

Luke 2:8-16

by Todd Atkinson

The sermon explores how the nativity scene illustrates God's intention to unite diverse individuals into one family through Jesus Christ.

Duration: 30:14

Scripture: Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:2-6, Luke 2:8, John 3:16

Topics: "Advent"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of knowing God as our father and becoming part of God's family. He encourages the audience to explore the nativity scenes and reflect on God's will for each individual. The preacher then reads from the Gospel of Luke, specifically the story of the shepherds who were visited by an angel and received the good news of Jesus' birth. The sermon concludes by highlighting the significance of God's message to the shepherds and how it applies to each person in the audience, reminding them that God values and has great plans for them.

Transcript

Thank you, Ryan. Let's express our appreciation to the worship team who led us so well. Let's never forget people who practice and work hard and there's an awful lot of hours represented behind the scenes.

They might glorify him and lead you into his presence. I'd like to begin with a reading from the Gospel according to Luke. The second chapter will begin at the eighth verse.

A familiar passage read at this time of year. Luke 2.8. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of... Sorry, just someone could use a bit of good news.

That's fantastic. Just the timing was impeccable. Oh, that's wonderful.

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest. And on earth, peace to men on whom his favor rests. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go into Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in a manger. May God bless this public reading of his holy word. Well, it's wonderful to have you all here today.

Look, we've got people down from Via Calgary. Look at Charlotte Espy. I look out and see your mom is with us today.

There's many other people old and new that are here with us today. Welcome to the fourth Sunday of Advent. One of the images that you can't help but see this time of year is that of a nativity scene.

You see them everywhere. So a scene with the infant Jesus at the center, flanked by Mary and Joseph, and then all kinds of other colorful characters, shepherds, the wise men, magi, various animals, even angels. And I've grown to really love the nativity scene and found myself thinking a fair bit about it over these past weeks.

We see it on Christmas cards. It features highly in Christmas movies. Some of you may have small nativity sets at home.

If I had my way, I would have a life-size one, like gigantic figures or at least hobbit size. So I like the big ones that you put in a church foyer or outside on a church lawn. Uh, those are my favorite.

And of course it, uh, there's nativity scenes are in stained glass windows. Uh, they are in classical paintings, very beautiful and plentiful. So I'm going to have one put up for us.

Not like you probably need a lot of reminders, but here's one example. So there's the infant Christ at the center, uh, Mary and Joseph in the middle. And on this particular one, you can't really easily tell the difference between shepherds and magi on, on a lot of them by their dress.

You can, there's no, uh, animals in this one. So a little bit bigger one. And especially on the Renaissance paintings, you could see pictures of angels.

They usually are usually at the top or in one of the upper corners. And so just as we look at both this, I wonder whether we get so familiar with this picture that we might tend to miss the message and maybe it just looks so normal to us that we might miss in some ways how unusual it is. Because having a baby under normal circumstances is pretty much a family affair.

It, it is, uh, quite private. So you're careful who you invite into the delivery room straight after your birth. Um, and so probably for the women that are here, you could probably answer that question.

How many shepherds did you invite into the room right after your baby was born? You know, how many ranch hands would you have given access? People you've never met in your life. Would you have said, come on in? Okay, magi, like how many just foreigners to the city? Would you have put something in the Lethbridge Herald? All foreigners welcome. We had a baby.

If you have nothing better to do this afternoon, come to the hospital and hang out in our delivery room. Um, animals, how many animals would you have let in uh, to your room? But in some ways this is really

what we're looking upon. This is the nativity, an array of total strangers, completely different kinds of people with nothing in common except that they have all been drawn by God to this child.

But because of that, in drawing to this child, somehow they become connected to one another. So much so that they are not so much seen as interrupting a family event, but becoming part of a family event. In fact, they become so close that they're indistinguishable from the family.

It's like we look at this picture, a baby in the middle, and the whole picture is kind of a family. Imagine shepherds, Magi, Mary and Joseph. Hours earlier, these people had never so much as met.

