

What Were They Thinking? : Infant Holy, Infant Lowly
By Jason Huff
December 25, 2011
Psalms 65, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 2:1-7

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 2:1-7. Listen now to God's Word. "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

Nothing changes...but everything changes. Christmas celebrations haven't changed all that much since I was a little boy. I still remember singing Christmas carols in the choir and driving around looking at all the decorations and waking up Christmas morning all excited about what was under the tree. When I see my boys experience the wonder of it all, it takes me back, and nothing has changed. And yet everything has changed. Becoming a parent gives you a whole new perspective on Christmas. You see it through a different set of eyes. For some, the magic of it gets lost in the shopping and hustle of the season. But for some of us, we discover afresh the beauty of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

Nothing changes...yet everything changes. When Galileo discovered that the earth revolves around the sun...when Newton discovered gravity...when Franklin discovered electricity...nothing changed. They didn't invent something or create something new. They merely stated what they observed. Yet everything changed. Our view of the world and how it exists in our universe was radically altered. Understanding why things fall gave us insight into why things could fly. Harnessing the power of the thunderbolt gave us...well, most everything in this room, from the lights to the computer to the microphone I'm using right now. Nothing changed...yet everything changed.

Two thousand years ago, nothing changed...but everything changed. A baby was born. Not a rare occurrence. It's happened tens of billions of times around the world. We tend to think of the harshness of the birth, the fact that this little boy was born in a stable, placed in a manger...but it's not as if millions of children aren't born under much the same conditions in our world even today. Some shepherds, outcasts in their day, visited him. Some time later, travelers arrived and brought him gifts. A few special people pronounce Him to be the long-awaited Messiah. But then, for thirty years, nothing. For decades, Jesus does virtually nothing of significance worth reporting. For all the reports of angels and dreams and visions, not much happens. Things in Israel stayed as they always had. It appeared that nothing changed.

And truthfully, many things we think changed didn't. God didn't change. All his qualities, all his traits, all the things that make Him God...they didn't change one bit. Nor did God's love for us. Some people like to think that that God was angry in the Old Testament and happy in the New Testament. But that's just not true. God's love for us has never wavered. The very fact that He saved for Himself a people throughout all ages despite our sin, despite our rejection of Him, shows that God's love extends from everlasting to everlasting. The eternal mercy and grace and love of God didn't change one iota that fateful night in Bethlehem.

And yet everything changed. For in that moment, God became flesh and dwelt among us. As our passage from Philippians this morning tells us, Jesus was in very nature God. Yet He did not insist on equality with the Father. Instead, He became nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant. On that day in Bethlehem, the second person of the Trinity limited Himself to a human body. He came to us as one of us, as a man full of grace and truth, so that we might know that God is not just on high, far away, unapproachable, but here, in our midst, with us. Suddenly, the LORD who had provided Abraham a home, who had led Israel out of the wilderness, who had seen His people through judges and kings and exiles and returns, He was not just the mighty king. He was the friend of sinners.

When Jesus became human, He put Himself in our hands. He was an infant, helpless and utterly dependent on His family for years as we all are. No matter how righteous Joseph and Mary were, they still made mistakes; they were still frail sinners like the rest of us. His step-brothers and sisters were likely less than pleased by the attention He got from these prophecies made long ago and probably tormented Him about it. Yet God entrusted His Son to the likes of these. For the better part of thirty years, in Jesus Christ, God simply lives with us. Not teaching, not preaching, not paving the way towards His death and resurrection...just simply being. Nothing changes...but everything changes.

This is a real challenge for us. So often, we see so little change in our lives when we turn to Jesus Christ as Savior. We are still aware, if not more aware, of all our troubles and faults and difficulties. Many of us come to Christ hoping for a radical, redefining moment that we've heard others talk about, where they instantly are freed from their addictions and problems and find a whole new life. For most of us, that doesn't happen. We might see a glimmer here, a hope here, but it doesn't seem that anything has changed.

The way I see it, though, is a little different. Recently, a friend online talked about when he started to change over his movie collection from VHS to DVD several years ago. He admitted that he didn't see what the big deal was. His TV was small, and he didn't think the difference was all that special. It wasn't until much later, when he got a bigger TV and went back to try and watch some of those old videotapes that he realized just how much more clear and sharp and colorful DVD was.

