas, the Child born in Bethlehem faced much more, and He overcame against the worst possible odds. He carried more affliction, faced more opposition, bore more sorrows and griefs, making Himself vulnerable to the onslaught of all our sins and their consequences, and He triumphed on our behalf, in our favor, for our sakes, in spite of all we've done! So whatever makes you sad this Christmas, the joy of this Good News is more powerful. In the face of our awful difficulties, all our violence, all the failures, God "did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all..." (Rom. 8:32). That's what we celebrate at Christmas!
- It's not about sweet sentiments or nostalgia, not a momentary respite from the drudgery and violence, but a real **Refuge for all us refugees**, a great Fortress for all us defenseless ones, a merciful Redeemer for all us slaves, a powerful Liberator for all us prisoners, a gracious Savior for all us sinners – a Wonderful Counselor for all our senseless stupidities, a Mighty God against all our idolatries, an Everlasting Father for all us rebellious orphans, a Prince of Peace for all us victims of war. "O come, let us adore Him!"