

*The Story: The Messiah Arrives*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Isaiah 9:1-7, Galatians 3:26-4:7, John 1:1-5,9-14*

Our final Scripture reading today is from John 1:1-5 and 9-14. Listen now to God's Word. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it..the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

We've made it! We've spent five months reading through the Old Testament, hearing about the lives of God's people, seeing their sin and their difficulty staying loyal to the One who promised Abraham a nation, who saw that nation out of captivity in Egypt, who gave them a homeland, who provided them with judges and kings, who brought them out of exile in Babylon. God has been working, caring for His people who never seemed to be able to really get it right. It's been a struggle at times, just as it was for God's faithful who wondered when God would finally send His promised messiah to set things right. The prophets and wise men pondered these things for over a thousand years. And after four hundred years of silence, God speaks again through the gift of His Son, Jesus.

We may feel like we know this part of the story best. Ever year, we hear the Christmas story told with angels and shepherds and wise men. But this morning, we get to have a slightly different take on it, one free of all the trappings of our holiday celebrations. We get to see the miracle unclouded by our traditions and trees and packages. Let's see how the Bible really presents the start of Jesus' story.

While the gospel accounts in Matthew and Luke contain similar accounts of his birth and Mark skips it entirely, John begins at a very different place. It tells us that Jesus existed long before He was born an infant in Bethlehem. John starts with an allusion to Genesis 1:1 – "in the beginning." In the beginning was the Word – Jesus. Not only was this Word with God, the Word was God. In Genesis, God speaks and everything came into being. John tells us that Jesus was there at the beginning of all things...He is not a creature or a created being, but instead, God the Father made everything through Him. Life itself comes through Him. The story of Jesus begins before time itself. Jesus is and has always been the Son of the Father; He has always been with the Father and the Holy Spirit. When He came to our world as an infant, it was not His beginning but a culmination of the plan God had from the very start. Once we realize this, we start to see Jesus' birth in a new light, that in obedience to the Father, Jesus willingly agreed to become human and take on the life He lived.

Then the events we associate with Christmas begin to take shape. A young virgin named Mary is chosen to be the mother of the savior. This wasn't the first story of a deity or demi-god being born to a human mother, but it's very different from all the others. Look at Greek mythology and you see the gods coming down and being intimate with human women, finding them irresistible. But not here; God's character never changes. Jesus is created in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What's so amazing about this is that Mary is so common, even typical. She didn't live in Jerusalem. In fact, she lived in Nazareth, way up north in what used to be part of the northern kingdom before its destruction. There was still a bias against those who lived in that region as being less godly. The text doesn't describe her as the most righteous woman of her generation. The angel simply says that Mary has found favor with God, and her response shows the depth of her faith. While she is troubled and asks questions about the "how," she never asks, "Why me?" Instead, once she understands, she responds in joy. She sings a song that echoes the promises of the Old Testament, particularly the song that Hannah sang when she was pregnant with the prophet Samuel, who ministered during the days of Saul and David. In Mary, we see abiding trust in God...being pregnant out of wedlock would follow her all her days, but she was more concerned with what God thought than what others would say. Her fiance Joseph is a man of faith as well. His first response, to set Mary aside quietly rather than to publicly disgrace her, shows his character. By all rights, he could have had her stoned...yet he has decided not even to shame her. And when an angel appears to tell him to accept Mary and her child, he does so. He like Mary is not extraordinary, just a carpenter who moves in faith.

Much of the rest of the story, we've heard in the past...Mary and Joseph have to go to Bethlehem to be registered in a census by Caesar Augustus because Joseph is of the line of David, and that's considered his ancestral hometown. They wind up being unable to find a place to stay with relatives or in a traveler's inn. We aren't sure why. It's easy to reason that family and friends might have rejected them due to Mary's pregnancy, but there are other possibilities. Bethlehem was a small place not accustomed to large numbers of visitors, and the census may have been overwhelming. What we do know is that they did find a place somewhere, and once Jesus was born, He was placed in a manger, typically a feeding trough for animals. This was the birth of the commoner, not a king. And because of that, his birth went unnoticed by the vast majority.

Those who did take notice had to be told. The shepherds, themselves among the poorest of the poor, found out through angels that gave them the news. The wise men from Asia who came had followed a unique star that appeared. Herod wound up learning of the child's birth from them, and instead of being overjoyed, he was enraged at the possibility of losing his throne. But those few others...they showed Him honor through their worship and through their gifts.

