

Carols by Candlelight: The Birth of Jesus

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 00] We've got one last reading tonight from Luke chapter 2, verses 1 to 12. In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth, and she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, and this will be a sign for you.

[1 : 22] You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you so much for these readings from Scripture, and the fact that we can come tonight and gather and worship you.

And so we come now and ask that as we look at the Bible, this passage, for just a few minutes, you would open our eyes to see your truth by faith, and you would open our hearts to receive your love that you teach us in this passage in Luke 2, and you would open our ears to listen with understanding.

So we ask that you would come and meet us exactly where we are for your Holy Spirit to lead us tonight. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. All right, let me raise this up.

We just read from the Gospel of Luke, and Luke, the author of that passage, the story of Jesus' birth, he was a medical doctor, and he was also a historian.

And so there's a notable scholar, a historian of the first century named Richard Baucom. And Baucom says that Luke's gospel is formatted in the same way that a Greek historian of the first century would format a historical text.

[2 : 40] And it makes sense because Luke was a man who had access to people like Peter and Paul, other writers of the New Testament, people who are eyewitnesses of the story of Jesus when Jesus was on earth.

And he traveled all around Jerusalem to the Mediterranean and everywhere. And he took in eyewitness testimony from lots of different people, and he produced this gospel, the gospel of Luke that we've read from.

What does Luke, the historian, want us to think and to feel tonight about the first Christmas? Three things. Number one, Luke wants you to know tonight that this story that we've read is not a fairy tale.

It's history. Now, when you read Luke's gospel, he doesn't open up with lines like, once upon a time. He doesn't open up with, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

And he doesn't even open up with, in a hole in the ground, there once lived a hobbit. No, in chapter one, he says, I write to you to give you an orderly account.

[3 : 46] And that's a historian's language for eyewitness testimony. And then in chapter two, he says that we just had read for us in those days. And then he lays out this political scene. And he says, the first emperor, Caesar Augustus, that's Gaius Octavius.

He was on the throne. And then he says, and Quirinius was the governor of Syria. That's Quirinius Warus, who was the governor of Syria at the beginning of the first century. And he goes on to give you family lineage details and travel schedules and what census we are on in the first century under the emperor.

Why? Christmas has become many, many things over 2,000 years. And today, for all of us, there's presents involved. And there's department store shopping involved.

And there is watching Home Alone involved. And all of that stuff comes with fun and good stuff. But the real Christmas, the first Christmas, was not a sentimental story.

Instead, it's an historical narrative. And it is where God, in the middle of history, became a human being, this little baby we've read about in real life history. And I don't know about you, but at my house, I sometimes get in trouble for failing to pick a movie to the point where we finally all just fall asleep.

[5 : 02] And there's so many options today in our world. And so we're scrolling and scrolling. And so what I'll do is I'll get my phone out and I'll open up Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb.

And I'm looking at everything saying, is this going to be good enough for me to invest my time into? Right now, if you're like me and you love IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, one of the things maybe you've noticed is that what the critics say about films and what the audience say are different.

And Rotten Tomatoes has even introduced the popcorn meter, which is the audience score, versus the tomato meter, which is the critics score. And when you pay attention, one of the things you probably know is that critics want us to watch con film festival films, you know, indie films, sad films. They want us to watch slow pacing, non-linear storytelling, avant-garde, unclear endings, sad at the start, sad in the middle, sad at the end.

Rugged realism is what the critics love. And the audiences, when you look at that, they love Lord of the Rings and Star Wars and Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast and Lion King and A Christmas Carol and Les Mis.

[6 : 11] And we normal humans love it when the brave children defeat the wicked witch. We love stories where the light breaks into the darkness and there's rescue and there's redemption.

And we, it's because we humans, until we're trained out of it, are drawn to certain story patterns. And those story patterns are because of Christmas. You see, Christmas says that Jesus Christ is the historical reality to which all the best stories point.

His story is the pattern by which every other story finds its shape and purpose. And the once upon a time stories that we love to write, we love to tell, they point to the fact that the real thing actually does exist.

And so my first invitation to you tonight is to trust your deepest longings, to trust your instincts, that when you watch the vulnerable hero's sacrifice at the end of that great story, and it stirs something in you and it makes you weep, and you say, I wish that were true in real life.

