

Christmas Eve
This Changes Everything
December 24, 2019

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO (2)

Sax Solo – Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas (1)

Feature – Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree (2)

Welcome – Shannon (2)

Worship – O Come Emmanuel (4)

Prayer – Shannon (1)

Reading – Christmas Story (6)

Feature – Hallelujah Let there Be Light (5)

It’s such a perfect story, isn’t it? The story of the first Christmas; the story of the birth of Jesus.

- It’s powerful; so powerful that writers dream up dramatic ways to tell it, as in the way it was read to us a few minutes ago.
- It’s moving; so moving that composers create amazing music to celebrate it, as in the song we just heard.
- And it’s meaningful; so meaningful that Christians (and even non-Christians) are gathering all over the world tonight to retell it and remember it and celebrate it.

It’s such a perfect story.

And when we’re children, it’s so easy to accept it as true.

But, as we grow older, what happens to many of us – and some of you have seen this; some of you have experienced it – is that we begin to put the story of the first Christmas into the category of myth and fable and fairytale.

And this <picture of the nativity> doesn’t help very much, does it?.

Whoever first came up with this kind of thing clearly meant well but, to our modern eyes, it’s almost like a cartoon. The whole scene looks a little like a fairytale.

- Mary and Joseph and Jesus have halos.

- Everybody is peaceful and smiling including Baby Jesus.
- The animals are kneeling and smiling, too.

Everything is just perfect.

- But every woman here or watching or listening who has ever had a baby knows that if you had had a baby in that stable without an epidural, you would not look like that. You probably wouldn't be all that happy, either.
- And we love that carol that says "no crying he makes" but we know that's not how it works.

Babies make crying ... and pooping.

And so, what do we do with those realities?

We create nativity scenes to ensure we don't lose the magic of that "perfect night."

So, it's no wonder that, as we get older, we take the story that meant so much to us as children and we drop it into the category of myth and legend and folklore and fable.

Of course, it's not even really good myth because, in a myth or a fable, there's always a moral to the story.

Remember how, growing up, you heard the story of George Washington cutting down his father's cherry tree? When his dad asked him if he did it, he said, "I cannot tell a lie. Yes, I did."

Of course, nobody believes that really happened, but the moral of the story is that it's "it's better to tell the truth, even if it gets you into trouble."

So, what do we learn from this <picture of the nativity>? What's the moral of that story?

I don't know, maybe whenever you go on a long journey it's wise to call ahead and make reservations?

I mean there's really no application. There's no moral to this story which means it's not even good myth.

And yet for many of us, that's what it becomes: a fairytale and a cartoon with no meaning other than maybe a an evening like this that takes us back to childhood ...

... but certainly nothing to take us into *adulthood*.

More Than Myth

Of course, all of this would be a shock to the two guys who actually wrote the Christmas story, Matthew and

Luke.

- Matthew was actually a follower of Jesus.
- Matthew knew Jesus.
- Matthew knew Mary.
- Matthew knew John who took care of Mary until Mary eventually died.

And Matthew, who had access to the information when he sat down to write his story did not begin with “once upon a time.”

Instead he begins with “Abraham had a son ... who had a son ... who had a son ...”

And he meticulously goes through this genealogy—that most of us find boring—because he wanted everyone to know ...

- Jesus was an actual person who really lived ...
- Who was connected to all the right people
- And that the story he was about to tell—as difficult as it would be to believe— actually took place.

And then he writes “the birth of Jesus happened as follows” and he dives right into the icky details.

- There was a man named Joseph who was engaged to a woman named Mary
- He finds out she’s pregnant
- And then he has a dilemma on his hands because he knows he’s not the father.

But Luke is even better.

- Luke *wasn't* one of Jesus’ disciples.
- But Luke knew Peter and Luke knew Matthew and Luke knew John.
- And Luke even knew James, the brother of Jesus.

And Luke realizes there are so many stories and there are so many different accounts and there are even

some conflicting details.

So he decides, you know what? I want to get this right.

