

Carols by Candlelight 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we read this story of Christmas from Luke chapter 2 tonight and at the very end of the story in verse 20 it says that the shepherds praised God for all that they had heard and all that they had seen.

And there's really an emphasis in Luke's Gospel on the eyewitness testimony of all that happened in Jesus' life.

And the same thing happens over and over again in the New Testament. And the book of the letter of 1 John written by one of Jesus' earliest followers, the Apostle John, John, opens the letter and he says, let me tell you about the Word of life.

That's his name for Jesus. And he says, all that we have heard, seen, and touched concerning him. And I just want to share tonight two brief things about that.

The first is the reality of Christmas and then secondly, the meaning of Christmas. So first, the reality of Christmas. It is very important for us as 21st century modern people to feel the weight of empirical evidence.

[1 : 1 1] We want to have eyewitness testimony for the public truth claims that are made for things that are especially important. And even in a time in the Greco-Roman world in the first century when the expectations of evidence were so different than today, the genres were so different than the scientific age we live in today, the ancient text of the Bible goes out of its way to talk over and over again about the weight of the empirical reality of all that happened in Jesus' life in the first century.

There's testimony after testimony and mention after mention of how significant it is, how many witnesses there were. In John's letter, he even puts the form of all we have seen, heard, and touched concerning the Word of life into the framework of an early first century judicial oath.

It reads to an original reader like he was making a vow in the public court. I'm telling you, all I saw, I even touched him the Word of life when he came into the world.

And Luke, the writer from the passage that we read, he was a physician, he was a doctor, and he tells us from the very beginning that he's very concerned to record testimony, eyewitness testimony of all that took place.

And if you think back, if you have the passage or think back to what we read at the beginning, just listen to how he frames the details in the first seven verses. He says, in those days there was a Caesar and a decree went out and there was a registration for tax purposes.

[2 : 4 4] And it was the first registration. He adds that detail. And also Quirinius was the governor of Syria, and Joseph had to travel because his lineage was Bethlehemite, and he had to register with his betrothed Mary.

And three times the census is mentioned, and there is one sentence in the Christmas story in Luke given to Jesus' birth.

Ten sentences of the political scene, of all that was happening at the exact moment that Jesus came into the world, and only one moment, one sentence that's given to the night of the birth, nothing about Mary's labor pains and all that happened there in the animal feed trough that they laid Jesus in and what it was like.

There's nothing. Instead, he's painting the picture and saying, some of you were little children and remember who was the governor when this happened. And we know who it was.

We know that the Caesar at the time was Gaius Octavius, and the governor of Syria at the time was Quirinius Walrus. Luke was right about this. This has been corroborated by historians.

[3 : 46] And that leads me to the first point. I want to say this, that the unique thing about Christianity and what makes it different from all the other religions and philosophies of world history is that the history of Jesus Christ is Christianity.

The main rational argument, one of the main rational arguments for why follow Jesus Christ in a modern world like we live in is because the writers are saying this really happened.

The center of Christianity is that Jesus Christ is history. The historical man is the man of the Gospels. They are the same thing. And John says here, what I write is real.

I found God. I touched him. I saw him. I heard him. See, as Lewis in the middle of the 20th century, the great English author, he once responded to a quote from the Russian astronauts when they had gone into space and come back.

You probably know this. The Russian astronauts had gone to the moon and they said, we went to the moon and we didn't find God. And Lewis wrote a public essay to respond to that statement.

[4 : 55] And this is what he says, looking for God by exploring space is like reading or seeing all of Shakespeare's plays in the hope that you will find Shakespeare as one of the characters.

Shakespeare is in one sense present at every moment in every play, but he is never present in the same way as Lady Macbeth is present. Nor is he diffused through the play like a gas.

Finding God is not like a man on the first floor, walking up the steps to find a man on the second floor. My point is that if God does exist, he is related to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to another object.

Now Lewis is saying here that the Bible teaches over and over again that God is the author of all of human history. And so we don't go to find God in the world in the same way that we find things in the claims of science.

And yet Luke and John and Paul say, but oh, you can. Because the Christmas story is that in this baby, God has written himself into the drama of human history to play the role of savior.

[6 : 06] The Christian claim, the Christian claim is this, that this is a great story precisely because it is a true story. It is the real drama of human history.

Now there are all sorts of questions that people have today about Christianity. What do we do with the relationship between faith and science? What about the problem of evil?

What about the questions today concerning human sexuality? But what I want to say is that the first order of business and really the first question that has to be asked is, is the Jesus of the Gospels the Jesus of history?

And that's the question that you have to say yes or no to. Because if you say yes to that question, then yes, there are secondary questions to deal with, but it changes everything. It means everything.

It means that you have to change your life. You have to completely center your entire existence around the man who died and rose from the dead. That's the question.

[7 : 03] The Gospels are written as eyewitness testimonies and Christianity swept the Greco-Roman Empire in the first couple of centuries. Why? The claim, the claim from the historians is because there were so many people who saw him rise from the dead.

Now secondly and finally, if the Christian claim about Jesus is real, then it also means something. And I just want to close by saying something about this.

