

What Is Christmas About?

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[0 : 00] I invite you to take your Bible. If you didn't bring a Bible, there's one in the pews, and you're welcome to use that.

And turn into the Gospel of Luke chapter 1, verses 26 through 38 will be the text of this morning's sermon.

Luke chapter 1, verses 26 through 38, and will you please stand as we honor the reading of God's Word together. In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of 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. And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, Do not fear, 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 call his name Jesus.

[1 : 26] He will be great and will be called the Son of 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.

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 this is 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. May God add a blessing to the reading of his word, and will you please be seated. Amen. My best friend growing up lived across the street from me.

[2 : 34] And he and his family, in the early part of our friendship, did not attend church. And I'll never forget a time when we were probably, I don't know the age that you are, in second or third grade.

Around that time, we were together. It was around this time of year. We were anticipating Christmas. We were talking about the things that we had on our Christmas lists and comparing with one another.

And we were talking about all the things that we were going to do, how we were going to spend Christmas and Christmas Eve with our families. And I remember that as I was explaining to him that in my house on Christmas Eve we were going to go to church, he had this really confused and perplexed look on his face.

Because he knew that we went to church, but he knew that we went to church on Sunday. And this particular year, Christmas Eve, was not on a Sunday. And so he wondered why we would go to church when it wasn't Sunday.

And then that confused me because then I was like, well, we're going because Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth. And he was confused by that.

[3 : 45] He didn't know that that's what Christmas was about. He thought that Christmas was all about the other stuff. That Christmas was about Christmas trees and Christmas music and all the things that associated with Christmas.

Santa Claus and Rudolph, you name it. But he couldn't understand why we would go to church on Christmas Eve. He didn't know what Christmas was about. He thought it was about all the other stuff.

And I couldn't believe that my friend didn't know why we celebrated Christmas. Again, he thought it was about Santa Claus, Rudolph, Frosty, Christmas trees, Christmas lights, Christmas presents, Christmas music, Christmas movies, Christmas cookies, Christmas dinners.

And all the other things, all the other stuff that gets associated with Christmas. And thinking back on it now, I can't really blame him.

I mean, how could you know these days with so much that goes on around Christmas? How could anybody know the reason for the season unless somebody explains it to them?

[4 : 55] Because Christmas has become so much about the other stuff other than Jesus Christ.

And again, there is so much stuff that is associated with Christmas that the birth of Christ has been pushed to the background.

And many celebrate Christmas without acknowledging the fact that Jesus was born. That Jesus came. That Jesus came to save us. They don't understand that that's what Christmas is about.

Or maybe they do understand that, you know, well, maybe it started out being celebrated that way.

But that's certainly not why I celebrate it. That's certainly not what Christmas is about to me, people might say.

And so while Christmas is a widely celebrated holiday, being celebrated by more people than any other holiday throughout the world, I think that we can agree that it's also the most widely understood holiday of them all.

And sadly, many Christians even have gotten lost in the stuff associated with Christmas. And they tend to pay more attention to those things, to that stuff, rather than the Savior who it's truly all about.

[6 : 13] Now, I don't want you to misunderstand me. I don't want you to think, well, Pastor Mike is just a Grinch. You know, he just doesn't like Christmas. Because that's not true. You come to my house, and not only do we have one Christmas tree, but we have two Christmas trees, right?

We've got the lights, and I like the lights, I just don't like putting up the lights. But we have all the stuff. And I enjoy that stuff. So I don't want you to think that I'm saying that you should go home from the service and take it all down.

That's not at all the point that I'm trying to make. Just that sometimes, oftentimes, during this time of year, we forget about why we celebrate Christmas. And we get so distracted by all that other stuff that it takes our awe off of the fact that God came to us.

Emmanuel, God with us. It's an amazing, awesome thing. And so today and next Sunday, my hope and my prayer is that these messages will be used by the Lord to keep our focus on Christ during Christmas.

So that we will stand in awe and wonder of the incarnation of our Lord and Savior. John MacArthur said, There is nothing man-made about the Christmas story.

