

In Just the Right Way

December 24, 2017

Various texts

Merry Christmas! I greet you this evening in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who's birth we celebrate this evening. I know there is great joy in getting together as families, sometimes gathering from very far away. I appreciate that you have chosen to spend part of that time here, celebrating with others the occasion for our celebrations. This is the night, the day when we focus our attention on a non-descript, improbable location for the birth of the kingliest of kingly kings, the holiest of holy ones, the Savior not just of the Jews, not just of a generation, but THE Savior, who will probably save more people this next year than even existed in the whole world of His day. That's quite a Savior.

For those here from our congregation, you know that we have been examining this event from the perspective of how the event shows evidence of a grand plan, evidence of the hand of God, evidence that every single detail was purposeful, consequential, important. Our theme verse has been Galatians 4:4, "But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman..." It happened in the fullness of time, at precisely the right time. He was sent at the right time, to the right place, among the right people, for the right purpose, in the right way. Tonight we take on "the right way." We have already seen evidence that the birth of the Messiah was planned, down to the detail level, with those details recorded as prophecy hundreds of years before they took place. So, what about the details of the way He was born?

Main point: Every detail of Jesus' birth was purposeful to tell us something about our Lord.

Once more, the details were not coincidental, not cute embellishments, not fables, not stories passed down to make the event heartwarming. No, the details recorded were purposeful, giving us God's perspective on this most glorious of events.

I would like to begin by giving a comparison. When Prince William and Princess Kate had their first child, what was it like? I don't know many of the details, but I know enough to conclude that their baby was born in a royal sort of way. This future king, born an heir to the throne of England was born in such a way which indicated who he was and what his family was like. Right? He would have been given the best of everything, no expense spared, the whole world watching and waiting, huge celebrations, throngs of people and cameras waiting to catch a glimpse. Even though he was simply a newborn baby boy, you knew he was born to a kingly family. Right? You could say that about people of extreme wealth as well. When you have all the money in the world and you are expecting the birth of your firstborn, there is no expense too high, no effort too much, no limit to the celebration which follows.

Then we compare this to Jesus. Jesus' heavenly Father, how wealthy is He? How royal is He? How many resources might He have at His disposal to usher in the birth of His Son? Do you think He would be willing to part with all of that? Of course. And yet, ALL of the details of the story highlight the exact opposite. In other words, details of Jesus' birth do not display extravagance, nor normality, but below normality. It is noteworthy because it was so humble. Jesus was born not in a hospital, not in a mansion or royal palace, not even in a typical home of His day, not even a rented room. He was born among the animals, with the animal's manger making do as a crib. I think God was sending a message. He could have done it any way He wished, but He did it this way to send a message.

So, if that's the case, what message did He send? What are we supposed to learn from the details of Jesus' birth? Clearly there are many lessons to learn, too many to contain in just one message. But I would like to put them into three categories: humility and service, celestial celebrations, the comparison of the reception by the Jews versus the Gentiles.

I. Jesus' humble birth shows us His perspective on Himself and His mission.

He was purposefully born in such a way as to show us who He was and what He was here to do. Or, to put it into Jesus' own words (Mark 10:45), "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." His birth showed us who He was. In fact, He expects us to have this same attitude. Powerful, kingly people in the world might lord it over those under them, but let it NOT be so among you. Followers of Jesus lead by serving, elevate themselves by humbling themselves, make their name great by becoming less. This is how His kingdom was to be set up...and He demonstrated it from day one.

As we know from the Luke account, Joseph and Mary were being good citizens, obedient subjects to their governing authorities despite the fact that it greatly inconvenienced them. I can't imagine how uncomfortable it would have been to travel over one hundred miles under such conditions. And then remember that they went home via Egypt, hundreds of miles further from home. This would be a long trip even today in an air conditioned vehicle. I can't imagine traveling that far by walking, or perhaps on a donkey.

But as dutiful citizens, they went. And when they arrived in Bethlehem, everything was full. Every suitable accommodation was already booked, occupied. I imagine Mary's contractions getting closer together and harder, but with no suitable place for them. So they made room...among the animals.

There was room among the animals. Wasn't this beneath Him? Apparently not. This suited Him just fine. This conveyed a message that God wanted us to know. Just as His Father showed in His speech to David concerning a temple, Yahweh is just fine meeting with His people in a tent. He doesn't need fancy surroundings. The important part for Him was that He would go where His people were, or in the words of the Old Testament promise, "He would dwell IN THE MIDST OF THEM." He would live where they lived. He would live where the people are, where the common folk live. He is not an isolationist. He is not an elitist. He is a populist. He is most at home among His family.

