

Celebrate Christmas, part 1

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Preacher: Mike Scrivani

[0 : 00] So today we take a break from our study in John, and we'll pick that back up in January, to focus this month on the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

So we'll be looking through the Gospel of Luke primarily for that, and the opening chapters there.

So would you please stand with me, and we will read Luke chapter 1, verse 26 through 38.

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great, and he will be called the Son of God the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

[1 : 49] Therefore, the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and is in the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.

And the angel departed from her. And God, I had a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated? I had a very good friend who grew up across the street from me.

And if you remember, we were in elementary school, and you remember being in elementary school. You were so excited for Christmas time, especially because it meant that you got an extended break from school.

And so, I remember the two of us in my room, playing and talking, and going through all the plans that we had with our family. All the traditions that we did at Christmas time.

[2 : 59] And one of the traditions that I shared with him was that my family and I, that we would go to Christmas on Christmas Eve, in the evening. And he thought that was strange. He had never gone to church.

And so, he, but he knew that I did. He knew that I went with my family on Sundays. And so, he was perplexed because Christmas Eve wasn't on a Sunday that year.

And he wondered, why in the world would we go to church when it wasn't Sunday? And so, I proceeded to tell him, well, we go because Christmas is when we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

And he was even more confused. And he didn't believe what I had to say at that point in time. He had to go home. He left my house and went to his home and verified with his mother that all that I had said to him was true.

I couldn't believe that all this time, one of my very best friends didn't know why Christmas was celebrated.

[4 : 01] He thought it was all about the other things. Santa Claus, Rudolph, Frosty, Christmas trees, Christmas lights, Christmas presents, Christmas music, Christmas movies, Christmas cookies, Christmas dinners.

And all the other things that have become associated with the holiday. And as I think back on it now, I can't really blame him.

I mean, how could anyone know these days about why we celebrate Christmas unless you've been in church and been told and had that explained to you, the reason for the season?

There are so many things associated with Christmas that the birth of Christ has been virtually forgotten by our society. Many celebrate Christmas without acknowledging the birth of Christ at all.

There's even a battle for Christians during this time of year to be reminded of the Savior that we have to celebrate as we celebrate Christmas.

[5 : 05] Now, I don't want you to misunderstand me in thinking that I'm some kind of a Christmas scrooge who's bahumbugging everything.

That's not me at all. I enjoy Christmas. I look forward to this time of year. We have two Christmas trees in our house. I let my wife put them up before Thanksgiving, breaking one of my old traditions, because at this age, I'm enjoying it even more.

As a father with young children who I know look so forward to it as much as I did when I was their age. However, I think we all know that we can be caught up, so caught up, with all these other things that surround Christmas that we forget to reflect upon the profound reality that God sent His only Son to die for our sins and give us eternal life.

So for the next few weeks, our focus will be on why it is so important that we as Christians celebrate Christmas and do so without taking Christ out of it.

My hope and my prayer is that these messages will be used by the Lord to keep us focused on Christ during Christmas. That we would stand in awe and wonder over the incarnation of our Lord and Savior.

[6 : 32] We'll do that by spending our time in the Gospel of Luke in this birth narrative of Jesus Christ. John MacArthur had to say of this that there is nothing man-made about the Christmas story.

It is the most miraculous, compelling narrative in history, as the Holy Spirit related the dramatic story of Jesus Christ's birth. Those who truly celebrate Christmas do so by remembering the profound reality that God sent His only Son to die for the sins of all who put their faith in Him. And so the main idea for this morning's message is this. In celebrating Christmas, I want us to read the Bible, of why we celebrate Christmas.

Of why it's so important that of all people in this world, that Christians be the one who celebrate Christmas the most.

And so there's some things that we need to understand about Christmas. First of all, we need to understand or be reminded that Christmas is about hope. It's about hope.

[8 : 06] There was not much to be hopeful about in Judea during the period leading up to the birth of our Savior. Herod the Great had taken control of the throne of Israel, having been placed there by the powerful and domineering Romans.