[7 : 36] It is the most miraculous, compelling narrative in history, as the Holy Spirit related the dramatic story of Jesus' birth. Those who truly celebrate Christmas do so by remembering the profound reality that God sent His only begotten Son to die for the sins of all who had put their faith in Him.

And so Christmas isn't about the stuff. So if it's not about the stuff, then what is it about? Well, first of all, I think we see from this story, from this passage of Scripture, that Christmas is about hope. Christmas is about hope. And here's the thing. There wasn't much to be hopeful for in Judea during the time or the period of time leading up to Jesus' birth.

There wasn't much for these people to be hopeful about. Here's the thing.

Going so far as to put to death even His own flesh and blood, His own children, in order to keep His power if they posed a political threat to Him.

[9 : 12] This man was evil. Why is that?

Why is that?

Well, His comments, Caesar's comments, reflected the sad irony of Israel's condition. Herod wasn't, again, really wasn't a Jew, but he pretended to be one.

And so for appearance's sake, he eliminated pork from his diet so that he could appear to be a good, law-abiding Jew. Jew, excuse me. However, there wasn't anything good or law-abiding about this man.

Herod was scandalous. Herod was murderous. Herod was a coward. And he was this, these people's king.

[10:14] Herod taxed the Jews through the temple. In keeping with the Old Testament law, then he would use that money to build cities where they would build temples dedicated to Roman Caesars and to Roman deities for their worship.

This man was a coward. This man was a murderer. This man was a hypocrite. And in the midst of all of this going on, all these reasons to be without hope, out in this little podunk town, population 300, city of Nazareth, a young woman, probably around 15 years old, receives a messenger with news that would shake the world, with news that would bring hope to the hopeless.

So Christmas is about hope. Christmas is also about selflessness. Christmas. To everyone else, this girl would have seemed like nothing much.

Just another one of those Nazarene peasants living out in the middle of nowhere, out in the boonies, just trying to work with her family to scratch together a living. There wasn't much to see out there.

If you remember Nathaniel's response to Philip, when Philip came to him with the news that, hey, we think we found the Messiah and it's Jesus of Nazareth. Remember what Nathaniel said? Nazareth. Nazareth.

[11:50] Can anything good come out of that place? That was the attitude towards this city and towards those people. There's nothing good that could come from a place like that.

That place is a dump and those people are trash, is the attitude that they had towards the Nazarenes. But yet here is Mary, this 15-year-old, who is betrothed to Joseph.

Now what does that mean? To be betrothed to someone? Well, the Jews of the first century Palestine, they saw marriage as a joining of two families.

And that is the case in many cultures even today, both in the past, in the present, that marriages are arranged. And so this marriage was arranged.

And according to rabbinic law, this could take place sometime after the age of consent, which for a girl would have been 12 years old and for the boy as young as 13.

[12:49] Once the marriage had been arranged, then the fathers drew up a legal contract. They had that prepared and then they read that contract during the marriage ceremony.

And then the vows were exchanged and tokens of promise were exchanged. And the families then celebrated together. And then at the conclusion of that ceremony, the boy and the girl would enter into what they called the betrothal period, which could last for no less than one month, but usually lasted for a year.

So after all of that, they still had to enter into this time of betrothal. And during that period, the couple was viewed by their community, by their neighbors as being husband and wife in every respect except for the fact that they continued to live apart from one another with their families. And they refrained from consummating the marriage. There are several reasons for why the Jews did this. First, it gave the groom time to prepare the couple's new home, which typically was an addition to his parents' house.

Secondly, it gave the bride time to complete several purification rituals to demonstrate that she truly was a virgin. And then thirdly, it gave the couple time to know one another. Right?

[14:11] They didn't expect that, Jewish fathers didn't expect that they'd just have their daughter one day and the next day they'd completely give them over to somebody else for their care and responsibility. Apart from her having any really idea what kind of family she was getting into.

So it gave them a time to get to know one another. And then at the end of the betrothal period, well, to end the betrothal period, excuse me, an official divorce decree would have to be made either by either of them if they had engaged with relations with someone else.