It is. It has become true in Jesus Christ. He is the truth to which all the stories ultimately point. At Christmas time, the Son of God became a vulnerable human being to rescue you.

[7 : 30] It's the truest story that's ever been. Secondly, Luke the historian gives us only one line in this whole section about the birth of Jesus. So one of the most important events in all of human history, the birth of Jesus itself.

Luke only gives you one verse, and it's in verse 7. And all he says is, he was wrapped in swaddling cloths. He was laid in a manger because there was no place for them in the end.

Now, he was laid in a manger. We learned later in Luke's gospel, in Luke 13, what a manger is. A manger is not a baby's crib. Instead, later, Luke 13 says, you have to tie your ox to a manger in a normal farm life.

And you don't tie your oxen to baby's cribs. You tie them to feeding troughs. He was laid in a feeding trough. That's what the manger is. And that means he was laid in a bath of muck, of animal feed, of animal spit.

And then we are told that there was no place for them in the inn. And another way to translate that is that there was no place for them in the guest room. And that's because in a first century house, it's two levels.

[8 : 36] In the bottom level, the ground floor, is where you keep your animals. The top floor is where you keep humans. And so nobody had any place for them in the top floor. So they stayed in the ground floor with the hay and the animals.

And then we're told that he was wrapped in swaddling cloths. Now, I've been around for the birth of five babies. And I've seen that moment that a baby's born and then the baby's wrapped in a swaddling cloth.

We still do that. And you've got to imagine that the God of all the universe, the God who hung the stars, is wrapped in a cloth. Why? So that his arms and legs don't flail at the beginning of his life. And what we realize here is in the story we just read, the Son of God was born into dirt and straw. There was no midwife. There was no doctor. It was animal waste everywhere. And he entered. We learn there that the conditions of his birth teach us that he entered into our uncleanness from the moment that he came into our impurity. That's why he was born there. The conditions of his birth point us all the way to the end of his life.

[9 : 41] The conditions of his death. He came to step right into our messiness, into our darkness, into our sin. And we see that right from day one. He enmeshed himself with us.

He came to get so close to us. This Christianity has no distant deity. But the God who came so close to you that he enmeshed himself with your life.

He came to get so close that he wanted to enter into your messiness, into your sinfulness, and rescue you. And that means that this Christmas you've got to know that Jesus Christ does not wait for you to get clean.

So don't come tonight thinking that you've got to get clean before you're going to become reconciled with the real God. No, no. He came to you. He came to meet you exactly where you are. He doesn't wait for you to build a castle of your achievements.

And he's telling you that because he didn't come in a castle. He came in a trough. Don't build a castle of achievements to come to God. There's an invitation to you to come exactly as you are tonight.

[10 : 43] Lastly, in verse 10, how does this work? In verse 10, the angels speak to the shepherds and they say, Tonight, we have good news of great joy for all people.

So here's what the angels say to us about this moment. It is first good news. And the fact that they say that is so important because news is not advice.

It's an announcement. News is the fact that in the birth of Jesus, God the Father has announced his grace to you. So there's no call or invitation here to be a better person.

And it's more of the gospel. The Christian gospel is far more like opening up the newspaper and reading what has happened rather than going to get advice from a counselor or a pastor or somebody like that.

It's an announcement of what God has come to do for you, to meet you where you are, to deal with your sin. And then he says to us, it's good news of joy for all people, meaning who can receive this?

[11 : 45] And the angel goes out of his way to say all people. And if you think about the stories that we've read tonight, right in this moment, he comes to the shepherds who are the poorest, some of the poorest in the first century world.

The next story after this, he comes to the magi who were some of the wealthiest, the wise men in the ancient world. And he comes to all sorts of people. He comes to Mary, who is a teenage mother. He comes to Zechariah, who is a religious man filled with doubt secretly. He comes for the religious. And he comes for people like Nathaniel, the cynic, and for people like Thomas, the doubter.

And if you know a little bit about the genealogy of Jesus, the mothers of Jesus, he comes for a woman who's in Jesus' genealogy like Rahab, the prostitute, or Ruth, the Gentile woman who was an enemy of God's people.