That's much the same way God's transformation works in us. We don't see it much on the front end. In fact, sometimes it feels like we're even moving backwards. I believe it is only in retrospect, perhaps even in eternity, that we will see just how much everything changed when the Holy Spirit entered our lives. When we first begin our journey of faith in Jesus Christ, it may seem that nothing has changed...but everything has changed. Trust in that truth.

Don't worry about what God has or hasn't done in you in comparison to your friends or your sister or your pastor or anyone else. God has a special plan for you. God is working it out for your ultimate good. He is working in each and every believer so that we will be perfected one day for His good pleasure and for His glory. In 1st Corinthians 15, Paul says, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed -- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." Now and later, both in our lives and in the resurrection to come, God is reforming us. Do not fear if you don't see it instantly. God's promise is on the way.

But there's another challenge and promise we have today that we celebrate in the birth of Christ. We wonder, "what was God the Father thinking when He put His Son, His Joy, truly part of Himself, into the hands of untrustworthy humans, knowing they would eventually kill him having done nothing wrong?" And the answer is not what we would expect. The answer comes in the form of a command...go and do likewise.

When Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me," He wasn't referring just to the future. He was referring to His past and present as well. Just by coming into our world, He had taken up a cross of suffering. Jesus didn't come to Earth because things had gotten better. They had gotten worse. On countless occasions, Jesus said that He was born into a "wicked and perverse generation." Yet He gave Himself to His people in the midst of that chaos and iniquity. He did not give of Himself because He trusted people to "do the right thing." He gave of Himself knowing that people could not be trusted, knowing that He was the suffering servant promised by the prophet Isaiah, the one "who was pierced for our transgressions...[who] was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." Yet He put Himself into our hands for thirty-three years. He did it because God wanted to bridge the gap. God wanted His people to know Him personally. He did it because He wanted to save us from ourselves, and He saved us the only way possible – by dying in our place, for our sins.

We live in an era where trust is ebbing. People don't trust the government or their neighbors; they don't often trust their friends. We don't trust that the guy with the flat on the side of the road wouldn't rob us if we stopped to help. We don't trust that the poor are really poor, and we don't trust the rich to help. It's a never-ending cycle. But Jesus doesn't ask us to trust in other people; He asks us to trust in Him and give ourselves away to others as His servants.

This is perhaps the greatest challenge we have of all as Christians. When we have been burned by others, when it seems we are the perpetual giver and all we get are lumps of coal in return, it's hard to keep at it. It's hard to love the unlovable and care for the hard of heart. It's hard to give ourselves away. We fear it. We fear the potential of loss. But that fear ultimately stems from a lack of trust in the One who holds everything in His hands. He knows all; He sees all. He knew what would happen when His Son came to us. He knows what will happen when we risk serving Him by serving others. It stings when we are rejected, when we face the wounds of the world because we stand firm in faith.

Yet that's the very heart of the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5 to 7, Jesus teaches us so many times to give ourselves away. Listen to just a few excerpts: "Don't resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to Him the left as well...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Do your giving so your right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. Forgive others their sins against you so that your heavenly Father might forgive your sins...do not be worried about your life, what you will eat or drink, or your body, what you will wear...not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

As the new year approaches, let's risk it. Let's risk it all for the sake of Jesus Christ, who became nothing for us and our salvation. What might it look like if we loved our enemies and forgave those who sinned against us? What might it be like if we didn't worry about our lives but trusted in the One who holds our lives for all eternity? We might be more bruised and battered, more weary and worn from serving to the fullest. But God will use us for marvelous things that will count for all eternity. God will see that through our sacrifice, for those around us, everything changes. Lives will go from meaningless to meaningful. Souls that were lost will be found. Broken relationships will be restored. The church will be seen as the place where people come to know the living and reigning Savior of the world. I believe that is the hope of the gospel, that through Jesus Christ, God will reconcile His people to Himself, offering us salvation from sin and an eternity with Him. That's worth risking all.

This morning, many of us are looking forward to unwrapping gifts and meals with family and friends. We're ready to soak in the glory of Christmas. But I think God is pleased that some of His people made certain to spend time with Him this Sunday morning. I'm thankful you are here. Because coming to church on Christmas Day is in a sense nothing special, just like any other Sunday...nothing's changed. But then again, if you're willing to delay your fun to spend time with your Master and Maker...if it sparks in you the fire to share Jesus with your loved ones this holiday...if it has spoken to you for the first or second or thousandth time of God's love for you showed to you in a manger and on a cross...if it puts it in your heart to trust in Him and risk it all...then it means everything's changed. Thanks be to God!