

December 15, 2019

Rediscovering Christmas
Jesus Came...
Luke 2:8-14

Opening Words: It will be forty-five years tomorrow. On December 16, 1974, I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. You know the story. I have told it many times. I was led to Christ by the prettiest girl in my high school youth group. I didn't know then the impact that day would have on my life. The only thing I felt on that day was relief. I knew I was going to heaven. When I was young having a date was important to me. Now, I am not so sure. There are many ways to follow Jesus. The only thing that really matters is that you follow Jesus. What is your conversion story? Today's message is about salvation.

This is sermon number three in my new five-part sermon series, *Rediscovering Christmas*. In this sermon series, I am reminding you Christmas is not just a secular holiday. It is a religious holiday. It is not about Santa Baby. It is about the birth of our Lord, the Savior of the world, the incarnation of God, Jesus. I began on the First Sunday of Advent, and I will conclude on Christmas Eve. Our Gospel reading for today is Luke 2:8-14. Let me call this message *Jesus Came...*

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 that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, 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 heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

The great evangelist Billy Graham (1918-2018) once said, "*Make sure of your commitment to Jesus Christ, and seek to follow him every day. Don't be swayed by the false values and goals of this world but put Christ and his will first in everything you do.*" I have used that quote several times because I like it. That quote challenges me. If you like that quote say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the second chapter of Luke. The scene is familiar because we visit it annually. Joseph returns home to Bethlehem to be counted in the national census. A census in the Roman Empire was taken for two reasons. The first is to be counted for military service. However, Joseph was excused from military service

because he was Jew. The second is everyone had to be counted for tax reasons. Joseph probably wished he could have been excused from taxes, but he wasn't. Joseph didn't travel alone. He travels with his betrothed, Mary. She is pregnant and gives birth shortly after they arrive in Bethlehem. She gave birth to a little boy. That baby would change history. There were many questions about the boy's biological father. Some say it was Joseph. Some say the boy was the very son of God. The answer to that question is found in our reading for today. This scene is equally familiar.

Shepherds are out in the fields in the hillside surrounding Jerusalem. We love the shepherds but that was not the case of their own generation. Their generation looked down on the shepherds because their vocation didn't permit them to carry out the various washings of their faith. They are basically ignored by their society, but they are not forgotten by God. They are favored by God. They are the first to be told the long-awaited Messiah had been born. The message is delivered by angels. In the Bible, angels are messengers, not protectors. Luke 2:11 quotes the angel, "*Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord.*" Did you hear what the angel said? Our Savior had been born. Later we discover the name of that baby is Jesus. The name Jesus means, "The Lord is salvation." There is no way to talk about Jesus and not bring up the complex topic of salvation. Can I ask you a personal question?

What do you need to be saved from this Christmas? Does anyone here need to be saved from their family? You promised to help watch the grandchildren occasionally, but now they are over every day. Or, do you need to be saved from your in-laws? You married your spouse out of love, but no one told you the love of your life came as a package deal. You didn't just get the pretty girl or the handsome young man, you got the entire clan. Does anyone here need to be saved from Christmas cards and presents? The issue is money, but the issue is also time. Does anyone here need to be saved from their own guilt? Your past includes some ugliness and the people in your life won't forget. Does anyone here feel like they need to be saved from responsibility? Wouldn't it be nice to be selfish just once? Won't it be nice if someone in your life did something for you? What is it in your life would you like to discard? What do you need to be saved from this Christmas? However, the Gospel lesson for today is not about the details of our lives.

The Gospel lesson for today is about the major issues of our lives. The Gospel lesson for today is about eternity. It is about your eternity. If we are going to rediscover Christmas, then you must remember some basic Christian theology. I hope, they are not new to you. Jesus came for three important reasons.

First, Jesus came to save you from sin. Back in 1830, George Wilson was convicted of robbing the U.S. Mail and was sentenced to be hanged. The case was complex, so President Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) issued a pardon for Wilson. Everyone was shocked when Wilson refused to accept it. The justice system didn't know what to do.