He comes for every type of person there is. And all that means tonight is Jesus Christ in the middle of history came for you. He came for every single one of us. He came to meet us exactly where we are. You are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace.

[12 : 53] And you are never so good that you don't stand in utter need of God's grace. So tonight, let me invite you to consider enmeshing yourself with him as he has enmeshed himself with you.

How do you do that? Let me finish with a story. In one of the great 20th century fantasy series, The Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis talks about, in the voyage of the Dawn Treader, a little boy named Eustace.

And Eustace was a—if you know the stories, you'll know—Eustace was a selfish, greedy, grumbling, complaining kid. And one night, he wanders into a dragon's cave, a dragon's den.

And greedy as he is, he falls asleep on top of a pile of gold. And he wakes up the next morning to discover that he has become a dragon. And what Lewis is telling us is that he actually became the condition of his heart.

He was so greedy, he became a dragon. And he's stuck, and he's trapped in dragon scales, and he's unable to speak, and he's unable to be with his friends and his family. He's unable to do anything but hoard his gold.

[14:03] He has no other ability than to do that. And what he realizes is the very thing that he thought would make him happy in life, more and more money, is the thing that has imprisoned him.

He worshipped gold, and he became a dragon, and now he can be nothing else. And then Eustace later on, after being redeemed and rescued, he's telling the story to Edmund, another boy who had been rescued, in a different story.

And this is what Eustace says. He says, all of a sudden, when there was nothing I could do, the lion appeared. And the lion, you may know in Lewis' stories, is a Christ figure, Aslan.

The lion told me to follow him. I got up and I followed him. I was terribly afraid. You may think that being a dragon, I would have thought, I can easily knock out a lion, but it wasn't that kind of fear.

There was no moonlight, but wherever the lion went, light shone all around him. He took me up a mountain into a garden, and in the middle there was a well. It was like a bath with marble steps that you could go down into.

[15:03] But the lion told me I must first undress. I thought, I don't have any clothes on, I'm a dragon. Then I realized dragons are snaky things, and snakes cast off their skin.

That's what the lion meant. So I started scratching, and the scales started to fall off all over the place. And I looked down, and I had shed an outer layer like a snake would do. And then I went to get into the bath, the pool, but I realized I still had scales all over me.

So I realized I had to do it again. I scratched, and I scratched. Scales fell everywhere a second time. And I entered the bath, but then again, I realized scales still all around me. I did it a third time, and then I realized how many layers am I going to have to dig deep down into who I really am until all the scales fall off, all the selfishness, all the greediness, all the God forgetfulness, all the moments I've lived in my life not thinking about the God who made me and the God who has offered redemption.

And Jesus, how far does it go? How deep does the dragon scale problem go? And then he said, then the lion spoke, you will have to let me remove the scales. So he began, it hurt worse than anything I'd ever felt.

There I was, scales removed, and he threw me into the water, and it hurt for a moment. But then I was perfectly healed. I was cleansed. I'd become a boy again. He gave me new clothes, and he gave me a new life.

[16:24] Christmas says, Christmas does not say that light shone from inside our world, but light came from without our world into the darkness of our world. We cannot fix our problems.

We can't all band together and make the world a better place. Not ultimately, not really, because every time you pull a layer off, you'll find something else. Deeper level of selfishness underneath it. We cannot heal ourselves from our sin condition. God did not send us a self-help manual. He didn't give us a program to clean our lives up. He gave us himself, and the manger preaches that, and the cross preaches that at this Christmas, Jesus Christ climbed into our dragon skin, and he died for our injustices.

What do you do? How do you enmesh yourself tonight? Believe that this is real. Turn to him in prayer and say, that is me. That's my need. I need God to come from the outside in and heal me, change me, forgive me, and then lift up your head with the shepherds and say, rejoice, peace on earth, mercy mild, peace between me and God.

And it's for every single one of us tonight. Let me pray. Father, we ask that you would do a new work in us and teach us the truth about our dragon-scaled hearts that we need healing from the outside.

[17:45] We thank you, oh God, that when you made us, you chose not to forget about us, but to redeem us. And we thank you that this Christmas we can remember that all the more. So teach us your mercy tonight, we pray, as we finish up with singing.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.