

# Christmas Message 2015

Title: “The Message in the Manger”

December 27, 2015

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**OBJECTIVE:** *To help us understand what the humble and ordinary circumstances of Jesus’ birth tell us about God and the salvation He offers us in Christ.*

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I hope everyone’s Christmas was delightful – full of wonderful memories and special times with your loved ones. Our family had a wonderful time – enjoying one another and the enjoying God’s blessings to us.

As a pastor, Christmas is a very exciting time of year because I have the opportunity to share the Gospel with people who normally don’t hear it. So many people come to a Christmas Eve service who normally don’t come to church – and the opportunity is exciting!

As a pastor, I look forward to preaching on the Christmas story, but Christmas is also a very difficult time of year because the Christmas story is so familiar – it presents a huge challenge to me.

*“How can I present the beauty of Christmas and the Gospel in a way that will be interesting and insightful?”*

After all...I’ve preached on Christmas here for the last 15 years – and many of you have been in church for 60, 70 or 80 years – and you’ve heard hundreds...maybe more than 1,000 Christmas sermons and sang the Christmas carols thousands of times.

What can be fresh and new – what can I say that will keep you awake this morning?

Well...today I hope to share the familiar and great truths of Jesus' birth by looking at a "flyover verse".

"Flyover Verse" defined: There is a term often used when describing the geography of our country. People on the East or West coast will use this term most, and they are referring to the states in the middle of the country – the heartland – when they travel from NY to LA – or from LA to NY – they "flyover" everything else.

When I speak of a "flyover verse", I'm speaking of a verse in the birth account of Jesus which we always read, but rarely spend much time talking about. Turn in your bible / tap on your device to **Luke 2:12**.

### Opening Prayer

**Luke 2:12**

"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

### **A sign that is outrageously normal**

"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

What is a sign supposed to do?

Attract our attention – mark a location – give us direction.

A sign is supposed to be noticeable – it should stand out from it's surroundings so it can be easily seen.

Of course, the greatest example of this is Las Vegas. Las Vegas knows how to make signs which capture your attention!

In vs. 11, the angels tell the shepherds the most unbelievable news they could ever dream of hearing!

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.”

That’s amazing...but how will we find Him? There’s so many people in Bethlehem...it’s so crowded due to the census...how can we find a single baby?

In the Greek, the word for “sign” is a word that generally refers to a miraculous sign - something supernatural that confirms God is at work. Think of the parting of the Red Sea...Lazarus being raised from the dead...something obvious and clear that attracts our attention...something “Las Vegas-like”!

What sign did the angel point the shepherds to? A baby. Hardly anything unusual - hardly anything out of the ordinary.

If you are in Washington D.C. and you want to find the President, all you have to do is follow the signs to the White House. You can notice the Marine helicopter landing on the White House lawn. If you see a man walking out of the White House surrounded by security, it’s a pretty clear sign you have found the President.

If you're in London, and you want to find the Queen, you simply need to follow the signs to Buckingham Palace.

If you're in St. Louis and you want to find the arch - just follow the signs - and when you're a few miles away, you'll be able to see the arch – the arch itself is a huge sign!

You get the point...signs are always clear - they direct you to your destination - and when you arrive, it's easy to see what you were looking for.

But a baby was not uncommon at all...and that's the point.

God usually works in ways that are very common - very ordinary.

So many people expect God to work in miraculous and supernatural ways to make their life better - to help them through difficult times.

But God's normal MO (Modus Operandi) is through the ordinary and the simple. This causes some to miss God completely because they're expecting the lights of Las Vegas, and they walk right past the little baby.

*The miracles of God* are seen in the resilient and forgiving love between a husband and wife over 50 years.

*The miracles of God* are seen as a mother and father cares for their children until they can care for themselves.

*The miracles of God* are seen in a believer's daily obedience in the little and often unseen moments of life.

God most often works in the ordinary moments of life.

### The humanity of Jesus: "You will find a baby"

**Luke 2:12**

"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The Greek word translated "baby" means...baby, infant. Jesus came to earth in the same fashion we all entered this world – through the wonder, excitement and trauma of human birth.

