

December 24, 2016

Christmas Questions

What Child is This?

Luke 2:1-20

Opening words: Our world values answers; I believe in questions. So did the famous French enlightenment writer Voltaire. He once wrote, "*Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.*" A good question is priceless because it simply means you want to understand. Good questions are the key to understanding our world; good questions are the key to understanding our faith. I believe God expects us to ask questions because God wants us to understand His mysterious ways. My 2015 Advent/Christmas sermon series has revolved around some of the finest questions ever asked. Each one is found in the story of the nativity. I have called this sermon series *The Christmas Questions*.

Over the last several weeks, we have been looking at these questions. We began on Thanksgiving weekend with Zechariah's question of doubt, *How can I be sure?* Then, we looked at Mary's question of humility, *How can this be?* Next, we looked at Elizabeth's question of resilience, *Why am I so favored?* Sunday we looked at the crowd's question of potential, *What will this child become?* That brings us to this evening's question, *What child is this?* This evening's scripture lesson is extremely traditional; you would be disappointed if you didn't hear it today: Luke 2:1-12.

Luke 2:1-20 ¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. 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. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 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." ¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Did you know, according to UNICEF, approximately 353,000 babies are born every day? (Approximately 154,000 die each day.) That means, 255 babies are born every minute, 4.3 babies are born every second. Just think about that figure for a moment. That means over a thirty-day period, 10,590,000 babies are born. That means 128,845,000 are born annually. I have no clue how many babies have been born over the past 2,000 years. On the day you were born, your mother was relieved and your family celebrated, but you were just one newborn in a crowd of newborns. This evening we come here to remember one of those births.

The story may sound familiar; it is found in the second chapter of Luke. The opening verses of that chapter act as the climax to the entire first chapter. Elizabeth and Mary were both touched by God in two different ways, and conceived. Last Sunday, we looked at the birth of Elizabeth's baby, John. Today, we look at the birth of Mary's baby, Jesus. You know the story; you have heard it many times.

Caesar Augustus, who sat on the throne of the Roman Empire from 31 B.C. to A.D. 14, issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. It happened when Quirinius was governor over Syria. That makes the date between A.D. 6 and 9. (Remember, the calendar was adjusted sometime in the past.) It will suffice to say, it was a long time ago. However, some things don't change. The census was taken for two reasons, taxation and military service. The law stated that everyone was required to go to their hometown to be counted. That meant Joseph went to Bethlehem, near Jerusalem. He did not travel alone; he traveled with a young pregnant teenager by the name of Mary. However, in some ways the times have changed. They had never known each other intimately, yet they were legally bound. The child she carried was the son of God and the time was drawing near for her to give birth. Timing is everything. The young couple must have worried the child would come during the journey. The child waited until they arrived in Bethlehem. Any Sunday school student will tell you where the child was born. The baby Jesus was born in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn. They named the baby Jesus. The name Jesus means "Savior." I guess names do matter. If any of that sounds familiar, say, "**Amen!**"

In 1837, William Chatterton Dix was born in Bristol, England. His father was a surgeon by trade, but his passion was poetry. He passed that passion on to his son. As a young man he moved to Glasgow, Scotland and sold marine insurance. That means he insured boats and related interests. Prior to his thirtieth birthday, Dix fell gravely ill. The illness nearly took him, and he spent months in bed recovering. During those long months, he prayed, read Christian literature and wrote poetry. One of the poems he wrote was called The Manger Song. He took several verses of that poem and put them to music.

The tune came from "Greensleeves". The first verse talks about the baby Jesus sitting in his mother's lap. The second verse questions Jesus's humble surroundings. The third tells of the Magi's visit. I know you know the hymn William Chatterton Dix wrote from his sick bed. You just sang it, *What Child is This*. It is one of the Christmas classics. However, I like it this evening for another reason. It offers us our question for the evening, the one the shepherds must have asked on that on this holy night, "What child is this"?

By your presence here this evening, I am assuming you know the answer to our question. Jesus was not the son of Joseph the carpenter; Jesus was the son of God! It is the greatest mystery in the history of the world. Why did God leave the perfection of heaven and enter into our world? Just think about it for a moment. God is God. God is all knowing, all powerful, ever present, unchanging, holy, righteous, and sovereign, and so much more. God is God, yet he left the perfection of heaven to dwell in a place like this. It is like trading places with your dog. We say we love our dogs, but would you really trade places with them? Are you willing to drink your water out of a bowl and beg for scraps under the table? Is anyone one here comfortable "going" out in the yard? It is hard to comprehend, yet God did it. Martin Luther once wrote, *"The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself in our flesh, is beyond all human understanding."* The Incarnation is hard to understand. I know that is true because I have struggled with it for years. However, this year I have a better handle on it.

