

# *Christmas Eve Reflections*

Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 24, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.<sup>6-7</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights,  
Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told! (Luke 2:1-20, The Message)

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We've got a new, young, energetic large black lab at home who needs lots of walks. My wife usually takes the morning shift and I take the night shift, which I don't mind, especially this time of year, because I like being out when it's cold and still. Plus, I love all the Christmas lights in this neighborhood. It seems like every other house is decorated in some creative way and it makes for a lovely walk each evening. The variety never ceases to amaze me.

However, the other night on one of these walks I began to wonder what it would be like for somebody to visit our city this time of year who came from another part of the world where, if there is such a place, people had never heard about Christmas. If I took him on a walk around my neighborhood and explained to him that people had decorated their homes and yards to celebrate a very special holiday, would he be able to figure out exactly what it was we were celebrating?

He would see displayed lots of colorful trees, species like reindeer that aren't native to this part of the world, along with plenty of penguins and polar bears, countless old bearded men in red suits, and snowmen in a land where it never snows. Not far from my house we'd come across a giant blow-up dachshund in a Christmas sweater, a smiling dragon adorned in Christmas bells, an inflatable helicopter flown by an elf, and my personal favorite, one those old bearded men peeking out of an inflatable outhouse. And of course, my bewildered visitor would also notice, sprinkled in among the other decorations, an occasional young couple dressed in vintage Mediterranean outfits kneeling beside a baby in a feeding trough.

Would it not be next to impossible for such a person to deduce from it all the Christmas story we just read from Luke's Gospel. There's no way. He would be left wondering what in the world is happening here. What exactly are these

people celebrating? What is the message in all this? And in some ways I have to think that the confusion would be reflective of our culture, not just at Christmas but in general.

I'm going to ask you to think carefully with me for a few moments. I know that's not fair. It's a tall order. Not because you can't think – of course you can - but because it's late, and your bellies are probably full, and it's warm and cozy in here, and we're sitting together on the most sentimentally-loaded night of the whole year and sentimentality and critical thinking don't make good bedfellows. An author named Alan Bradley once put it this way, "One of the things I dread about becoming an adult is that sooner or later you begin letting sentimentality get in the way of simple logic. False feelings are allowed to clog the works like raw honey poured into the tiny wheels of a fine timepiece." So I know I'm asking a lot, but indulge me.

Think about it. What are we doing here? It's late. We should be home, in bed. I mean, really, what are we doing here? What are we celebrating, or not celebrating? What's the message here? Why does it all matter? Does it matter?

You see, there's a whole group of us running around these days who believe there is a God, some God up there in one form or another, and that this God created us and is now watching us, though perhaps from a distance, and taking note of all the good things we do and also all the not-so-good things we do. You might say he's keeping two lists, a nice list and a naughty list, like somebody else we know. In fact, I think it's why Santa Claus makes sense to lots of us. It's cut and dry, right? If you are good you are rewarded, maybe even with heaven. If you're not good you're punished, or at least left out. More people than you might think see God this way.

Truth be told, sometimes I see God this way. And when I do, one of two things happen in me. Sometimes, when I'm not sure I've been good enough, I'm left full of fear and insecurity. Because how can you really know if, in the end, you've been good enough? Left unchecked, this can even lead to a deep sense of discouragement if I begin to believe I'll *never* be good enough to make it on God's nice list. On the other hand, sometimes I'm convinced I *have* been good enough, especially when compared to other people I see around me. At those times I'm left feeling prideful, even arrogant. I can even start to feel some level of disdain for those I believe ought to be on the naughty list.

Is that what all this means? Is this really what we are celebrating here, that God has given us a chance to prove we are good enough so that some day we might be rewarded? If that's the way things really are, is that really worthy of such a celebration?

For this reason there's a whole other group of us running around who think it's all rubbish to begin with. The Luke story we just read – stars, and wise men, and shepherds, and angels, and a virgin giving birth to the Son of God - more people than you might think, perhaps even some of us, think it's a fairy tale. And I can see why. It does seem quite hard to swallow when you think about it.