When we are told by the angels "You will find a baby", it tells us the completely normal state in which God entered human existence. It tells us His entrance into the world was completely and utterly normal.

But in reality, this baby was unique in all of human history!

This baby was indeed a sign for the shepherds...and for the generations since because this baby directs us to God's tremendous love and this baby proved how far God was willing to stoop to save us!

This baby attracts our attention because when He chose to come and save us, God chose to arrive in such a humble and helpless state.

The baby is proof of the incarnation - proof of Gabriel's words and His prophecy to Mary 9 months earlier.

This baby was the first missile fired at Satan as God put His redemptive plan into motion.

This baby was fully God...and fully man. He was not ½ God and ½ man - He was fully God and fully man.

**Colossians 2:9**

“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form...”

**1 Timothy 3:16a**

“Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body...”

Christmas is so amazing and wonderful because God became flesh...God came to us!

Have you been trying to go to God – to make your life good enough for Him to accept you?

Self-improvement is not the way to God – God came to us!

This truth about God should encourage us - because they show us the extent of His love and how far He is willing to stoop to redeem us back to Himself!

The fact that God arrived on this earth as a baby is one of the central truths of Christianity. The incarnation –

the Virgin Birth - God becoming flesh – is central to His ability to die in our place – to be our sin substitute.

Think about it...if He had not been born, then He could not have died on the cross for our sins...we would still be in our sins with no hope!

Do you believe not only that Jesus was a person...a baby...but do you believe He was fully God?

You can look at history and see the theological debates about this truth. It was not always understood or accepted that Jesus was fully God – but thankfully, the truth of Scripture and the truth of Christmas history was victorious in the battle for the truth.

Many of these kind of disputes and questions were hashed out at what we call the church councils. At these councils, various bishops and other church leaders would gather together and work through their differences – using God’s Word as the primary source for their discussions. Nicaea was a city located east of Constantinople, and Constantine convened the council in 325 AD. The Council of Nicaea dealt with a number of issues, but the primary issue was the deity of Jesus. Was He a man inspired by God – the greatest prophet who ever lived...or was He God in the flesh?

The Council of Nicaea overwhelmingly affirmed the deity and eternity of Jesus Christ and defined the

relationship between the Father and the Son as “*of one substance.*” It also affirmed the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were listed as three co-equal and co-eternal Persons. (Source: <http://www.gotquestions.org/council-of-Nicea.html>)

The Nicene Creed states:

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.*

Those in Judaism do not believe this about Jesus.

Hindus do not believe this about Jesus.

Mormon theology does not agree with this.

Jehovah Witnesses do not believe this about Jesus.

Muslims do not believe this about Jesus.

But this is exactly what the Bible teaches. Jesus, the 2<sup>nd</sup> member of the Triune God, willingly chose to become human so He could be the perfect sacrifice to pay the price for our sins – and this entire plan was put into effect when He was born and the shepherds were told about a sign - they would “find a baby”.

**Jesus was helpless: “wrapped in cloths”**

Luke 2:12



“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

**KJV** “Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes...”

This was part of the sign the shepherds were to look for. These were strips of cloth, and it seems this was a very common practice for parents to wrap their infant in these strips of cloth. This was done for two reasons: First, it was snug – and it was comforting for the baby – just like parents today wrap their little baby snugly in a blanket/sheet.

Second, it was a form of protection for the baby. The arms and legs would be wrapped separately – and this would keep them from scratching their eyes, or doing anything else which might cause them harm.

In my preparation and research this week, I came across all kinds of ideas on the significance of the “swaddling cloths”.

***Some said*** they were a foreshadowing of the burial cloths Jesus would be wrapped in.

***Some said*** the same practice was done with the firstborn sheep which was destined to be sacrificed at the Temple – and it needed to be “without blemish or defect”, so they would wrap it in swaddling cloths and lie it in a manger for the first hour or so of it’s life so it wouldn’t fall and get hurt.

