

Faces Around the Manger

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Luke 2:6-20**

Merry Christmas! It's so good to worship together with you this Christmas Eve. I want to offer a special welcome to any of you who do not regularly attend Vineyard Columbus. Let's welcome those who are our guests here today.

How many of you have a nativity scene in your home with little figures of animals and shepherds and Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus? Do you know who was credited with setting up the first live nativity scene to celebrate the birth of Jesus? St. Francis of Assisi did way back in 1223, nearly 800 years ago.

The practice of nativity scenes grew after Francis set this up. It was incredibly popular. Within a century, every church in Italy had live nativity scenes. Eventually, statues replaced human and animal participants and these things were placed not only in the church but in people's homes.

Now, in the 21st century, we have nativity scenes featuring every imaginable cartoon and action figure.

This Christmas Eve I'd like to take the nativity scene as a jumping off point.

The picture that ought to be in your mind of the birth of Jesus is of a typical peasant house in the first century in the Middle East in which animals slept on the lower level of the house in an enclosed space and people slept on the second floor. Mary and Joseph would have been guests of some relatives or perhaps friends of theirs in Bethlehem, but the house of these folks was so overcrowded that the only place for Mary and Joseph was on the lower floor with the animals and that's why the baby Jesus was placed in the animals' feeding trough, which was a manger. That's what a manger is, it's a feeding trough for an animal.

So, who was gathered around the manger? Let's start with the animals – maybe some sheep.

What spiritual lesson do the animals gathered around the manger teach us?

The Bible opens with Creation way back in the first book of the Bible, Genesis 1-2. And the initial scene that we read about in the Bible is that we were created to enjoy a personal relationship with God and with other people as we also enjoyed the rest of God's Creation and this good earth. But, unfortunately, we read in the third chapter of Genesis that Adam and his wife, Eve, decided to go their own way. They rejected a relationship with God and do their own thing.

Adam and Eve's sin was like a stone tossed in a pond. The ripple effect of Adam and Eve's rejection of God spread out and affected the rest of the world. It affected human society, it affected the animal kingdom, and even affected the ground itself. The whole world has been groaning under the weight of sin since the beginning.

Now, place yourself in God's shoes. What's your next move? This good earth that you created has been profoundly damaged by human sin. Would you decide to scrap the world and start over, admitting that the world was broken beyond repair? Cut your losses – no sense putting good money after bad – take your ball and go home. If you were God, and the Creation you made had been ruined, what would you do? God decided to not scrap the world that he's made, but instead he set out a plan to save the world. God's plan to save the world didn't involve just pulling a few people out of the world to heaven. God decided that his plan of salvation would go as far as the whole rippling effect of sin. God made a choice to not rest until every last corner of his good creation was rescued. As the wonderful old hymn, "Joy to the World", puts it:

No more let sin and sorrow grow,

Nor thorns infest the ground;

He comes to make his blessings flow

Far as the curse is found,

Far as the curse is found,

Far as, far as the curse is found.

To put it simply, just as sin began with individuals and rippled out to contaminate the whole world, so God's wonderful plan of salvation begins with an individual, Jesus, and then ripples out to save the rest of creation. While individuals are the bullseye of God's target of salvation, we're not the entire target. Society is rescued and the animal kingdom is rescued and the whole earth is rescued.

What do we learn from the animals that are there at the manger? That God wants to rescue the whole world too from the terrible effects of people's sin.

What about the shepherds?

The shepherds are there at the manger. Here's what we read:

Luke 2:8-9

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Who are these shepherds? In Jesus' day, shepherds were at the bottom rung of the social ladder in Palestine. Shepherds were viewed in the same way that people looked

at tax collectors or dung sweepers. Shepherds were generally viewed as second class and untrustworthy. In the centuries before Jesus' birth, shepherds were even deprived of their civil rights. They were not allowed to be judges in court, they couldn't even serve as witnesses. Some people felt that doing business with a shepherd was unwise since it was assumed that anything you bought from a shepherd was probably stolen property. Shepherds were related to in the way that gypsies were related to for centuries in Europe. They were viewed with great suspicion, traveling around and not rooted in a particular community. People to be avoided. People to be afraid of.