The matter went to Chief Justice John Marshall (1755-1835), who concluded that Wilson would have to be executed. *"A pardon is a slip of paper,"* wrote Marshall, *"the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged."*

We live in a world that is rejecting the pardon. Jesus Christ came into this world to free us from our sins. We do not have to die. However, many will die because they have rejected the pardon. One of the things you really need to do today is accept the fact that you are sinner and you can't earn your salvation. Roman 3:23 says, *"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."* How many people do you know justify their sins by comparing their sins to others? We look good next to murders, child molesters and terrorists. The problem is they are not part of the equation. The only sins that should concern you are your own. How do you compare next to Jesus? We have all sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. Jesus came to save us from our sin. Martin Luther said, *"The life of Christianity consists of possessive pronouns. It is one thing to say, "Christ is a Savior"; it is quite another thing to say, "He is my Savior and my Lord."* Jesus came to save us from sin. And all of God's sinful people said, **"Amen!"**

Second, Jesus came to save you by grace. I love the story of Clara Barton (1821-1912) and Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919). During the Spanish-American War, Clara Barton was overseeing the work of the Red Cross in Cuba. One day Colonel Theodore Roosevelt came to her. He wanted to buy food for his sick and wounded Rough Riders. But she refused to sell him any. Roosevelt was perplexed. His men needed the help and he was prepared to pay out of his own funds. When he asked someone why he could not buy the supplies, he was told, "Colonel, just ask for it!" A smile broke over Roosevelt's face. Now he understood--the provisions were not for sale. All he had to do was simply ask and they would be given freely. I understand why Teddy Roosevelt couldn't understand. We are raised with the fact that nothing in this world is free.

If I were God, I would give everyone who labors in the church a bonus! If I were God anyone who labored in the kitchen all day so others could eat all the food in a few minutes would get a bonus. If I were God anyone who served on the Board of Trustees and shouldered the responsibility of maintaining our property would get a bonus. If I were God anyone on the Finance Committee would get a bonus. If I were God anyone who tithed or wrote an extra check to help us pay our \$55,565 in conference and district apportionments would get a bonus. If I were God Sunday School teachers would get a bonus. If I were God everyone who showed up for choir practice or TOGGLE rehearsal would get a bonus. If I were God anyone who sacrificed for another would get a bonus. If I were God every preacher would get an extra big bonus. The job is becoming harder. It is harder to find people, and it is harder to keep people. Respect for clergy is at an all-time low. If I were God, I would give everyone who labors in the church a bonus! This is the problem.

I am not God. I am like you, a sinner. There is no way to earn your salvation. We are

saved by grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."* In other words, it is a gift. There is nothing you can do to earn your salvation. I love that divine truth, but it is hard to swallow. Jesus came to save you by grace. And all of God's sinful people said, **"Amen!"**

Third, Jesus came to save you for a purpose. Two of the greatest names in baseball history are Yogi Berra (1925-2015) and Hank Aaron (born 1934). Berra was a catcher for the New York Yankees. Aaron was a power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves. In 1957, the Yankees and Braves played in the World Series. Berra was famous for his endless chatter. As Aaron approached the plate, Berra said to him, "Henry, you're holding the bat wrong. You're supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark." Aaron didn't say anything, but he hit the next pitch into the left field bleachers for a homerun. After rounding the bases and tagging up at home plate, Aaron looked at Yogi Berra and said, "I didn't come up here to read." That sets up an interesting question.

What is your purpose? God did not put us in this world to be consumed by our own needs. God put us in the world to be consumed by the needs of others. Our blessings were not to be hoarded; they are to be used. Salvation is not just fire insurance to keep you out of hell. You are saved for a purpose. Ephesians 1:11-12 says, *"In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory."* Jesus came to save you for a purpose. And all of God's sinful people said, **"Amen!"**

One of the great names in history is Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821). His soldiers raised him to super-hero status. Folklore tells us one of his marshals was mortally wounded in battle. As the last struggle drew near and he lay dying in his tent, he sent for his chief. Napoleon came. As Napoleon stood there the man yelled out his name and said, "Save Me!" Napoleon didn't have the power to save the man and sadly walked away.

There is only one name that will save you. That name is not Napoleon. The name is not Donald or Nancy. The name is not Ben or Baker. The only name that will save you is Jesus. He came to save you from your sins. He came to save you with his grace. He came to save you for a purpose. Do you remember the quote from Billy Graham? He once said, *"Make sure of your commitment to Jesus Christ, and seek to follow him every day. Don't be swayed by the false values and goals of this world but put Christ and his will first in everything you do."* And all of God's saved people said, **"Amen!"**