And then once on that throne, he kept a stranglehold on it. He called himself the King of the Jews, though he wasn't really a Jew. And he guarded that stolen title ruthlessly, going so far as to put his own sons to death when he perceived that they might be a threat to his power.

Macrobius, a 5th century historian, recorded this. He said, When Caesar Augustus heard that Herod, king of the Jews, had ordered boys in Syria under the age of 2 years old to be put to death, and that the king's son was among those killed, he said, I'd rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son. The comment made by Caesar Augustus reflected the sad irony of Israel's condition. Herod wasn't really a Jew, but he pretended to be one. And so for appearance's sake, he eliminated pork from his diet like any good law-abiding Jew would have.

However, there wasn't anything good or law-abiding about this man. Herod was a scandalous, murderous coward. He built a magnificent temple for God, but gave the administration of it over to one corrupt high priest after another.

[9 : 44] He taxed the Jews through the temple in keeping with Old Testament laws. Then he would turn around and use those finances to build temples and statues idolizing gods of other foreign religions.

In the midst of all of this, out in this little podunk population 300 town of Nazareth, a young woman, probably about 15 years old, 12 to 15 years old, received an angelic messenger with news that would shake the world.

It was a message of great hope. A message of great hope that was for all people, that a new king would soon be born.

Tomorrow, we celebrate the life of a good friend in Barbara Helmer.

And as I talked to the family, and I'll talk to them again today, the one thing they wanted to stress to me is that tomorrow's sermon, tomorrow's message, tomorrow's service, is to be a service of celebration.

[11 : 04] That we are not mourning Barbara's death, but we are celebrating her life. The life she lived here, and the life that she is living now, eternally, with our Lord.

This is a hope that Christians possess. A hope that even when death approaches, we understand that to die is gain because our king was born to a humble virgin in a lowly manger.

That he reigns and that he rules eternally. That he is the king of kings. That he is the Lord of lords. His cross gives us hope that sin has been vanquished, and his empty tomb gives us hope that death has been forever defeated.

We are free. We live. There is no power capable of removing us from his strong grip. Nothing in this world can take away the hope that Christians have in Christ.

Christmas is about hope. Christmas is about selflessness. To everyone else, Mary would have not seemed like much.

[12 : 21] Just another one of those Nazarene peasants living out in the boonies, working to scratch out a living with her family. Not much to see there. In fact, Nathaniel's response to Philip after Philip had reported to him that they believed that they had found the Messiah and that it was Jesus from Nazareth characterized the attitude that most Jews had about that place.

Remember, he said, can anything good come out of Nazareth? That place is a dump. Those people are nobodies.

In verse 27, we learn that this young woman whose name was Mary was betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph. What does that mean to be betrothed?

Well, the Jews of the first century Palestine saw marriage as a joining, really, together of two families. As in many cultures, both past and present, first century Hebrew parents arranged the marriages of their sons and of their daughters.

According to the rabbinic law, those could take place sometime after the age of consent, which was 12 for girls and 13 for boys. Imagine looking at our youth group and our teenagers and imagine them being married or engaged, maybe even having children of their own.

[13 : 43] Once the marriage had been arranged, the fathers had a legal contract that was prepared. The contract would be read during the marriage ceremony. Vows were made, tokens were exchanged, and the families then celebrated together.

And at the conclusion of that ceremony, the boy and the girl would enter into what they referred to as the betrothal period, which could last no less than one month, but usually lasted an entire year. During the betrothal period, the couple was viewed in the community as being husband and wife in every respect, except for the fact that they were to continue to live with their respective families and refrain from consummating the marriage.

several reasons were given for this. First of all, it gave the groom time to prepare the couple's new home, which usually was in addition to his parents' house.

Second, it gave the bride time to complete several purification rituals to demonstrate that she was, in fact, a virgin. And then third, it gave the couple time to get to know one another.

[14 : 56] Because they may not have known each other very well, if at all, before this contract was drawn up between their fathers. To end the betrothal period required an official divorce decree, and if either of them engaged in relations with someone else during the betrothal period, it was considered adultery, which could carry the penalty of death by stoning.