And from that time to this, this image has been kind of immortalized because they become a kind of eternal family. And so what we're looking at is a picture of the gospel, that God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were together as an eternal family of three. And the love that they knew was so exquisite between them that they wanted to share it.

And so the Father sent the Son to come as a child so that all that would believe in Him could also become children of God and know His Father, the Heavenly Father, as their very own Father. And so I don't know everybody here today. I don't know the circumstances that brought you, but there's a couple things I know for certain.

Number one, I know that you're here today because God wanted you. You're not here by accident. There's not one person in that picture that was there by accident.

It might have seemed random. They may have been perfect strangers only hours before, but they were there because God brought them. It wasn't an accident.

And you are here today because God brought them. I know that another truth, I know that they were there today because the one figure you can't see in this picture is invisible, and that is the Heavenly Father. And He's the one who's actually orchestrating the entire thing.

He's the one that sent His Son. He's the one who made it possible for Mary to conceive and give birth to that Son. He brought Mary and Joseph together.

He's the one that put the star in the sky that drew the magi. He sent the angels that spoke to the shepherds. And so the most central figure you can't even see in the picture, except for the one who's smallest, who came to make that Heavenly Father known.

And so I don't know who you are today, many of you, but I know that He has brought you, and He has brought you for this reason, because He wants to be your Father. He wants to be your Heavenly Father, and to fashion you into His family in a way that would meet your deepest needs. So I want to take a look at the picture a little bit.

I want to take a look at some of the characters and how that they got to be here on this day. So Mary and Joseph. Of course, there's no doubt there was already a relationship between Mary and Joseph.

The shepherds were strangers. The magi, the wise men were strangers. But that isn't the case with Mary and Joseph, because the Bible describes them as being betrothed.

Now, betrothal in that culture didn't work exactly like an engagement process of our culture. In this day, parents chose a young woman to be engaged to their son. So somehow these families knew each other.

Maybe they grew up in the same little town, but they certainly knew each other well enough that Joseph's parents favored Mary and wanted her as a daughter-in-law. Then there was a second legal stage in this process where a contract was signed before witnesses. And so this was a very serious thing, betrothal.

So Mary and Joseph were not strangers before Jesus entered their lives, but whatever the factors were that brought them together, whatever the factors were that brought them to that day, the fact remains is this, is it was that baby became the glue in their lives from that day forward. We got marriages all across here today. You ever imagine what brought you together? So maybe it was sharing a common interest, or maybe a common circle of friends.

Maybe that special girl looked at you across a crowded room and rolled her eyes at you, and you rolled them back to her. I don't know what it was that brought you together and gave you a basis for closeness, but whatever it is that brought you together, do you know that there's limitations to that? You can only go so close and become so close on that basis. And that's why many marriages hit a stage where there's a sense of disenfranchisement, a disillusionment, because we were so close.

All the things that brought us to this stage, and now we don't know how to get closer. This is a beautiful picture. Mary and Joseph betrothed, but it's that baby that brought them closer.

And if you're here today and in your marriage, the same truth holds. Jesus holds the answers to your marriage. Jesus holds the answers to the challenge that your marriage is facing, and he holds the answers to bringing us close.

And so here's this baby. One of the things I see in the picture, he brings people close that could not have ever otherwise have walked closely together, starting at marriage. Maybe you're not a Christian here today, or maybe not been part of our congregation, and maybe even one of the reasons you're here today is wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get some help for our marriage? Come talk to us, because I'm convinced that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, has everything that your marriage needs and more.

A second group that I want to take a look at is the shepherds in this picture. We don't have a long time to concentrate exclusively on them, but the shepherds are very interesting figures, because they were considered a lowly, and some people even considered them a despised class in this society. Why is that the case? Well, they led a hard life.

They were extremely poor, and they lived a great portion of their year, they actually lived day after day out of doors with their sheep, which is why the Bible says they were keeping watch at the night. They literally slept in the fields and took turns sleeping every night, so that they could watch over their sheep and protect them from predators and thieves. So the shepherds are like ordinary folk, the people that are always there, and you can't live without them, but in a sense they're so natural, they're so ordinary, that they are overlooked.