Truth be told, I have a certain level of respect for people in this crowd. Our whole culture is nuts with Christmas, some form of Christmas or another. But Christmas, the word, is literally Christ Mass, the name of an ancient annual celebration of the coming of God into our world in Jesus Christ. At the heart of it, you see, Christmas is about worship, and so if you don't believe in any of it, you're actually demonstrating intellectual honesty if you refuse to decorate your house, or extend Merry Christmas greetings to people along the way, or exchange gifts with others. Seriously, why would you?

The problem is that even people in this group appreciate, even highly value, much of what Christmas stands for: family, and celebration, and peace on earth, and caring for those in need, and, most of all, love. Generally, these things matter to even the most ardent atheist among us. But if there is no God, no grander purpose in the universe, then how can those things matter?

Francis Crick was a noble-prize winning scientist who was most noted for sharing in the discovery of the structure of the DNA molecule. In other words, he was a super smart guy. He was also an atheist who believed that there is nothing on this earth but us. Not only is there no god but there is no human soul, no spirit, no divine presence, no afterlife. The world, subject to a process of natural selection, is all there is. In his book called *The Astonishing Universe*, Crick once made this stunning claim. "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memory and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will are all, in fact, no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules." Merry Christmas.

All joking aside, if there really is no god then this claim makes perfect sense. In fact, it's irrefutable. Thoughts, feelings, love, family, life purpose, courage, honor, truth, all these things are in us as a chemical response because our ancestors had these in them as well and it helped them survive, unlike others who didn't have these things wired in them and, thus, didn't survive. In the end, therefore, none of it really matters or lasts.<sup>1</sup> And honestly, I find this is a refreshingly candid admission and, once again, irrefutable if you choose to see the universe as a godless accident and thus celebration, even at this time of year, seems sadly out of place.

In 1961, the Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, became the first human to orbit the earth. Upon his return to earth, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, a proponent at that time of an atheist Soviet Union, famously declared in a speech, "Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any god there." For him, the case was finally closed.

C.S. Lewis, the brilliant Christian writer and theologian, was still living at the time and Khrushchev's remark prompted him to respond in an essay called *The Seeing Eye*. In that essay Lewis argued that saying a Soviet cosmonaut returned from space and didn't see God is like saying that Hamlet went into the attic of his castle and didn't see Shakespeare. His point was this. If God truly is the creator of the universe, we would never be able, on our own, to discover God as if he were some object that could be observed from a spacecraft and then perhaps even brought into a lab and analyzed. No, the only way that Hamlet could ever know anything about Shakespeare is if Shakespeare put information about himself into the play!<sup>2</sup>

I once heard New York City pastor, Tim Keller, tell the story of Dorothy Sayers. Sayers was a renowned English crime writer who lived 100 years ago. She was one of the first women to ever graduate from Oxford and went on to great fame for her detective stories. The main character in her books was an English gentleman named Lord Peter Wimsey, a man who found amusement working as a detective solving criminal mysteries. Well, in the middle of this series of novels a new character suddenly appears by the name of Harriet Vane. She's not particularly good looking, graduated from Oxford, and is, herself, the writer of criminal mystery novels. When she meets Lord Wimsey she begins to help him solve mysteries. Eventually they fall in love, marry, and live together happily ever after.

Many readers of these novels suspected what you likely now suspect, that over time Dorothy Sayers looked into the world she had created in her books, specifically at the man she had created, and she fell in love with Lord Peter Wimsey because she saw he was lonely and needed somebody to save him. So she wrote herself into the story to do exactly that.<sup>3</sup>

Isn't that a sweet story? It is, but please don't let sentimentally blur your vision here. Think about it. This is, in fact, the claim of Christmas. There actually is an author of the universe, but he's not some distant being who sits far off in heaven with his clipboard making lists of the naughty and the nice. In fact, as the story goes, God knows that we don't have it in us to earn salvation by being good enough and so we need to be saved. On our own we'll never find God, no matter how far out in space we venture. Which is, in the end, why God wrote himself into the story. Apparently, God's love for us is so great that he would rather come to be one of us to rescue us, even die as one of us, rather than live without us. God is not some impersonal force or concept to be contemplated, or some higher power to be subject to, but a Father who, yes, requires our full devotion but only after he has shown his full devotion to us. In other words, love really matters, and our Creator has gone to infinite lengths to show us that it matters. His journey has signaled his intentions; he came that eventually all that is wrong with this world will someday be set right again.