Several weeks ago, I attended an Emmaus event. It is a group that is committed to spiritual development. Each time they gather, they sing and someone stands up and shares something from their heart. On that night, the person who led the group grabbed my attention. I really wasn't surprised because I have a great deal of respect for him as a man, and as a disciple. I knew he wouldn't waste my time and he didn't. He told a story that widened my understanding of the incarnation. I hope that story widens your understanding of the Incarnation too. This is the story:

There was once a man who didn't believe in the Incarnation or the spiritual meaning of Christmas, and was skeptical about God. He and his family lived in a farm community. His wife was a devout believer and diligently raised her children in her faith. He sometimes gave her a hard time about her faith and mocked her religious observance of Christmas.

One snowy Christmas Eve she was taking the kids to the Christmas Eve service at church. She pleaded with him to come, but he firmly refused. He ridiculed the idea of the incarnation of Christ and dismissed it as nonsense. *"Why would God lower himself and become a human like us?! It's such a ridiculous story!"* he said. So she and the children left for church while he stayed home.

After they left, the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blizzard. As he looked out the window, all he saw was a blinding snowstorm. He sat down to relax in front of the fire for the evening.

Then, he heard a loud thump, something hitting against the window. And another thump. He looked outside but couldn't see. So he ventured outside to see what it was. In the field near his house he saw, of all the strangest things, a flock of geese! They were apparently flying to look for a warmer area down south, but got caught in the snowstorm. The snow had become too blinding and violent for the geese to fly or see their way. They were lost and stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter. They just fluttered their wings and flew around in circles around the field blindly and aimlessly. He had compassion for them and wanted to help them. He thought to himself, *"The barn would be a great place for them to stay! It's warm and safe; surely they could spend the night and wait out the storm."*

So he walked over to the barn and opened the barn doors for them. He waited, watching them, hoping they would notice the open doors and go inside. But they just fluttered around aimlessly and didn't notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them. He started whistling and calling to them. Nothing. He shouted, jumped up and down, waved his arms. They didn't pay attention. He moved closer toward them to get their attention, but they just moved away from him out of fear.

He went into the house and came back out with some bread, broke it up, and made a bread trail leading to the barn. They still didn't catch on.

Starting to get frustrated, he went over and tried to shoo them, run after them, and chase them toward the barn. They only got scared and scattered into every direction except toward the barn.

None of his attempts to get them into the barn succeeded. Nothing he did could get them to go into the barn where there was warmth, safety, and shelter; nothing he did could make them enter the one place where they could survive.

Feeling totally frustrated, he exclaimed, *"Why don't they listen to me! Why don't they follow me! What's wrong with them! Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm! How can I possibly get them into the one place that will save them!"* He thought for a moment and realized that they just wouldn't follow a human. He said to himself, *"How can I possibly save them? The only way would be for me to become like those geese. If only I could become like one of them! Then I could show them the way! Then I could save them! They would follow me, not fear me. They would trust me, and I would lead them to safety."*

He stood silently for a moment as the words that he had just said reverberated in his mind: *"If only I could become like one of them -- then I could show them the way -- then I could save them."* He thought about his words, and remembered what he said to his wife: *"Why would God want to be like us? That's so ridiculous!"* Something clicked in his mind as he put these two together. It was like a revelation, and he began to understand the Incarnation.

We were like the geese -- blind, gone astray, perishing. God became like us so He could show us the way and make a way available to save us. That is the meaning of Christmas, he realized in his heart. As the winds and blinding snow abated, his heart became quiet as he pondered this epiphany. He understood what Christmas was all about. He knew why Christ had to come. Suddenly, years of doubt and disbelief were shattered, as he humbly and tearfully bowed down in the snow, and embraced the true meaning of Christmas.

There are 353,000 babies born every day. Can you tell me how many babies have been born in the past 2,000 years? They are all special and they all deserve love. However, only one was the son of God, who came into the world to save us "bird brains". Merry Christmas!