There's little more about Jesus' early life in the Scriptures. His family fled to Egypt to avoid Herod, and when they returned, they went back in Nazareth. The only incident we know of is one where the family was in Jerusalem for a festival. Jesus went to the temple and talked with the teachers and priests...and because the extended family, likely in the hundreds, traveled in a large caravan, it took them a day to realize Jesus wasn't with them. Oddly enough, once they got back to Jerusalem, they didn't look for him at the temple for a couple of days. When they found him, they learned that he had totally amazed everyone with His understanding of the faith. But his family was more confused and upset than overjoyed. Nevertheless, Jesus returned home with them and was an obedient son.

There is no more incredible miracle in the entire Bible than the gift of Jesus. As we'll read in the coming weeks, Jesus breaks all the expectations the Jewish people had for a messiah. In fact, He eventually exceeds all the promises of the Old Testament in every way. There are three parts of that miracle that I want to talk about today to remember. First, *the miracle is the message*. Second, *the miracle is in the mundane*. And finally, *the miracle is missed and misunderstood and turned away, but its magnitude never changes*.

The first point is perhaps the most difficult to understand but maybe the most important for Christian faith – *the miracle is the message*. Let me explain exactly what I mean by that. We often celebrate Jesus for what He does. We see how Jesus is the means to salvation. He forgives us, He loves us, He cares for us, He shows us the way to God the Father. All of these things are true and they're good reasons to love Him. But John 1 tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God's message is Himself. Jesus is the message. Jesus is the Holy One long promised to Israel. But more than that, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. When the Bible calls Jesus Emmanuel, it's telling us that in Him, God is now with us.

That's the heart of the gospel that we are supposed to share. The word “gospel” means good news. What is that good news? Ultimately, the good news is Jesus. Jesus is proof that God loves us. Jesus is proof that God cares. Beyond salvation and eternal life, beyond being transformed into the likeness of God, beyond everything else that is good news, is the good news of the person of Jesus. Ultimately, the good news is not about what He does so much as it is good news of His very self – His character, His nature, His very being and existence.

When you think about it, it makes perfect sense. Hopefully, none of us loves our family members or our friends just because of what they do for us – what we can get out of them for ourselves. We love them for who they are. One of the deepest signs of love is that we care for people who are *not* good to us, who are sometimes unlovable, who have hurt us. We don't love them because they are contributing to our lives. We love them for who they are, warts and all.

In comparison, Jesus does give us everything. He fulfills our every need and our greatest desires. He does in fact love us beyond all measure. We get something beyond compare in our relationship with Him. And it's OK that many of us begin our spiritual lives by coming to Him in thanks for what He does. But God doesn't want us to remain in that superficial state. He wants us to come to love Him for who He is...His mercy, His compassion, His love, His justice, His grace, all in equal perfection.

Sometimes we grow frustrated with Jesus; we don't understand His parables or His way of thinking. But that's part of the miracle too. In Jesus, God makes Himself known. God's ways are not our ways, and we see that in Jesus. The message, the Word incarnate, is not always a message we are going to fully comprehend. We can't even fully comprehend ourselves, let alone the Son of God! But that's OK. In Jesus, we see that we don't have to understand God fully; we are simply asked to be in a relationship with Him, to learn from Him, to become His friend and obey Him. He himself is the miracle; He is the message.

While we may not fully fathom Jesus with our minds, He wants to meet us where we are. And that's proven by the second point this morning: *the miracle is in the mundane*. There's not a single person on earth who can't relate to Jesus, and that's because He is an everyman. Born to a young mother under mysterious and scandalous circumstances...born to a common family in a place normally meant for animals. The story about Jesus spending days at the temple as a young man is notable because it's the only one of its kind. Over a hundred years after His resurrection, people made up amazing stories about his childhood, but it's because they thought His entire life must have been spectacular. But the truth is that until the age of 30, when He began His public ministry, Jesus was unknown. He probably learned carpentry from His father and worked at His trade for years unnoticed by all but those around Him who realized there was something different about this uniquely holy man.

Even once Jesus begins his ministry, it's all done at a street level. He doesn't preach on the steps of Herod's palace or to the powerful and influential. He attends the religious festivals in Jerusalem, but He doesn't make the center of Jewish religious life His home. Instead, He goes to the common people, preaching out on the mountainside, stopping in villages and towns, speaking to rabbi and swindler alike. His existence is mundane and average. He needs sleep and food like every other man. He Himself is extraordinary, but the backdrop of His life is strikingly ordinary.

We miss out on Jesus when we think of Him only on Sunday mornings or at special events. While God can meet us here at church service or at a Christian concert or at a wedding or a funeral, His intention is to be with us through our everyday lives. He meets the shepherds in a cattle stall. He goes to the people and meets them in their own towns – only on a few occasions did everyone come out to see Him. Instead, He normally lived among the people, accepting their hospitality, teaching God's ways, healing the sick. Jesus wants to come to us too. He wants us to see Him in the car ride to work, in the drudgery of the day, in doing the laundry and making the beds, in playing with the kids, in taking time with our spouse. He wants us to realize that He is there in every part of our lives. If you're ordinary, guess what? So was Jesus. It's OK to come to Him as a friend.