What is so wonderful about God choosing to reveal himself to shepherds? It tells us that God is incredibly humble and kind. No one is so low or so disreputable or so messed up that God won't reach out to them. God doesn't ask, "What do other people think of you?" and if he gets a bad report says, "Well, then I'm going to avoid you, too!" God doesn't care what a person's reputation is. No one is such a failure or has done so many horrible things that they can't come to God.

Friends, this Christmas Eve there is no one that you could pray for who is so far gone that even God can't reach them. Do you believe that God's grace can soften the hardest hearts? Do you believe that God could rescue anyone? Do you believe that God could turn anyone's life around that you prayed for? God announces the birth of his Son to people who are among the most despised in the world.

We've looked at the animals and the shepherds. What other faces do we find around the manger? We find Joseph.

I've mentioned on a number of occasions that before I began pastoring my background was in law. One of the things I delighted in doing when I practiced law was adoptions - being able to find a baby for a desperate couple; going to the hospital and having the hospital personally release the baby to me. I'd carry the baby downstairs to my car and put them in their little carriers. I'd strap them into the back of my car. And then I would drive the baby to my house where the couple would be waiting. I remember couples walking my driveway, looking and straining to see when I was coming with their baby. You cannot imagine how joyful the experience is of pulling up in front of your home, going into the back seat of your car, unstrapping a little baby and handing it to a couple and saying "Here you go. Here's your new son. Here's your baby girl." I'd get to watch husband and wife dissolve into tears. It doesn't get any better than that.

Let me read to you Matthew 1:18-19.

Matthew 1:18-19

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law,

and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

You know, one of the most difficult decisions that a birth parent has to make is the choice of an adoptive parent. God the Father had to make this choice in deciding who was going to adopt his Son. Why did God out of all the possible choices in the world choose Joseph to be the adoptive father, the surrogate dad, in his Son, Jesus', life?

Mary became pregnant before she and Joseph came together. The only possible conclusion was that Mary had been unfaithful. Joseph had the option of publicly divorcing Mary, that would involve dragging her through a court hearing, displaying her pregnant condition, shaming her before her community so that she would never be accepted or received by anyone including her own family. That would have been the common approach in the first century for someone like Mary.

But what did Joseph decide to do? Here's what it says in verse 19:

Matthew 1:19

¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

The rabbis provided for a private divorce in which a person could go before two witnesses and quietly break off an engagement. When God the Father looked for someone to be the adoptive dad for his Son, he looked for someone who was exactly like himself. Someone who brought together integrity and mercy, high standards and great grace. The gospel writer says that Joseph was a righteous man.

You know what I think of when I think about Joseph? I think of Joseph the carpenter cutting his boards straight and true. He didn't cut corners. He didn't substitute inferior boards for a more expensive kind. He's the kind of person who always gives his customers a square deal. He's the kind of person that when they shake your hand, you know their word is their bond even if it causes them great loss. They're going to keep their word. They look you in the eye and they say, "You have my word on it and you can take that to the bank."

It's so rare these days to meet a man or a woman who when they say something, you know in your heart that if they said it, I know this is absolutely true and accurate. They're not fudging things. Just like God. God said it in his Word, you can count on it and put your faith in it. God always makes good on his promises.

But just like God, Joseph was a merciful man. So many people who have standards fall in the other direction toward a rigidity, a harshness, a legalism, a Pharisaism. Do you know people that when you're in their presence you always feel judged? You always

feel like nothing you do is ever good enough? Do you know anyone like that? Your housekeeping standards aren't up to snuff. You're not a good enough parent. You weigh too much. The way you dress, the movies you watch always are the wrong choices. God is nothing like that. God is merciful. He's kind. He stretches out his arms in welcome to anyone who would come to him in faith and repentance. God welcomes anyone. He welcomes us joyfully.

Why Joseph? Because Joseph combined in his person these two qualities of God – great integrity and great mercy.

We looked at the animals, the shepherds and Joseph. Now, let's look at Mary.

If we read back in Luke's gospel, we have this exchange between Mary and the angels.

Luke 1:34-37 (ESV)

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."

Mary hearing this, said:

Luke 1:38 (ESV)

³⁸ 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.

