

“Christmas: The Glorious Scandal”

Luke 2:1-20

12/20/09—Christmas Sunday

I hope and pray that each of you encounter God’s love and grace in new and transformative ways this Christmas. I do hope it is a Merry Christmas. And even if it is not merry in the “jolly” and “happy” sense of the word, I pray that God will renew you and surprise you and everyone with His amazing grace.

Because that really is what all this is about. It’s the unexpected way God fulfilled the yearning of all humanity for meaning and hope.

We know there are a lot of unexpected things that happen in life. Some good, some not so good. I mean, it’s Christmas Sunday so we probably are not expecting to hear about scandals this morning, but have you noticed? I can pretty much count on hearing about some scandal that is going on with someone nowadays, be it an athlete, a banker, or a politician. It’s kind of become our new fascination.

Why? Because it is unexpected. It’s some event that happens in someone’s life that is extreme enough to make you to stop and say, “Wow. That is big. How could someone do that? *Why* would someone do that?”

So how does it feel to hear me say that by walking into this church this morning, you are part of the biggest scandal of all time?

Out of all the scandals of the world, there is one that has actually gotten glossed over. One that changed all of history. No, this scandal does not involve infidelity or thievery or any sin for that matter. Yet this is one that has affected every human that ever lived or ever will live on this earth.

And unlike other scandals where people run and hide in shame, this one you can rejoice to be a part of.

Yes, it is Christmas. Christmas? Yes,

The Christmas story and all that Jesus’ life eventually would entail is the biggest scandal in all of history.

This is not how it was “supposed” to happen. The Messiah, the One who was to come and restore God’s people to respect and authority, the Savior of His people, was supposed to come in glorious fashion. The prophets foretold for many long years of His glory. God’s people waited and longed for His arrival, yearning from the depths of their souls for this display of God’s will and power and fulfillment of His promises.

And so what happened?

Read Luke 2:1-20

Yes, and this Baby would grow into a Man who would heal, save, transform lives. He would speak Truth—unlike anyone had ever heard. He would talk about being one with His Father in heaven. He would show a love, and ultimate humility, that no one could truly comprehend. Because it was a love that led Him all the way to a wooden cross, the Messiah put on display for all to watch His suffering and death.

The Apostle Paul would name it in 1 Corinthians 1:23: *“But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”*

Scandal.

You see, it was not supposed to happen this way—the way God showed up in this world. Shepherds were the first to receive the news from the angel of God that the Savior was born.

Let's look at the shepherds. Although we hear this account of the shepherds now in a very comforting, positive way, in the first century shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on others' lands. Shepherding was a despised occupation at the time. They were despised by the orthodox Jews because they were so unclean. They couldn't observe all the cleanliness Laws since they lived in the fields with the sheep.

I was trying to find a likeness to our world today, but I didn't want to offend anyone by comparing them to shepherds. So I'll put it on storyteller Garrison Keiller, who described them "Like big-city parking lot attendants." Kind of puts a little twist on how we look at our Nativity Scenes.

They were the ones God spoke to first. They were the ones who became the first evangelists, praising God for all they had heard and seen.

It is easy for us to overlook the absolute scandal of the Christmas story—that God came into human history completely helpless, as a newborn, and was laid in a feeding trough. He came quietly into a small province far from the seat of earthly power, born to a young woman who was not married when she found out she was with child. No elaborate preparations were made for the birth. God was born on the road. I mean, it's not too far-fetched to say that today Jesus would have been born in the back of a bus. Shepherds were the ones to come see Him at His birth, not kings or priests. The magi came later on.

But these are facts of that time that we cannot forget or overlook. Christmas is the glorious scandal.

Why is that a big deal? Why mess with our safe images of Christmas?

Because:

From day one God has made it absolutely clear that He will go to any length to reach you.

God is not one to "play it safe", but will risk it all for you.

There is no one out of reach of God's love.

You cannot predict how or where He might show up.

"To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord! Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

This is not just some story in a book, some "Once upon a time" we tell around the fire as tradition, some other person's tale. This is your life, your story, your Savior. God came into real life, just like you're living it now for the purpose of loving you into Life. To show you that He is one of us, yet is the One to save us from ourselves. He knows all about your pain, your joys, your struggles, and your triumphs. That makes all the difference in the world.