When the bride had completed her purification, and when the groom had made their new home ready, the groom and his wedding party would then arrive at the bride's house. The groom would call for his bride to join him, and the wedding party would lift the couple into the air, and they would carry them to their new home.

This was what they called the home taking. Once there, the families and guests would celebrate the nuptials for as many as seven days. It's a long wedding.

So why am I telling you all of this? Well, because it was during this period, during this betrothal period between the vows that had been given and before they were celebrating the home taking ceremony, it was during this time, in between these two periods, that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb.

Verses 26 and 27, again, in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

[16 : 34] Life was about to become very complicated for this very young couple. Again, Mary being somewhere between the ages of 12 and 15, Joseph being at least maybe at the age of 18, perhaps older than that, we don't know for sure, but they were young people.

And these two young people were about to have their lives divinely interrupted. This was not something that they asked for, but God in His sovereignty chose them for this.

And Mary gets the news first. Greetings, the angel says, O favored one, the Lord is with you. God chose Mary to show her His favor because God is God, and God can do whatever He wants. In verse 29, it says, but she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. Now, that word translated discern in my Bible might be translated differently in yours.

Some translate it as wonder in the NIV, or in the New American Standard, they translate it as pondering. King James Version translates it as cast in her mind.

[17 : 55] In the Greek, that term was an accounting term. It was used to take stock of everything, used to weigh options and figures by what the data that had been collected was saying.

So what's Mary doing here? Well, she's rationalizing. She's thinking. She's having healthy doubts about what she's experiencing.

In verse 34, Gabriel tells her that she will conceive the Son of God. And there, Mary expresses healthy doubt about this when she says, how will this be since I'm a virgin?

And this is interesting to me because look over at Luke 1, verse 18. There, it's the same angel, Gabriel, and he's telling Zachariah, the priest, that his wife, Elizabeth, who was unable to have children and was now beyond the age of giving birth, was to bear a child, that that child would be John the Baptist, that he would be the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

And so when Zachariah hears this, this amazing news, he responds by saying, how shall I know this? For I'm an old man and my wife is advanced in years.

[19 : 26] Then Gabriel gets a little impatient with him. And he ends up silencing him, taking away his ability to speak until after the child is born.

So what's the deal here? Right? You wonder? Why was Gabriel so grumpy towards Zachariah and so patient with Mary?

Well, maybe Gabriel appeared to Zachariah on a Monday before he had had any coffee and he was angry. And maybe he appeared to Mary on a Friday, right?

That was the last thing he had to do before he punched the clock for the weekend. Obviously, that's not the case. But it is interesting. And I think it's interesting because the Bible sees doubt in different ways.

Mary here is expressing a healthy dubiousness and then circumspect surrender. one form of doubting seeks answers.

[20 : 35] That's what we call healthy dubiousness. Mary wanted answers. It wasn't that she doubted the message. She just wondered how it could be. She had questions that she wanted answered.

But the other form of doubting is closed-minded and it refuses to seek any answers. Church is not the place to shut off your brain.

church should be a place where we feel that we can express the questions that we have without being afraid. Without receiving dirty looks from other people in the church.

So use your mind when you are in church, please. Use it when you read the Bible. Think. Rationalize.

Seek answers to your healthy doubts. Mary wasn't certain how this could be, but that didn't mean that she refused to believe that it could be so. So Gabriel explains to her.

[21 : 40] He has answers. The Holy Spirit, he says, will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God.

And behold, your relative in her old age has also conceived a son and is in the sixth month with her who was called barren for nothing will be impossible with God.

As confusing and as terrifying this encounter would have been for Mary, she would not have missed the significance of Gabriel's words, of his instruction of how this would be.

She would have known Scripture, she would have known for ages that prophets had foretold that a king would come, a king who was larger than life, that he would come and he would claim the throne, that he would destroy Israel's enemies and that he would inaugurate an unprecedented time

of peace and prosperity, that ultimately this king would rule over the entire world.