So if you wanted to end the betrothal, you could do so if one of the betrothed cheated on the other. That was one way where you could get a divorce. And if that was the case, the penalty for such a thing was death by stoning.

They'd throw rocks at you until you died. So why am I telling you all of this? Well, it was during this time, the betrothal period, between the vows and the home taking.

At the end of the betrothal period, the groom would come to the house of his bride with his wedding party and they would call her out and they would carry them back to his home and they would celebrate for about seven days together.

[15:29] And it was during the time after they had taken these vows and after the home taking that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb. It says there in verses 26 and 27, 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. And so life was about to become very complicated for this very young couple.

These two teenagers were about to have their lives divinely interrupted. They didn't ask for this, but God in his sovereignty chose them for this.

And so Mary gets the news first. In verse 28, Gabriel addresses her, Greeting, O favored one, the Lord is with you. Again, God chose Mary to show her his favor.

Why? Because God is God. God will do what God will do. And he showed favor upon this woman. In verse 29, But she was greatly troubled, it says, at the saying, And she tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

[16:51] In your Bibles, I read to you the ESV in that word, Diatirasso in the Greek is translated as discern. If you have the NIV, it's translated as wonder.

If you have the New American Standard, it's pondering. If you have the King James Version, it's cast in her mind is how they interpret that. And so what this word was, it was a Greek word.

It was an accounting term. And so it means taking stock of everything. Weighing the options.

Figuring out the data that has been given to you.

And so what do we see here with Mary? She's heard this amazing news, and what she's doing is she's rationalizing it. She's thinking it over. She doesn't doubt that the angel's message is true, but she's trying to figure out how it can be true.

She's experiencing, she's having healthy doubts about what she is experiencing. In verse 34, after Gabriel tells her that she will conceive the Son of God, Mary expresses healthy doubts again when she says, How will this be?

[18:04] How can this be? Since I am a virgin. And I think this is very interesting to me. Because look over at Luke chapter 1, we're there. Look over at verse 18.

Same angel. Different person. And Zechariah said to the angel, right after he heard this news, that his wife would conceive that she was barren, that she was old and he was old.

That this same angel, Gabriel, comes and tells him that he is going to have a son. And his son will be the forerunner for the Messiah. And he says to Gabriel, So what's the difference here?

Same angel. Gabriel, similar messages. Different people. And it seems like they have a similar response, right? So we could be tempted to believe, well, what's Gabriel's problem?

Did he appear to Zechariah on a Monday and maybe he was grouchy? And he didn't like Zechariah's answer. Well, you know what? Be quiet. And did he just, you know, see Mary on a Friday and maybe he was just in a better mood?

[19:34] Could that be the case? No, it's not the case. And I thought this was interesting and so I wanted to share it with you. And it comes from Timothy Keller. He says that Mary here is expressing healthy dubiousness and circumspect surrender.

Healthy dubiousness and circumspect surrender. What does that mean? Well, the Bible sees doubt in two different ways. One form of doubting seeks answers.

That's what we call healthy dubiousness. The other form of doubting is closed-minded and it refuses to seek answers because it refuses to believe.

And so this is what I want to say to us as we come to that verse is this. Church is not a place for you to shut your brain off.

Church is not a place where you forget or throw away your ability to rationalize and to think and to use your intelligence. It's the opposite of that.

[20:39] Church is a place where you should have your questions asked and seek to have your questions answered. It is not a place where you should be afraid to ask the questions that you're wrestling with or the struggles that you have.

Church is a place where you should be able to feel that you can express those healthy doubts because you are seeking to find an answer. And so when you come to church, use your mind.

Please, use your mind. Use it when you read your Bible. Think. Rationalize. Seek answers to your healthy doubts, your questions.

Mary wasn't certain how this could be. But that didn't mean that she refused to believe it. She didn't refuse to believe that it could be so.

And so she gets an explanation. Gabriel says in verses 35 and 37 how the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, he says. Therefore, the child to be born with you will be called Holy, the Son of God.

[21 : 48] And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. And so as terrifying and as confusing this encounter would have been for Mary, she would not have missed the significance of Gabriel's message to her.

