

THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE AND THE DISCIPLE'S MISSION

I will admit that year after year, I find myself with a deep sense of enjoyment and nostalgia during the Advent and Christmas seasons. I know that many people feel that way, although it is a difficult season with painful memories and losses for some. I lost my own father on a Christmas Eve. I went to visit him in hospice after our Christmas Eve service one year. After coming home, I received a call in the early morning of Christmas day that he had passed away. I understand Christmas can bring mixed memories. Nevertheless, it remains a time not only of special treats, parties, decorations, and celebrations but also, at the heart of it, all this powerful message of hope and grace we all need.

I imagine of all the Scriptures that can be read at Christmas, the verses we read from the gospel of Luke about the angels announcing the birth of a Savior are some of the most famous and familiar. The battered, bedraggled, and burnt-out need this message of hope and peace. This is the last Sunday in Advent. On Saturday, at our Christmas Eve services, we will look at this passage again. And it fits the conclusion of the series we have been in on the seven facets of discipleship. I hope you will see that before we are done today.

We associate many emotionally evocative images with the Christmas message: Angels, shepherds, stars, wise men, a baby in the manger, and words like joy, hope, and peace. Yet, all of the images revolve around a central truth which is that...

I. JESUS CAME INTO OUR WORLD TO FULFILL A MISSION OF GRACE AND REDEMPTION.

Luke 2:10-11, *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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

Two important questions to ask about Christmas are what happened and why did it happen. If you want a one-word answer to these

questions, the answer to "What happened?" is *incarnation*. The answer to the question "why did it happen?" is *salvation*.

A. It was the mission of Jesus that required the incarnation.

Incarnation means God took on flesh. We don't understand the awe-inspiring miracle of Christmas unless we understand that in Scripture, it is not just that God took an empty human body and possessed an empty shell with a divine spirit. It is that God in Jesus Christ took on the fullness of the human experience with the exception of sin and wickedness.

In the Greek myths, Zeus and Hermes came down to earth for a time disguised as poor slaves. They did this to fool people, to get a reading on the level of respect they were being given. They took on the *outward form* of humanity, but it was just a deception. The Bible tells a radically different story. Listen to how the book of Hebrews speaks about this. **Hebrews 2:17** *Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.* Jesus was God in human flesh, God incarnate, not to disguise who he was or is but to more fully reveal who he is. And to provide a perfect sacrifice that would pay for the sins of the world.

God has eternally existed as one God possessing a deep unchanging unity and yet at the same time existing in three distinct persons in relationship with each other: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of *Christmas is that a miraculous and momentous unrepeatable event occurred in human history. God came into our world as one of us in Jesus.*

For the first Christians understanding the advent and birth of Christ was stunning. They came out of paganism or Greek and Roman philosophy, and there was nothing like the full meaning of Christ's incarnation in their mythologies. One church father, Junius the younger, wrote of his reaction to first contemplating the incarnation of God in Christ. He said; *my body shuddered. My mind was in*

amazement, and I was so agitated the whole day that I scarcely knew who I was. Nor did the agitation cease but continued till it was at last soothed by a humble faith in him who was made flesh and dwelt among us. This was the astounding new thing - God became man!

Don't let the meaning of Christmas become commonplace. Don't fail to grasp the wonder of what God has done. The shepherds burst - breathless into a stable. Barely lit by flickering firelight and see a tiny infant, but that infant is God incarnate. He was not now God minus some element of Deity, but God plus true humanity. He would experience everything, literally everything that you and I experience. From temptation to tiredness. **Hebrews 4:15-16** *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then, with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

*What happened? Incarnation: God took on human flesh in Jesus.
Why did it happen? Salvation:*

B. The mission of Jesus was a mission of salvation.

Salvation is a good word. The angels in **Luke 2:10-11** said, *“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* The need for salvation humbles us because it makes no sense unless we admit we need it.

Jesus wasn't just born. He was sent! To what end? **John 3:17-18** *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

The mission of salvation is a revelation of God's love. Christmas is about the incarnation of God for the purpose of salvation because of God's love. **1 John 4:9-10** *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live*

through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Christmas is about the incarnation of God for the purpose of salvation because of God's great love for lost people like all of us. Jesus came into our world to fulfill a mission of grace and redemption.

We've been talking a lot about Christmas. So what happened to the seven facets of discipleship? Here's the thing, and it truly is an amazing, often unrecognized part of the message of Christmas; we who have received the Christ of Christmas are called to carry on his mission in our lives as well.

II. THOSE WHO FOLLOW JESUS CARRY ON THE WORK THAT HE WAS SENT TO DO.

*Toward the end of his earthly life and ministry, after his death and resurrection, having fulfilled his mission, he made an important statement. **John 20:21** Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you."*

How often, when we celebrate Christmas, do we consider this...

A. Jesus sends us to continue the mission for which he was sent.

This is the seventh facet of discipleship! His mission must become our mission.

We begin with an upward look.