They represent the unlikely, and they represent the undervalued. And so on this holy night, there's no way that they could have ever conceived, I mean they felt like the least important people in the world, there's no way they could have conceived that all of heaven was about to shine upon them. Do you think they could have even possibly begin to imagine the kind of favor they had in the eyes of God? That He would send His angels to them, that they would be amongst the first people He would make His announcement to.

And so here's these people that felt very overlooked, and God sent them a message, I'm not overlooking you. Here's people that felt terribly ordinary and undervalued, and God sent them a huge message, I value you, and you're as important as anybody else in this story. And so I love the way that the story goes with the shepherds, because they're just the unlikely people, out in the fields by night, not thinking that anybody is ever going to think of them as significant figures.

And all of a sudden all of heaven breaks loose on their story, and so if you're here today, maybe you resonate with them. Maybe you've come to church today, and three or four people shook your hand, and you're actually kind of surprised, because you kind of feel like you'd go under the radar, like who would notice me? Who would think I was valuable? You just feel like you are used to being overlooked, ordinary, and undervalued. Then that's the reason why God brought you today, because just like these shepherds in the story, God had a message for them, well God has a message for you.

He doesn't overlook you, and he brought you here to hear that today. He doesn't undervalue you, he highly values you, and he has so much in store for you if you would come to that child and believe in his son, and become part of his family. He has more for you than you could possibly ever imagine.

Next group in the story. The next group to visit Mary and Joseph are a group called the wise men, from the east called the magi. They could not have been more different from the shepherds.

They were exotic figures who represented wealth, and culture, and learning, and influence. They came from a very far away land, likely Babylon, which is modern-day Iraq. So here's God visited what is now the Iraqi people, people from the other side of the world, and even of a different faith, and spoke to them in ways they could understand, and brought them to his son.

It would have taken them anywhere from a number of months to two years to have traveled that distance. That's a commitment. They were astrologers, which means they studied and interpreted the stars, and since that was the language they spoke, as it were, then that's the language God used to speak to them.

He spoke to them from the stars. So three astrologers, independently of one another, were looking and studying the stars, and somehow saw some sight, some star, perhaps a star in a constellation of stars, that somehow told them that a baby was going to be born, and that that baby was going to be king. So do you know that God speaks in all kinds of ways? So in our city right now, he knows what will get people's attention.

He'll have all kinds of ways of speaking. There'll be people at the cinema today. They'll be watching Star Wars.

Isn't that sad that Harrison Ford died in the first one? I'm just joking. Totally joking. Sorry.

I haven't even seen it. I just know how immoral it would be to leak information. But honestly, there'll be people there, and guess what? That's their love language.

I work with, just have become good friends with a fellow out of Victory Barbers in Victoria, BC, kind of this famous barber shop, and only this week I didn't realize how central the Star Wars story has been to his life. So guess where God will be speaking to him? Now that's not the end of the story, but God will be there in the middle of the cinema getting this guy's attention. So here's these guys who've given their entire life to study the stars.

God got their attention by that. It didn't end there. Guess what the next thing is? This idea they had that the baby was going to be born, and was going to be ruler, was confirmed to them in the scriptures.

So they came across an ancient Jewish prophecy from the Old Testament from the book of Micah, and it says, and you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are by no means at least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. So they see a star. Where does the star lead them? To the scriptures.

Where does the scriptures lead them? To the Savior. So they see a star, which is then confirmed in scriptures. They begin a long journey which leads them to meet the Savior.

So people are going to have their starting points. And I think as a church, we should train ourselves to speak to people in language they can understand. That will then give them an appetite for the scriptures.

That will then lead them to the Savior. And so here are these incredibly unlikely people. I mean, they are more unlikely than the shepherds because the cultural gap would have been enormous between them and Mary and Joseph.

And then somehow that baby, not only were they drawn to the baby, but now they're part of the family. I mean, a church is like this. Sometimes we have to think, I've got to look for a church where people are just like me.