For ages, prophets had foretold the coming of a king who would be larger than life. He would claim the throne.

He would destroy Israel's enemies. He would inaugurate an unprecedented time of peace and prosperity. And ultimately he would rule over the entire earth.

And every Jew anticipated the coming of the Messiah. And Mary learned that she would be his mother.

Wow. Mary also understood how this could happen based upon the imagery that Gabriel used. If you remember, after Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, the Lord directed him to construct a tabernacle.

[23 : 02] Which gave the blueprints for what eventually would become the temple. It was a portable house of worship. And when it was completed, the Bible says that God would overshadow that tent.

Which the people saw as an eerie glow in the form of a cloud. And this is the imagery that Gabriel is using. When he says to Mary, the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

And he's explaining that God's spiritual presence would miraculously conceive a male child in her womb. And while the child would be human in every respect.

He would not have a human father. Because his father would quite literally be God himself. This man would be the God man.

100% human. 100% God. What a request. To place before such a young woman.

[24 : 06] Right? Could you imagine one of our teenagers hearing such a message? But look how she responds. Behold, she says, I am a servant of the Lord.

And let it be to me according to your word. And so here we see Mary expressing what Timothy Keller calls the attitude of circumspect surrender.

She understands what this news would mean for her. Because here's the thing. Gabriel told her. He would eventually tell Joseph.

But he was not going to tell the people who they lived in community with. And so you can imagine that Mary understood this. And so she knew that she would be viewed by her family and her community in a strange way.

They would whisper about her. They would make rude comments to her. They would give her dirty looks. Because they didn't understand.

[25 : 18] How she would be seen by her community would be that she is the mother of an illegitimate child.

They wouldn't understand. But here's the thing. Mary didn't care. Why? She didn't seek man's approval.

Instead, she surrendered herself completely to God's will for her. And she said, not only would she do that, but she called herself a bond slave.

Now this describes a particular kind of servanthood common throughout world history. And the term refers to someone who voluntarily sells him or herself into slavery.

Mary viewed herself as God's servant. And she was willing to submit to whatever he asked.

Christmas is about selflessness.

[26 : 22] Christmas is also about grace. Luke and Matthew's gospel report two subsequent events that happened after Mary had 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 wife is pregnant with a child who she says is conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And so understandably, this man struggles with that news. And in Matthew 119, it says, And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

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 this woman, who was to be his wife, had been unfaithful to him.

Imagine that. You love this person. You're excited about the day where you'll be able to take her home as your wife.

[27 : 42] And then she tells you, I'm pregnant with God's son. How would you respond? I don't know if they had a saint in asylums back then, but you would have probably considered that.

Wouldn't you have? She's crazy. What happened to you? How could this be? What kind of lies are you coming up with? Just tell me you don't want to marry me, right? I couldn't imagine what is going through the mind of Joseph when he hears this news from her.

But Joseph planned to deal with her mercifully. He would pursue a quiet divorce. He would get on with his own life.

She could remain with her family, who would hopefully care for Mary and this child. And so to him it seemed like a logical, wise, and kind decision.

But then in Matthew chapter 1, verses 20 through 23, Joseph receives a message. As he was considering 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.

[28 : 50] For that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. And 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. And so this visit, no doubt, gave Joseph the personal peace that he needed in order to move forward with their marriage plans.

And while the rabbinical law permitted a husband to divorce his wife during the betrothal period, if she conceived a child by another, get this, it strictly forbade a husband from ending the marriage during the betrothal period if he was the father of the child who was conceived before the home taking.

So do you understand what's happening? Jewish law said, hey, if you are betrothed to your wife and you get her pregnant before the home taking, you are not allowed to divorce her.

You must take responsibility for what you've done. Therefore, for Joseph to bring this pregnant woman home as his wife was to admit in the eyes of the community that this child was his.

[30 : 13] In other words, Joseph voluntarily subjected himself to any misunderstanding the community would have surrounding his wife and her pregnancy.

And so Joseph, like Mary, understood the risks. He counted the cost. He set aside his own rights and was willing to accept his role in God's great redemptive design.