1. Focused on God
2. Fulfilled in Christ

Then there is an inward look

3. Biblically Integrated
4. Growth-oriented

Then an outward look

5. Ministry minded
6. Committed to the church
7. Devoted to disciple-making

Christmas is not only a wonderful time to celebrate what God has done for us in giving us Jesus to be our Savior. It is also a time to reflect on what it means to be sent into the world as his disciples, to make disciples who, like us, experience his salvation and share our devotion to Him and his mission!

B. The Christ whose birth we celebrate at Christmas is our Lord, who commissions us to carry on his mission in the world.

Think again about what the angels said to the Shepherds. **Luke 2:10-11**, *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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

This Savior is Christ the what? Christ, the Lord. So as our Lord, he commands and commissions us, and we follow him. All of this ties into what Matthew tells us Jesus said when Jesus was preparing to leave his disciples, he gave them a commission. He gave them a mission.

Matthew 28:18-20 says ... Jesus came to them and said, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Our mission is not just to get people to say a prayer or come to church. The mission is to draw people into a whole new way of life in which they are trusting in Christ as their Savior and following Him as Lord, and living their lives as disciples of Jesus who glorify God by following Christ daily.

Consider all the essential elements in the great commission.

1. Jesus said, "Go" which stresses the active willingness to be on a mission. *For some, it may mean going across the ocean. For many, it might mean going across the street or to the student commons or the break room. The "going" here emphasizes the*

willingness to not just wait passively for people to come to you but to initiate prayerfully to them.

2. Baptizing stresses the importance of a formal, intentional commitment to Christ and the church. Through baptism, a new believer publically declares his or her faith in Jesus and commits to follow him as part of the church. Jesus said, "I will build my church."

3. Teaching is the communication, the transfer of truth that has the power to change lives. Notice the mission is not just to teach so as to inform but to teach so as to transform. It is teaching aimed at the application of faith to life in all areas of life.

4. The heart of the command is to make disciples. This is our goal as a church; when we engage the world with the gospel, it is not just so that people believe in Jesus as Savior but also so that they begin to follow him as Lord.

Discipleship and disciple-making is a lifelong journey. We have to take it one step at a time. You have to rely on his grace and strength all the way. You can't do everything perfectly and at once, but it is important to keep all the facets of the goal clearly in view. Christ calls you. He says, "Come follow me."

You need to say: *"Lord, you are my Savior, I trust in you, and I will follow you as you help me by your grace. I want to go deeper and keep learning. And I want to bring others along with me and encourage others to follow Christ. I want to be part of a church community in which we encourage each other on this mission Jesus inaugurated, and we've inherited. I want to get into a group, serve in a ministry, teach children or youth, or lead worship and give not only my money but give of myself to him who gave himself for me."*

I was doing a search for "followers" online years ago and stumbled across a surprising comparison between Jesus and Lady Gaga. On the Yahoo Answers website, someone asked what Lady Gaga's followers are called. There were some sarcastic answers. Someone wrote "idiots." But the true answer was "little monsters." Did you know that? For her followers, that name is a badge of pride. The fan who wrote the

answer said this: *Think of it like this, Gaga is a Monster.* (Apparently, that was a theme she herself developed in her second album) *Her fans carry with them (in a sense) a part of her; therefore, we are called Little Monsters.* Then she added, *It's kind of like Jesus with his... disciples. Christians are followers of Christ, and Little Monsters are followers of Gaga.* What's interesting, in spite of the inadequate comparison, is that it does convey the truth that Christians were never supposed to just be fans of Jesus or casual believers but much more. Not fans but followers. What category do you think most of the people in the church in America fall into 1.) Casual believers or 2.) followers of Jesus.

Conclusion

The Jesus born at Bethlehem to be our Savior is also Christ, the Lord. The only fitting response to him is to trust and obey and surrender our lives. But the beauty of that duty is that if we see who he is and what he has done, we don't think of our response to Him as duty but as devotion. We want to follow him because of who he is and what he has done and will do for us. And we know that we can trust him because he is a giving God who became one of us to serve and save us.

1 John 4:9-10 *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

Amen

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

God of grace and light, I thank you for the good news of great joy for all people. A Savior has been born, who is Christ the Lord! I am thankful for a Savior, for I know I need nothing less. For all have sinned and fall short of your glory. I have sinned against you and deserve your judgment, but you have revealed your love and offered grace in Jesus, Immanuel, our Savior. I turn to him and trust in him as my Savior. I acknowledge and embrace him as my Lord. Thank you for the gift of forgiveness and new life the Christ brings. In his name, I pray, Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord, may the beauty and power of the gospel be deeply received and clearly revealed in every facet of my life. May the Christ I celebrate at Christmas become, in ever-increasing measure, the central reality and underlying source of strength and fullness in the whole of my life for the duration of my life. Lord, enable me, by your Holy Spirit, to joyfully follow Jesus with a bold and believing faith. I ask this in his all-powerful name. Amen.