Even now, do we have a temple for Jesus? No! There is not now nor ever has been a temple, a house where Jesus is. Instead, what did He say, "For where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20) This church is not a temple, it is not a "sacred" place where God meets with His people. It is simply a gathering place, knowing that the space is not important, it is the people who are important. They are the temple. He lives in them, not in some building.

So it was important that Jesus was born in such a way to show that He really means what He says. He humbled Himself, becoming one of us, and humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The details of His birth also showed that He values people at the bottom. It is significant that the angels came to the night shift workers to announce His birth. The angels could have come to the temple in Jerusalem, or even to all the relatives gathered in Bethlehem, or the super devout gathered for midnight prayer at some synagogue. Instead, God chose to share the celestial celebration of His Son's birth with the lowest of the low, the shepherds, the night shift shepherds at that. That my friends is bottom of the barrel. That would be like not telling us, but telling the cleanup crew next door at McDonald's. You know, they are the ones who have no life, or who could not get off and so they had to stay to clean up. While we are here dressed in our finest, they are there cleaning up after another long day. Imagine what it would say were they to hear the news of a long awaited event before we do. Notice that Scripture records no other groups were privy to such a scene, only the shepherds. What does the shepherds' hearing first tell us? Were they more

deserving than the rest? Not at all. They were chosen to show that God values those at the bottom. He sees things in them things that no one else sees, that they probably do not even see in themselves. He honors the humble.

Does this fit Jesus' mission? Of course it does. Jesus came not for the deserving, but for the undeserving: the sick, the lost, the weak, the heavy laden, the children, the women, the mentally unstable, the Samaritans, the outcasts, the "sinners," the tax collectors, the crippled, the blind, the dead. He valued them, honored them, was not ashamed to be seen with them. He went to their homes, ate with them, helped them, served them, healed them. He pronounced their place in His Kingdom. O yes, from the very beginning, Jesus showed His humility and His desire to serve the least among us. The least, the last, the lost are important to our Lord, always have been, always will be.

Here He is, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the Prince of peace, the Savior of the world. And yet, none of this resulted in ego. He came to serve, not be served.

II. There may have been no commotion here on earth, but I guarantee you there was a celebration in heaven.

Clearly we see that with the angels and the shepherds. Once more, I think it is significant that the heavenly hosts put on a display above the nearby fields. It was done for maximum effect. There would have been no competing lights, no sounds interfering. It would have been horizon to horizon, taking up the whole sky.

This is where my love of fireworks kicks in. You shoot off fireworks at night, for maximum effect. Lights are brighter in the darkness. And the bigger the shell, the more of the sky you fill up. Right? And then you add in special effects, like booms, and bright flashes, changing colors, and zipping buzzers. So, maybe it's just me, but I imagine a fireworks show above all others. After all, this all came from above, the heavens opened up and the shepherds got a glimpse of what was going on in the spiritual realm.

Hear once more these words from Luke 2:8-14.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. [9](#) An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. [10](#) But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. [11](#) Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. [12](#) This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” [13](#) Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, [14](#) “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Can you imagine the scene?

-Not just one angel, but a host of angels (that’s a whole lot).

-Not just angels, but the “glory of the Lord,” the shekinah glory, the light so bright it caused Moses to have an instant tan, the Moses glow.

-Something so spectacular it terrified them and had to be calmed down.

-Singing, the air filled with music.

-From the words, I take it a joyous singing, earth shaking, rock splitting, eardrums bursting, God glorifying, everyone nearby falling flat on their faces type of singing. Yeah, it was that kind.

But why? Was it because the angels couldn’t believe He survived birth? No! The celebration gives us a clue to the significance of the event. It means the angels had been waiting for the moment for a long time. The time had finally come. This is an event worth celebrating! The Savior had finally been born. Help and hope for mankind was finally here. The central event for all of human history was beginning.

But I also see this from another perspective. The angels were important characters in the unfolding drama, but they had also been a part of the heavenly event that made this whole event necessary. As you know, there had been a rebellion among some of the angels in heaven, resulting in satan and his followers being cast out of heaven to the earth. They were cast out, but not defeated. That defeat would come with the arrival of the Messiah, who would crush the head of the serpent. Right? So, this host of angels would have been the ones fighting on the front lines during such a rebellion. They stood strong while their fellow angels went over to the dark side. They have been fighting since, just waiting for the day of victory.