Joseph and Mary modeled for us the kind of selfless grace that Christmas is about. Christmas is also about love.

Christmas is about a God who so loved the world who had turned its back on him that he gave his only begotten son that whoever would believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

You know, it's interesting to me as we've been going through Philippians here on Sunday mornings and we've been there for quite a while that now we've come to this section in Scripture that's very fitting for this time of year.

[31 : 27] Philippians chapter 2, verses 5 and 8. And I don't believe that it's a coincidence that we've now arrived at this place during Christmas time. And this sermon and next Sunday's sermons are going to set us up to unpack that portion of Scripture next month when we get there, but let's look at it together.

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.

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.

You know, I've heard the illustration that many people try to use to portray God as being loving and accepting of all people regardless of the fact that they've asked for his forgiveness or placed their faith in Christ or repented of their sins.

And so, you'll hear that universalist argument, well, just think of it like this. God is on the mountain and we're all trying to get to God and we're all taking different routes, but eventually we're going to all end up at the same place.

[32 : 51] Now, there are many things wrong with that illustration, primarily that it isn't us who are trying to climb the mountain to God. We're not trying to climb the mountain to God.

And the other thing is this, that God, in His grace, in His selfless love for us, has come down the mountain to be with us, to reveal Himself to us, to die for us, that we might have forgiveness of our sins and eternal life with Him.

Christianity is unlike any other major religion of the world. It's completely unlike any other major religion in the world.

And one of the major ways that it is different is that we serve a God whom we have a personal relationship with. We serve a God whom we can know intimately and no other religion can claim to have that or has that.

Think about the close personal relationships that you have. Think about the people who are closest to you and what do those relationships have in common. I would say that the closer you are to somebody in relationship, the more vulnerable you've been willing to be with that person.

[34 : 19] You know what I'm saying? So like you think with your spouse, your spouse probably knows you more than anybody, knows your strengths, knows all of your weaknesses, knows all of the things that you've done that you're ashamed of, yet still loves you.

Or you think about your closest friend and the things that they know about you. You've been willing to be vulnerable with them. And the more vulnerable you've been with them, the more that they have earned your trust and the closer you are in relationship with them as a result of that.

Through the incarnation, the almighty God, our almighty God, our creator, our sustainer of all things made himself vulnerable to us by putting himself in a vulnerable position where it would become possible for us to hurt him.

And we did. We murdered him. Why did he do that? Well, we'll discuss that in greater detail next week.

But I'll conclude with my last point in answer to that question. And that is this. Primarily, Christmas is about the gospel.

[35 : 44] Christmas is about the gospel. Christmas is about Jesus Christ who encompasses all of these things that we've talked about. He is our hope.

He's our only hope. He is the one who brings light into darkness. He is the one who gives us purpose and meaning in life. Apart from Christ, there is no hope.

Jesus epitomized selflessness, did he not? Who left the joys of heaven in order to take on the flesh, coming in the vulnerable form of a human being, a baby, selflessly obeying all that the law required that we could not obey, selflessly going to the cross and dying for sins that he did not commit.

An innocent man. And by his grace, right, in doing this, purchasing for us a salvation that we do not deserve, he has shown us incredible love.

Jesus is the reason for the season. And Christmas is about Christ.

[37 : 14] You might be here this morning and you are hearing this maybe for the first time, maybe you've heard it a few times, but God has been speaking to you. And he's been revealing to you that Christmas is not about the stuff.

That the stuff, as fun as it might be, is unfulfilling. It cannot give you what you're truly looking for. There is a reason why Christmas is such a big deal because it is a big deal.

God sent his only begotten son to us that he would live the life that we could not live.

To die a death in our place that we do not deserve. To forgive us of our sins. And here's the good news. He didn't remain dead.

He arose again on the third day. Amen. Proving that he was exactly who he said he was. Proving that he did all that he said he had come to do and accomplish.

[38 : 24] And you can have salvation in Jesus Christ and none other because he's come down to us to make it a possibility. And it's a possibility for you today while you still live and breathe to receive that good news.

To believe it and to have eternal life.