And every Jew anticipated the arrival of this Messiah. Messiah. And here, Mary learns that she would be his mother.

[22 : 56] Mary also would have understood how this could happen based upon the imagery that Gabriel used in telling her how she would conceive the Son of God. After Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, the Lord directed him to construct a tabernacle, if you remember.

It was a portable house, a portable tent, a place of worship. When it was completed, when it was erected, God overshadowed that tent, which the people saw as an eerie glow of a cloud would form.

And then, God would use this imagery to help Gabriel, or Gabriel would use this imagery, I should say, to demonstrate how in the same way as God's presence would overshadow and fill that place of worship, so the Holy Spirit's presence would overshadow Mary and fill her womb with God's Son. While the child would be human in every respect, he would not have a human father. His father would be, quite literally, God Himself.

What a great request to place before this very young woman. But look at Mary's response in verse 38.

[24 : 17] She says, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And so here we see Mary's expression of an attitude of circumspect surrender.

This is what that means. She understood what Gabriel was telling her. Gabriel wasn't going to go around. She understood this too, that Gabriel wasn't going to go from house to house in her community and tell them what had just happened to Mary or what was going to happen to Mary. Do we understand that? They were all in the dark. They had no idea that this encounter had taken place. Mary knew how she'd then be viewed by her family.

how she'd be viewed by those in her community. There would be whispering. There would be rude comments. There would be dirty looks. She would be seen as the bearer of an illegitimate child. They wouldn't understand. But she didn't care. She didn't care for man's approval. Instead, she surrendered to God's will for her.

[25 : 27] She says, I'm your bond slave. That describes a particular kind of servitude common throughout world history. The term refers to someone who voluntarily sells himself or herself into slavery.

She was all in. You know, as I was thinking through this passage this week and also writing my final paper for my class, which dealt with, in part, the issue with young people leaving the church once they enter into adulthood, I couldn't help but think about the difference back then and what we see today in our church right now.

These were young people, 12 to 15 years old. Joseph maybe around 18. And I read an interesting stat, a sad stat, that in the SBC today, which our church belongs to that denomination, when children and youth who have grown up during the 2000s who are now adults, that only 42% of them are still in the church.

42%. And that's good compared to other denominations in our nation. And I just thought, we've got to be doing something wrong here.

Obviously, we are doing something wrong here. And maybe it is that we don't view young people the way that God views young people. He had an important task for them and he didn't think that they were too weak or too immature to carry it out.

[27 : 16] And I know that there's a difference between their culture then and our culture now, but I couldn't help but think that the church is not doing a good enough job in thanking God and taking the responsibility that God has given us to train them, to teach them, to equip them, to care about them, to want to be a part of their lives.

An interesting stat in that poll as well, in that study as well, was that for those young people during that same time who had developed a close relationship with somebody inside the church older than them, sometimes much older than them, who was not their mother or father, that the chances of them still staying in the church into adulthood doubled.

Interesting. And we'll talk about that in January. But here I hope that we see that Christmas is about selflessness.

Mary was willing to give whatever was required in obedience to the Lord in His command. In the church, as in life, Christians should be selfless.

Mary certainly was. Again, unconcerned for what God's calling meant for her, but willing to do whatever He asked. In the same way, Christ, in a greater way, drank the cup of God's wrath on the cross for sins that He did not commit.

[28 : 55] And then He calls us who follow Him to bear our own cross. We serve a selfless God, and so we should live selflessly, and when we do, we mirror Him.

Who can you reach out to this Christmas in selflessness? Mary viewed herself as God's servant and was willing to humbly submit to whatever He asked.

And may it be the case with every one of us as well. Third, we see that Christmas is about grace. Luke and Matthew's Gospels report two subsequent events that happened after Mary received this message.

Luke tells us that Mary went in haste to the hill country to visit Elizabeth in verse 39. And Matthew describes Joseph's struggle to accept Mary's story. So at some point in time, Joseph finds out that his betrothed is pregnant with a child conceived by the Holy Spirit, and understandably, he seems to be struggling with that news.