***Others said*** the cloths were signs of how poor Joseph and Mary were.

*Others said* the cloths were a sign which tied Jesus to the royal line of David.

As you can tell...there are lots of opinions out there on the significance and meaning of the cloths Jesus was wrapped in. It doesn't help that this is a "flyover verse" – not much data to be found in the commentaries.

For now, I'm left to conclude:

I don't know if there is any significance to the cloths – other than what might have been normal practice of parents in bundling up their newborn baby.

I don't know if there is really any foreshadowing here of Jesus' death and burial. In fact, in the Greek text, the passages that describe Jesus' burial use different words for the burial cloths.

Also...I'm not sure if this is yet another link to the Davidic line.

It's tempting to agree with one of these more dramatic understandings, but I'm satisfied with the normal and simple understanding that this was pretty normal practice.

It points out Jesus was completely helpless and utterly dependent on Joseph and Mary for His care and safety. Jesus was a fully human baby, and a helpless baby at that...

But he was also amazingly humble.

## The humility of Jesus: “lying in a manger”

**Luke 2:12**

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The manger...such a polite name for a feeding trough. Have you ever seen a feeding trough that barnyard animals use? I feed our dog every morning – and her bowl is pretty clean. I wipe it out and make sure it’s not too nasty – but if I didn’t wipe it out, it would get pretty crusty.

A barnyard animal’s feeding trough is not cared for like our dog’s food dish. This was the crib for Jesus.

This was the bassinet for the One who would “save His people from their sins.” (Matt. 1:21)

This was the only place Mary could lay the baby who would “...be called the Son of the Most High...the throne of His father David...will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:32-33)

The manger shows the humility of Jesus.

“...but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!”

**Philippians 2:7-8**

That night if you had walked by, nothing would have seemed supernatural. Mangers were not the beautiful, clean places we see in our Christmas pageants. They are lonely, dirty, smelly places made for animals. If you

are looking for Jesus, don't start in the nursery. Go outside to the barn and find the oldest part where the boards need repair and the ground is covered with dirt and the air smells of manure. When you hear the baby's cry, you'll know you've found the Lord. He's not in the nursery with the rest of the children; he's out in the barn with the animals.

Luke 2:12 paints an amazing picture of Jesus' birth.

This little "flyover verse" shows us:

God works in *normal* ways – He uses ordinary people to accomplish the most amazing things.

This verse shows us the *humanity* of Jesus as God became flesh.

This verse shows us God came as a *helpless* baby – like every other baby born in human history.

This verse shows us the *humility* of Jesus as He was placed in a manger – a feeding trough for barnyard animals.

### **Apply it...**

Some of you here this morning are discouraged and frustrated because you don't have some amazing talent or you don't believe there is anything about you that makes you special or unique. You wonder what you could ever do for God – how can you serve in a ministry

and make a difference in anyone's life – after all – you don't have much to offer (so you tell yourself).

**God uses the normal and ordinary to impact history and people.**

God loves the normal and ordinary – because His glory shines brighter when surrounded by normal and ordinary!

If you're normal, then sign up for ministry – because God will use you in ways you never imagine!

Get involved in Children's Ministry – or Youth Ministry – and change a kid's life and impact their family for Christ!

The humanity of Jesus – He entered human existence as a baby – fully human and fully God.

**Trust Jesus with your life –**

*He was fully human* which means He understands your suffering and temptations.

*He was fully God* which means His sacrifice on the cross was full payment for your sins.

Put your faith in Jesus.

**A**dmit your sins

**B**elieve in Jesus as your Savior

**C**ommit each day of your life to Him

The helpless state of Jesus – and His humility encourage us in two different ways.

***First***, we should follow His example (Phil. 2) and serve others.

***Second***, we should be encouraged that Jesus went to such extremes to redeem us. He was willing to become flesh – to become human in every way – beginning as a baby – so we could know God. We should be encouraged because His love for us is so great...He was willing to become a helpless little baby – completely dependent on His mother and earthly father.

What an example for us – when we feel helpless – God not only understands our helpless condition, but He can work through us despite our helplessness.

Close in prayer