So here's how Luke begins his story of the birth of Jesus. Like Matthew, he does not begin with "once upon a time."

Instead, he writes:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us ... Luke 1:1 (NIV)

In other words, "there are a lot of people who were trying to get this story on paper because it's so amazing."

And this isn't 20, 50, 70, 100, 200 years later, this is right after these events took place. Luke said there's so many people trying to get this right.

"So," he says ...

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning ... Luke 1:3 (NIV)

Since I had access to Peter and since I had access to John and since I had access to Matthew and since I had access to Mary, since I had access to the eyewitnesses ...

He says this ...

I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. Luke 1:4 (NIV)

"Theophilus, you've heard these stories. Theophilus, you've been taught these things.

"But I want you to know this isn't myth, this isn't legend, this isn't fairytale. This isn't oral tradition that was passed down generation after generation after generation and then it began to be exaggerated and embellished.

"These things happened among us and the eyewitnesses of these things are still with us, so I was able to thoroughly investigate. And I'm about to tell you the story of how it actually happened."

And then Luke does something extraordinary, something that doesn't happen in myth and fable: *he anchors the birth of Jesus to a very specific period in time.*

He says this, chapter 2 says ...

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Luke 2:1 (NIV).

And then he gives us even a greater parenthetical detail so that Theophilus (and future readers like us) would know this was a period of history they could track down and know with certainty that these events took place.

He says this:

*(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria).
Luke 2:2 (NIV)*

And, other historical documents (outside of the Bible) tell us that Syria actually had a governor named Quirinius and that, while he was governor, there were actually two censuses taken.

So this isn't "once upon a time."

This isn't "long, long ago in a land far, far away."

This isn't "once upon a time there was a king."

This, Luke says, was during the reign of Caesar Augustus, while Quirinius was the governor of Syria.

There was a census that had to be taken – an event that every historian would be able to track down and pinpoint the time when this actually happened.

And then Luke says that ...

- A man named Joseph was visited by an angel concerning his pregnant fiancé, Mary.
- He took her to be his wife anyway
- They went to Bethlehem to register—because every male had to go to their hometown.
- And while they were there, she gave birth to a son and they named him Jesus.

And it turned out He would become the Savior of the entire world.

One Question

Now, my point in telling you all of this isn't merely to give you a lesson in history or in ancient literature.

Instead, it's to ask you one simple question.

What if it's true?

- What if what Matthew and Luke wrote actually took place in history?

- What if the faith that you had as a child was actually *not* a fairytale?
- What if you had the certainty that Luke wants you to have that these were events that took place in such a way that everyone knew God had done something unique in the world?

What if it's true?

If it is, I think it changes everything.

Actually, it *did* change everything. The whole world changed as a result of Jesus of Nazareth.

If we had the time I could tell you how He and His followers dramatically changed – *positively* changed – the way the world thinks about ...

- Children
- Women
- Marriage
- The value of every human being
- The use of power and position
- Education
- Science
- Medicine
- Governmentⁱ

We're not a very religious culture anymore but so much of what *almost all of us agree on* as being "good" and "right" and "how things ought to be," traces directly back to the influence of Jesus and His followers.

But, more importantly, if the story of Jesus is true and not a myth ...

And this is what I want you to know more than anything else today ...

If the story of Jesus is true and not a myth, this can change everything *for you*.

Here's what I mean.

Luke tells us that an angel appeared to the shepherds announcing the birth of the Messiah. And what that angel said is so significant for every single person on the planet, including you and including me.

The angel said ...

*"Do not be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for ALL the people."
Luke 2:10 (NIV)*

And in the original Greek language that last part means "all the people."

... even the people who think "I must not matter to God because look what's happened in my life. Things never go right for me. God never answers my prayer. If there is a God, God must not love me."

To which the angel would say "no, no, no this is a message for you, because God does know you and God does hear your prayer and God does love you."

It's good news to all people ... even those who think "what in the world could I do to ever gain God's favor? How could I ever be good enough to gain God's favor?"