Matthew 1.19 says, And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

[30 : 16] So again, according to Jewish law, Joseph had the right to demand the public stoning of Mary. No angel had appeared to him yet.

And so he had every reason to believe that Mary had been unfaithful to him. Imagine that. The woman that you love telling you that she's pregnant and that God has done it.

How would you respond? You're crazy. You've lost your mind. Would you be willing to marry such an unfaithful woman who clung to such an outlandish story?

Someone should place her in a mental institution, you would think. But Joseph planned to deal with her mercifully. He would pursue a quiet divorce.

He would get on with his life. She would remain with her family who would hopefully care for Mary and the child. It seemed to him like a logical, wise, and kind decision.

[31 : 27] Then in Matthew 1, 20-23, we see that as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel. This visit gave Joseph the personal peace that he needed to move forward with their marriage plans.

While the rabbinical law permitted a husband to divorce his wife during the betrothal period, if she conceived a child by another, it strictly forbade a husband from ending the marriage during the betrothal period, if he was the father of the child conceived.

Therefore, for Joseph to bring his pregnant woman, his pregnant wife, home as his wife was to admit that the child that she bore was his, at least in the eyes of society.

[32 : 49] In other words, Joseph voluntarily subjected himself to any misunderstanding that the community would have surrounding himself and Mary's relationship and the child that she bore.

Joseph, like Mary, understood the risks. He counted the cost. He set aside his own rights and willingly accepted his role in God's great redemptive design.

Joseph and Mary model for us the kind of selfless grace that Christmas is about. Christmas is about grace. The grace that Joseph showed Mary. The grace that God has shown to us.

By definition, grace is undeserved favor. Maybe there is someone in your life right now who has wronged you. They've done something to you or they've said something about you that was not right.

What a great time to demonstrate grace to them by reaching out to them and forgiving them even if they don't seek it.

[33 : 56] Is that not what God has done for us? And while we were yet sinners, Christ died for our sins by his grace? Fourth, Christmas is about love.

Christmas is about a God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whomever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

And we've been in that verse for several weeks and we've basked in the amazing love of God. The understanding that Christianity is unlike any other major religion of the world.

And one of the major ways that it is different is that we serve a God whom we can know personally whom we have a relationship with. No other religion can claim such a thing.

Philippians 2 5-8 we get a demonstration of what this God is like. Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant.

[35 : 07] Being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. I want you to think about this.

Think about the closest most personal relationships that you have in life right now. No doubt those relationships are close because at some point in time and continually so you've risked being vulnerable with that other person.

You've risked allowing them to get to know the real you. Your real concerns and fears and doubts.

The way that you really think about things. Think how vulnerable our Lord made himself to us.

And I would say the closer those relationships are the more vulnerable you've been able to be. How did Jesus express that vulnerability with us?

[36 : 21] Well in the incarnation becoming a man emptying himself taking on the flesh becoming vulnerable to the point where it could be possible for us to hurt him.

and we did. Why did he do it? Well we'll get into that in greater detail next week but I'll conclude with my last point and answer to that question and that is that we celebrate Christmas because Christmas is about the gospel.

Why did God send his son? because he loves sinners. And Jesus willingly died in our place bearing the wrath of God for our sins and he died.

And for three days he was in the tomb and then he arose from the dead as proof that he is the son of God as proof that God has accepted his sacrifice in place of sinners as evidence that this life is not all there is to life giving us eternal life that begins at the moment of salvation and lasts forever.

We celebrate this at Christmas. So what do we do with this message? Well at least two things. One, model the giver. Who is the giver?

[38 : 05] Well it's God. Demonstrate his goodness during this time of year. Be loving. Be gracious.

Be forgiving. Be selfless. Model the giver. Secondly, model the receiver. demonstrate Mary's attitude towards hearing this great news that God had for her.

She accepted this role with gladness. Like Jesus did, he was willing to receive our sins to himself.

Receiving the cross. Receiving the nails. dying in our place. So this Christmas, let's also model the receiver again by being loving and gracious and merciful especially to those who don't deserve it. the who who the! the! the!