If we can make our way through the rest of the glitter we will find that *this* is the claim of Christmas. But if I'm honest with you, there have been times I've struggled to believe it. Maybe as a pastor I'm not supposed to say that, especially on Christmas Eve – but it's true. As I said before, too much of the time I slip into thinking that God is like some divine Santa Claus making two lists and, as a result, either pride or fear take over in my heart depending on which list I imagine I'm on.

Other times – not often, but there have been times – I begin to wonder if it's all true in the first place. But in those moments I take solace in the fact that even Jesus' own disciples had the same struggle. At one point lots of people were having a hard time believing in what Jesus was saying and eventually most of the crowds deserted him. In that moment

<sup>1</sup> I'm citing this illustration from Tim Keller's sermon, *The Meaning of Christmas*, preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, December 18, 2011. In significant ways his sermon inspired this one.

<sup>2</sup> Cited at <http://www.objectivegospel.org/god-the-playwright-tim-keller>

<sup>3</sup> Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Christmas*.

Jesus must have seen something in the eyes of his disciples that told him they were feeling the same doubts. So he asked them if they wanted to leave him as well. I love their response. Peter, speaking for the rest of them, answered, **“Lord, to whom can we go? You alone have the words of eternal life.”**<sup>4</sup>

That’s so good. That’s me. At those times when I struggle in faith to believe this unbelievable story, I hear God’s Word, this sacred story handed down to us, and there is just something there that has the ring of truth. It’s like smelling salts. And I wake up and realize that within the promise of Christmas there is the promise of life, and where else can I find that?

So think about it. Seriously. Pay attention. Ask the question. What are we doing here? What are we celebrating? What’s the message here? And does it even matter?

What if it’s true? What if there really is a God and what if he isn’t up there making lists? What if the love God has for this world – you included – is so great that he actually did write himself into the story and give himself the hardest role of all? The eternal author of life confined to the body of a helpless child, destined to grow to become a man who would take on the entire suffering of human history, all so that we might be saved and set free. The implications of this claim are so enormous that we dare not let the sentimentality of the season numb us from thinking carefully about its legitimacy. We do so at our own peril, not so much because we then run the risk of facing some consequence or another – though that may be part of it – but more so because we run the risk of missing a depth and quality and permanence of life that we all sense we were made for, and most of us realize we aren’t living – not even close! – but which has freely been offered to us in Christ.

In a moment we are going to gather around the Table behind me. This Table is both a reminder and an invitation. It’s a reminder of what God has already done. The bread reminds us that God himself allowed his body to be broken on the cross. The cup reminds us that God allowed his blood to be shed on that same cross. He really did come into this world to give his life for us. That leads us to the invitation, that the way is now clear for us to come back home, to not only know about God but to know God, and the life he always intended to share with us.

This is not the time or place for sentimentality, however. Let me be clear. If you don’t believe that you need God’s grace, that on your own you can make it on to the good list, or even that there isn’t a God in the first place, then this table is not for you and it would not be right for you to come. It’s not that you’re not welcome; of course you are. It’s just that it doesn’t make sense for you to come, because this table is for people who know they need grace and have come to believe that Jesus, after what he has done for us, is now the only source of grace which is sufficient. It’s for broken people who just can’t seem to get it right.

If that’s you as well, then come. Come with your doubts and with your failures. Come with all the broken pieces of your life. Come not having it all figured out. Come even if you’re not sure faith is what you have but only something you long to have. If that’s you, come and take part in this feast which Christ himself has prepared for all who, in faith, would receive it.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> John 6:68, NRSV