And the angel would say "no, this is for you as well because God just loves you. God just favors you. God just likes you—not because of anything you've done but just because that's who God is."

It's good news to *all* the people ... even those who would say "I'm not a religious person. I'm an outsider. I don't even like religious people. Religious people don't like me and I don't like them.

"We have an agreement. I visit my parents during Christmas and Easter and we just don't talk about it because I'm not one of them."

And the angel would say you, too, are part of that "ALL" because when Jesus grew up He repeatedly demonstrated in unmistakable, remarkable ways that He loved people who were not religious.

And that's why so many people who were nothing like Jesus liked Jesus.

The Good News

So what is the good news that will bring joy to all people? News that can change everything?

The angel says ...

"Today in the town of David a Savior, a Savior has been born to you. He is Messiah, the Lord." Luke 2:11 (NIV)

- What *really* makes this story perfect ...
- And what makes it a story that we long to be true ...
- And what makes this so perfect for you ...

... is that God didn't send you another to-do or to-don't list. He didn't send more commandments.

And He didn't send you a second chance to make up for your mistakes.

God sent you exactly what you needed. And He sent me exactly what I needed, a Savior, because we are not mistakers who need a second chance; we are sinners who need a Savior.

And, do you know how I that you know you're a sinner?

You don't even keep *your own* rules. You fall short of your own standards.

And if there is a God in heaven who has any standards at all, if you fall short of your own standards, there have to be times when you fall short of His.

And the reason this was such great news is that God sent exactly what you need. He sent the perfect gift, a Savior – Jesus of Nazareth – which is what makes this the perfect story.

But it's better than perfect. It's true.

It's better than perfect, because it's not a standalone story that we can look at every December 24th.

It's a story that encompasses *your* story because you ... and you and you and you and you and you and you ... and every "you" that you will ever be eyeball-to-eyeball with for the rest of your life ... are part of "ALL people."

And it can change everything.

<PRAYER>

Feature – Love Came Down

Transition

One of Jesus best friends, John wrote this about him:

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:4-5 (NIV)

John wrote that because when you understand the good news of who Jesus is and what He has done for you, things start to change in your life. It's like the light comes on.

In this past year, many of you have had some kind of experience with Jesus where that's happened. The light has come on for you.

- You've accepted Him as your savior.
- You've been baptized.

- You started coming back to church.
- You decided to implement a specific teaching from him
 - Forgave someone
 - Decided to love an enemy
 - Shared your faith
 - Prayed regularly for yourself and others
 - Gave to support the work of the church

Many of you in some way have taken a step with Jesus. <think of it>

Now, what we're going to do in this time is to offer you the opportunity to visualize what's happened not only in your life but in this congregation.

- Turn lights down
- Invite people to come forward to light your candle and then go back and light the candles of those around you.
- Spread the light until the whole room is filled

<Parents light kids lights>

Ok, here we go.

Worship – O Come All Ye Faithful / Candlelight

Worship – Silent Night

That's pretty good singing but, you can't celebrate someone's birthday without singing Happy Birthday to them. So, would you join me in singing Happy Birthday to Jesus?

Here we go ...

Happy Birthday (1)

Blow out candles.

Conclusion

We are so grateful you came to be with us for this service and we're going to sing one more song before we

leave.

But before we do I want to mention that ...

- We talk all the time around here about how Jesus changes everything. So if you don't have a church, we want you to know you are welcome here, even if – especially if – you're not a religious person.
- After the first of the year ... four week series called "The Resolution Solution"
- Remind you to take a bag with you as you leave as it has some gifts and info about what's happening after the first of the year.
- Next Sunday ... Groundhog Day
- Receive offering at the door.

Would you stand with us and sing Joy to the World?

Worship – Joy to the World (3)

Endnotes

ⁱ For more detail, see <https://lisamargretprice.com/2017/12/18/four-seldom-recognized-ways-jesus-birth-changed-the-world/> and <https://www.usrenewal.org/how-the-birth-of-jesus-christ-changed-the-world/>.