Do you know, friends that your happiness and my happiness does not depend on getting what we want out of life – getting the job you want, living in a certain type of home; getting the recognition you feel you deserve; being married; having your kids succeed in life. One of the best kept secrets to happiness is this: You can be happy even if life doesn’t go according to your plans. You can be happy even if life doesn’t go according to your dreams. You can be happy even if you don’t get your own way. Mary discovered the secret to happiness: May it be to me, Lord, according to your will.

Mary’s “let it be” is totally counter-cultural to the spirit of American individualism and self-assertion. We believe the secret to happiness is found in us having the freedom to run our own lives having no one telling us what to do, calling our own shots, determining our own destinies. This stuff is as American as apple pie.

A Christian is someone who has discovered the secret to happiness – repeatedly making a decision that you are going to have God’s will and God’s way control you. And there is so much freedom, and so much peace when you finally say along with Mary, “Let it be

to me, Lord, according to your will.” I have continually found this to be true in my own life over my entire adult life. Whenever I stop insisting on my own way, whenever I make a decision in little things or big things: “God, I’m going to choose to do your will in this situation; I’m going to let you have your way in my life,” I find myself to be freer, I feel lighter, I feel more peace inside, I feel more whole, I feel more hopeful. May it be to me, Lord, according to your will.

We’ve looked at the animals, the shepherds, Joseph and Mary who were around the manger, now it’s time to look into the manger to see the baby lying there as the angels told the shepherds

Luke 2:11-12

¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

What the world needs above every other need is that we need to be saved. Listen, whether you are religious or not, whether you are a church-goer or not, whether you consider yourself a follower of Christ or not, everyone of us here today knows that we need to be saved. Everyone of us has in our hearts a dream, a secret wish, a fantasy, which tells us that if we just got this one thing then we would be OK. If we just got this one thing, we’ll be saved. If I could just get this one person to love me, then everything

would be OK. If my loved one's life would turn around, if they would just get free of their addiction, then everything would be OK. If I could just get married and escape my loneliness, then everything will be OK. If I could just get pregnant and have my own baby, then everything would be OK. If I could just get this one job, just get out of debt, just get a certain score on an exam, then I will be OK.

This one thing, this one person, this one achievement will save me from failing in life; it will save me from a life of mediocrity and emptiness.

The Bible tells us that our problem in life is that we are looking to everything and everyone other than Jesus to be our Savior. We know we need to be saved. But we've fixed our hopes and our dreams on the wrong thing.

Friends, have you ever had the experience of getting what you thought would make everything right and when you got it, it didn't make everything right. You thought you getting married would absolutely complete you but afterwards you still felt alone. You thought having kids would be the best thing ever but you have incredible struggles with your kids.

I remember talking with a physician a few years ago. He was the Chief Medical Officer of one of America's largest healthcare systems. He said to me, "Rich, I've done everything that the world tells me should make me happy." He had done fantastically well as an

undergraduate, went to one of America's top medical schools, graduated with honors, completed a prestigious residency, had a great job, a big house. He said to me with real sadness, "Is this all there is?"

Is that it? He had pinned his hopes on all of these saviors – high marks in school will make things right in my life. Going to a top medical school will make things right in my life. Getting invited into a great residency program will make things right. Getting a top job, making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, having a large house, having a beautiful wife.

God says to us this Christmas Eve, "You're looking to the wrong things to save you! Look to me and not to something or someone else." God says to each of us this Christmas Eve, "The reason I sent my son Jesus was to be the Savior. Jesus came to earth on Christmas Day. He died for your sins on Good Friday and he rose from the dead on Easter Sunday." The reason Jesus was born on Christmas was to be the Savior. God says to each of us this Christmas Eve, "If you want to be right with me, if you want to be saved, come to me. Put your trust in me. Ask me to forgive your sins." God says to each of us this Christmas Eve, "If you want a relationship with me that will make a real difference in your life for the rest of your life, come to me. Invite me into your life." God says to each of us this Christmas Eve, "If you want to become my child, if you don't want to be afraid of death, if you want your life changed and transformed, if you want to find the thing you've always been looking for, then give your life to me."

The angel said to the shepherds, he says to each of us this Christmas Eve, “For to you is born in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”