Christmas means, we could put it in one phrase, God with us. And in Matthew chapter one, a corresponding text to the Luke 2 chapter that we read, that's the word that Matthew uses to wrap up all of what Christmas is.

He says, it's Emmanuel, which is a Hebrew word that means God with us. But when you see a phrase like that, we sang it a moment ago, you've got to ask the question, what is the nature of the with?

God with us. Because we will talk about that preposition with all sorts of human relationships. People say that when there are two people romantically involved, that man is with that woman, that guy is with that girl, or that child is with that parent, or that lawyer is with that defendant.

[8 : 20] There are all sorts of things, types of relationships that the word with could mean. And when we read the word Emmanuel, God with us, I think there's multiple ways to answer the nature of the with.

But one of the ways is this, when you read the rest of the book of Luke, one of the most prominent features is that Jesus Christ comes and he sits down at the table and he breaks bread with anybody.

He eats with the lowly in the first century. He breaks bread with sinners. He comes to the disciples at the end of his life and says, I do not only call you servant, I have actually come to call you friend.

And so one of the significant meanings of Christianity is that God in Christ has come, God with us to say to you, I want to know you. I want to be your friend.

I want to have a relationship with you. I want to sit down and break bread with you. I want to share common life with you. Christianity says that the living God has come into the world by way of this Christmas child so that he could know you, so that he could be in a relationship with you.

[9 : 25] And so as we close, the question pops up, if Christianity, if Christmas is about being near to God, you could ask a question like, am I moving in my life right now toward God or away from God?

And there's a temptation in that question to then ask a second question. And I think it might be this, if it's true, if it's true that Christmas is about God coming to get me, God coming to be friends with me, God coming to know me in this Christmas child, then what do I need to do today to abide with him, to know him?

And central to this story, central to the Christian claim is actually the question, what am I doing to get near to God is the wrong first question.

What do I need to do today to get to him? That's not the right first question. And that's central to the Luke and story that we just read. And let me just show you a couple of details and we'll wrap up.

In that story, at the very beginning or toward the middle, we're told that he was wrapped as he was born in strips of cloth, swaddling clothes as this translation put it.

[10 : 41] And then it says that he was laid in a manger and we can't trivialize what that means. That is saying he was put in an animal feed trough in the muck and the mud near the manure where he was there.

One biblical scholar puts it like this, the point of this story is that at his birth, Jesus had to be content with the habitation of animals because there was no room for him in human society.

The first announcement that got made that we read was to the shepherds and the shepherds in that time were low in the Greco-Roman order of public hierarchy. They were not allowed to be witnesses in a judicial court.

And this is what the same scholar says. He says, God's grace has now been revealed to a group of people held in low regard in the midst of the Greco-Roman world. The angels come and they say, glory to God in the highest.

God has been born this day and we read in the accent of the story that the highest has now come into the world as the lowest. And let me say that the details of this Christmas birth, the poverty of this Christmas birth is actually the sign of his mission.

[11 : 57] This poverty and lowliness from the very beginning is the mark of his entire life. It's the mark of his mission. He came, we see in this moment, to be made low. He came as God in the highest to identify with the weak.

He came for people who do not have it all together. And he came to identify, as we say in Christianity, with sinners. And the Christian tradition calls this the humiliation of Jesus Christ.

And humiliation there doesn't mean embarrassment. It means being brought low by suffering that he did not deserve. And God in the highest, he was brought all the way not only to the manger, but to ultimately suffer.

He died on the cross at the hands of murdered by his own creation, treason committed against him by his closest followers and why.

And over and over again, the scriptures testify he came to so identify himself with us, to be united with us. Covenantally, he who knew no sin became like we are sinners.

[13 : 07] God came in Christ to be humiliated to suffer, to take our place. He took the injustice that we committed, the injustice that the world has committed, the great sin of all of human existence into himself.

He ate it at the cross so that we might know reconciliation and justice before the living God. And so at the heart of Christianity, Christianity says this, G.K. Chesterton, the Roman Catholic and the English scholar, there's an apocryphal story about him.

I hope it's true, but many people aren't sure. A famous story where the times asked him to write an essay answering the question, what is wrong with the world?

And he wrote back and said, dear sirs, I am your truly G.K. Chesterton. And that is at the heart of the Christmas message.

The Christmas message and its first judgment, it's God coming into the world and saying, we are not what we ought to be. Humanity is not what it ought to be. The world is not what it ought to be. We need Messiah.

[14 : 11] We need Savior. And then justice and reconciliation with the living God is on offer in the Christmas child. He got what I deserve so I could possess his resurrection life.

And so the question tonight is not first, what do I do to get him, but look up and see what he did to get me. Look up and see his condescension.

We call it Advent, his coming. Look and see how he has come for us. Now the Christian call then is this, to pray to him tonight and to confess with your mouth that this Christ is God and that he is the hope of forgiveness and he will come and he will commune with you and he will give to you eternal life.

And that's an invitation. Let's pray together. Father, we ask now that the spirit of the living Christ would move upon many hearts here and in this city, that there would be a movement of the gospel and that you would wake us up to see the reality and power of Emmanuel God with us, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.