In the fullness of time, God had sent forth His Son, who would defeat once and for all the enemies of their master. He would withstand all that this enemy could throw against Him without falling to temptation. He would withstand the punishment for all the sin of all the people, satisfying the justice of God. He would be able to once and for all proclaim victory when He cried out, "It is finished!" from the cross. No, I suspect the angels singing was enlivened by the knowledge that their victory was at hand. Their leader had shown up on the scene. They welcomed Him onto the battlefield.

III. The Gentiles were better at welcoming their King than were the Jews.

Again, the details of the story stand out, details meant not so much as material for Christmas carols as for biblical truth. It is important that magi

arrive, bearing appropriate gifts. It is important that Egypt be a place of refuge for someone hunted down by the Jews.

As we saw a few weeks ago, it is significant that the Jews learned about the birth of their Messiah from travelers from the east. These were not the Jewish holy men of their day, but men who were at least symbolically as far from the scene as you could get. They came from the east, the symbolic term for separation from God. Adam and Eve were sent out from the Garden of Eden to the east. The east represented desert, wilderness, away from the presence of God. But these men came to visit this newborn King regardless. They came not to kill but to worship. They came bearing gifts. They came with gifts appropriate for the birth of a king: precious gold, expensive incense, and myrrh. The gold we all instinctively get. Giving a gift of gold does not indicate a real love, but a real loyalty. Yes, I know that skilled marketers have convinced everyone in our day that diamonds indicate love. In fact, I noticed the twist for this year is that real love is shown by giving two diamonds, not just one. "Show her she is both your true love and your best friend." Yeah, that will do it!

But gold symbolizes loyalty. You give gold as tribute, as taxes, as something precious to symbolize your respect of their authority. The more difficult ones were the frankincense and myrrh. Yes, I know they were both precious spices, and this would have been the common currency of the day. These were easily transportable, highly valuable products which were easily obtained by such men from such a place. Yes, the Jews used frankincense as part of their worship, so it would have been thoughtful and appreciated.

But you also cannot escape the fact that both of these fragrant gifts are used at people's death. Both were significantly connected with death. Yes, giving someone today a casket for Christmas might be nice and appropriate, but you cannot escape the idea that there would be a connection with death. For the magi, even if they made no such connection, we as the readers of Scripture cannot escape it. In other words, the identification of the gifts they brought is significant to us. Their names were not recorded, their home countries were not recorded, how many was not recorded. What was recorded is the gifts they brought. Why? Because they were expensive? No! Because they were inappropriate? No! They were important enough to record because of the

message they convey to us as the readers. These wise men of the east brought gifts acknowledging kingly authority and pointing to a preparation for death. In other words, He was king and He was going to die. He was a king born to die.

Did they know that? I highly doubt it. But God wants us to know it. He wants us to know that Jesus' death was in focus from the moment of His birth. He was born ready to die. His first followers gave Him gifts pointing us to His death. Indeed, we know that His death would be the basis for their salvation. So, here we had Gentiles (most likely) from the other side of the world, far from God, coming to bring gifts fit for a dying king at the moment of His birth. The Gentiles are portrayed as catching something the Jews have still never gotten. The whole issue that caused them to reject Him was that they could not envision a Messiah who would die as part of His saving. No! He had to live forever and get rid of all their enemies. He couldn't die! And yet, His dying was their only hope. They rejected their only hope. The Gentiles? They got, they still get it. We get it. Knowing what we know now, we would bring the exact same gifts, pledging Him our loyalty and seeing His most significant event in His life His death, when He won victory over satan and sin.

So as we gather as families over these next days, as we hear songs or witness displays, or watch programming portraying this most glorious of events, I ask you to pay attention to the details, details that tell us about who God is, who Jesus is, and what He wanted us to know about His coming. He came as King, yes, but a different kind of King, humble, servant, obedient to the point of death. He came to give value to those who have none, hope to those who have none, a future to those who have none, a name to those who have none, a forever home to those who have none. He came to defeat the enemies of God once and for all, the exact point of victory even if we are still engaging the enemy on the battlefield. He came to draw from the far reaches of the earth a people for Himself, a people who see the most significant event of His life as His death, where death was swallowed up in victory. Because of His death, our deaths have no sting! Amen? Let's celebrate.