Author and speaker Jill Briscoe recalls a time this was made clear to her:

"In Croatia I was asked to speak to a church gathering for about 200 newly arrived refugees. Refugees from this area of the world are mostly women because the men are either dead or in camp or fighting. This group of Muslims, Croats, and a few Serbs had fled to a seminary on the border of a battered Croatian town. The town was still in danger of sniper fire and bombing, but the church had escaped because there were apartment buildings between it and the guns. Attackers had tried to fire shells over the apartment buildings to the seminary, but they hadn't managed to do it, so it became the refugee receiving and feeding place.

"We worked all day visiting with the refugees. At night a service was held in this huge, old church, and I had to speak. I didn't know what to say. Everything I had prepared seemed totally inadequate, so I put my notes away and prayed, 'God, give me creative ideas they can identify with.'

“I told them about Jesus, who as a baby became a refugee. He was hunted by soldiers, and His parents had to flee to Egypt at night, leaving everything behind. I could tell the people began to click with what I was saying. I kept praying like crazy.

“I continued telling them about Jesus' life, and when I got to the cross, I said, ‘He hung there [humiliated].’ They knew what that meant. Some of them had been [humiliated] through torture.

“At the end of the message, I said, ‘All these things have happened to you. You are homeless. You have had to flee. You have suffered unjustly. But you didn't have a choice. He had a choice. He knew all this would happen to Him, but He still came.’ And then I told them why.

“Many of them just knelt down, put their hands up, and wept. I said, ‘He's the only one who really understands. How can I possibly understand, but He can.’”

That is what God did for us:

God made our story His, and His story ours.

Jesus knew what was going to happen to Him, but He still came as a vulnerable little baby. Because that way He can honestly say to you that He knows exactly how you feel right now. He knows what stuff you brought with you here this morning. Yes, it's Christmas, but you and I know that life is still happening out there. Christmas doesn't mean everything is perfect in the world or in our lives. What it does mean is that God showed us in person who He is, that He loves you enough to come and experience what you experience. And through our adoption in Christ we are now a part of His story.

So what does that mean then? Well of course we always have hope. We have new life. We are freed from our sin and death.

And:

We can live differently now.

We can live like Mary who, first of all, allowed God to do His will in her life by having Jesus. But also trusted God through criticism from others, trusted God when she and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem when she was close to being due. This wasn't a luxury car she took across town. Mary rode a donkey 80 miles over rough terrain. But Mary went, and in a town not her own, she gave birth to the Son of God.

Yes, this is your story. When we say to God as Mary did, “Let it be according to Your Word,” by God's grace we can live like Mary did.

God will use our lives to accomplish His will in us.

As I read from someone this past week, “God turned this inconvenient moment with Joseph and Mary into one in which the angels found their tune and Satan met his match.”

We are a part of His story. Which means we can also live like the shepherds, regular folk who were simply doing their job one night when God broke into the world and changed it forever. Yes, they were afraid. Yes, they had to absorb what all this meant. But still they went and looked for themselves at what the angel told them, and they saw Jesus. And because they believed and trusted God's Word, they became the first witnesses of God's glory.

When we live as God's children in Christ, His story becomes our own. He will give us a new purpose, to live out His will and be His witnesses to the world around us.

Yes, it can be fearful at first. All this can feel overwhelming, just like it did for the shepherds, but in God's hands He will overcome our fear and give us courage to go.

Because you know how it can often be with us. We read the news, we hear of all that is happening somewhere with someone, and yet it doesn't really impact us that much because it is

not our story. People on the other side of the world, or even on the other side of the street are just another statistic, just another headline.

But their story, your story, is just as much mine. That is what Christ did in coming into our world. We are all in this together. We're all human beings with the same needs, who all mess up along the way.

And one night, through a teenage girl, just around the corner behind the local motel, the Creator of the universe showed up as one of us.

It's the glorious scandal. God is in your midst. There is reason to rejoice. To us a child of hope is born. [Hark! The herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn King!] Amen.