And because He lived an everyman life, He understands our pressures and problems. Hebrews 4 tells us that Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses because He has been tempted in every way as we are, yet He was without sin. Because He can sympathize with us, we can approach Him with confidence – He can and will give us mercy and grace in our time of need. In other words, Jesus gets it. Jesus gets you. He came an ordinary man to show you that you can always turn to Him. No matter what you've done or where you've been, He knows. He hung out around ordinary people, from the worst of sinners to the self-righteous who thought they were perfect and everybody in-between. Don't ever think that He's too holy or perfect to be a part of your life. He is holy, He is perfect, and He wants to bring His life to your life and give you all that you're missing. He wants to give You Himself.

Some of the things I'm talking about are a little tricky, and they go to the final truth we see in today's passage: *the miracle is missed and misunderstood and turned away, but its magnitude never changes*. In the grand scheme of things, virtually no one knew of the messiah's coming. We're told certain stories – of Mary's cousin and her husband, an older man named Simeon, the shepherds and the wise men – but that's it. The greatest event in the history of the world is seen by a few dozen people at most. As our Scripture this morning said, “though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him.” Surely Jesus' parents would not have been turned away from the inn if the citizens of Bethlehem had any clue Who was in their midst.

And even worse, those who do know who Jesus is misunderstand why He came. Herod the Great, essentially the king of Israel of that time, wants to have the child killed because he thinks that the messiah is going to usurp his throne. The Pharisees who we will see in more detail in the next few weeks come to hate Jesus because they think He wants their religious authority and power. But even those closest to Him have their problems. The story of Jesus staying at the temple in Jerusalem is a prime example. Mary knows who this child is; she knows He is uniquely God's own; yet when He winds up missing in Jerusalem, she doesn't first go to the temple to find him. None of the family does! When they do find Him, they act like Jesus has done something strange and unthinking. Jesus obeys His parents, of course, and returns with them. He never intended to get left behind. But if those who were closest to Him, His own parents and siblings and cousins, couldn't get a grip on Jesus, it's no surprise that we find it difficult too.

But you know what? Jesus remains Jesus whether or not He is recognized, whether or not He is acknowledged, whether or not He is worshiped. Human leaders only have as much power as they have support. As we saw in the destruction in Japan last week, structures and buildings and power plants only stand until a greater force comes along. But Jesus' power and honor and glory have nothing to do with human recognition. They are His by rights, by His place as the Son of God and by His utter perfection. In Him there is nothing untrue, nothing wrong, nothing unholy. The miracle of Jesus doesn't depend on us. The miracle is solely His. He is undiminished if we fail to acknowledge Him.

That means we have to make some decisions. The world today still doesn't recognize Jesus. In fact, in its history our culture has never been so anti-Jesus. Our culture doesn't understand Jesus. Truth be told, a lot of people aren't for or against Jesus at all; they've missed Him entirely. Our world is so incredibly full of distractions, from texts to video games to instant this and instant that, that we try to fill the gaping holes in our lives with things that make us forget our pain and our sorrow, the emptiness of a life that isn't centered around God. We have to determine today – are we going to miss Jesus? Because if you come on Sunday mornings and the rest of the week you're surrounding yourself with your own entertainments and diversions, you're missing Jesus. You can live a life where you still control everything and you give Jesus a bit of your spare time, but that's missing Jesus too. Jesus is worth the whole of you. Make the choice not to miss Him.

And don't misunderstand who Jesus is and what He came to do. Jesus didn't come to give you an easy life but a simpler life. When you know who you are in relationship to Jesus, it changes your perspective. When Jesus is at the center of your life, you are no longer controlled by the “tyranny of the urgent,” the fear that a missed email or TV program or news bit will ruin your life. A life with Jesus is slower, more deliberate, more disciplined. It is focused on God and on others and not on the world's standards. Part of the miracle of Jesus is that He came to give us life – not just eternally, but now. He intends to come to you in the everyday moments and give you hope, to meet you in the trying times and give you peace. In the end, He will save you and bring you into eternal life. He didn't come so that you could do what you want; He came so that you could know God, so that you could love God just for being God, and so you could become like Him. Determine today not to miss Him.

The Messiah came so long ago as an infant so we could relate to Him, so we could see God in the mundane moments of life. The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. He is the message. Don't miss it. Amen.