That's not the nativity story. I'm actually really glad that I'm not full of a church of people just like me. I want to see some shepherds in the midst.

I want to see some magi in the midst. I want to see people from our culture. I want to see people from the other side of the world, from vastly different cultures, who are on this same journey.

And that the closer we get to that baby, the closer we get to one another. And the more that it feels like family. One more group that I think of are interesting, and that is the angels.

So this particular picture doesn't have angels in it, but particularly the Renaissance pictures, they tend to be replete with angels. Have you ever wondered why there's so many angels, so much angelic activity around Jesus' birth? I don't like it when people treat the angelic part of the story like it's somehow an embellishment or a metaphor. I heard this preached by an eminent figure in Canada once, that the angelic stories were kind of sophisticated metaphorical ways of speaking about truth.

I was like, that's actually not true. It was all I could do not to stand up in public. They're not saying, they were saying that angels were not real beings, they're just metaphorical ways of conveying spiritual truth.

It's not true. I've had many significant angelic encounters. I only say that to say, take that part of the story like it's as real as anything else in the story.

So why do you see so much angelic activity in this story? Well, here's one reason, because around that baby, the line between heaven and earth becomes thin. Not only are unlikely people being united around Jesus, but heaven and earth are being united. This huge gap between heaven and earth, between the natural and the supernatural, the huge chasm between God and man, is being narrowed through this baby.

So the kinds of things that happen in heaven happen around him everywhere he goes. He is narrowing the gap. And so angels are ministering around him as freely as they minister around the throne of God in heaven.

What a family. Mary and Joseph, men and women, shepherds, rural and urban, the people that feel noticed in life, the people that feel under the radar, magi, people from one culture, people from another culture, the poor and the rich, heaven and earth, angels and men, all forged together by that one baby, all forged together into one holy family. You get an idea of what the church is supposed to look like? That's what we're meant to look like.

We're on that journey. We've made many, many significant steps. But if people were to ask us, how are you doing on that journey? The truest answer is, we are a work in progress.

Like any journey, we've made a few steps, we have more steps to take. But I'll tell you, is the journey worthwhile? That we become a picture that resembles more day and day that picture? Is that journey worthwhile? I hope you think so. You think of the magi, they traveled as much as two years on this journey, would have had a huge entourage, and would have spent considerable sums of money to be able to get there.

So not only did they think it was a worthwhile journey, it was a costly journey that cost them everything. We think that all it cost them was a bit of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. You go on the road for two years and take a huge entourage with you and see how much it costs.

Of course it's costly. That's what makes it beautiful. And so this journey to that baby, this journey we're on closer and closer to that savior, the way that we become forged into him, but also the way that we get forged into one another is a journey of infinite worth and value.

I also want to say one other thing as we draw closer to the new year. I think we live in a culture that are longing for family, longing for family. So it doesn't matter how good people's family were, all it does is create a greater appetite for things that the biological family cannot meet.

This need for a family with God as its head. My sons are here on the front who I love. This is Aidan and Callum, my beloved sons.

It doesn't matter how good a dad I am to them. And believe me, with all my heart, every single day of my life, I seek to be a good dad. I would say that's one of my greatest passions in life, is to be a good dad.

But it doesn't matter how good, they will need God as a heavenly father. Because I can never meet those deepest needs in their heart. Maybe I give them a little sample.

Maybe I give them a little taste of what he's like. So even the better I do, all that I'll do is make them want him more. And where I fall short, I meant to fall short, so that they would go to him.

So I think we live in a country, we live in a time where the family has never been more broken down, it has never been more disenfranchised, and yet there's never been a stronger desire for somehow this thing inside of our hearts that wants a true expression of family. And here we have it right now, a holy family, brought together by God, deeply united, people that had actually very, very little in common. But they had everything in common they needed to have in common, and it was that child.

Because he was bigger than all their differences, and we have that right here. If you're new to us, come get to know God as your father. I could easily, if we had time, we could have probably a hundred people right now and stand up and say that God is their father, and here's what it's done for them.

Come get to know God as your father, but also become part of God's family, and get to know us as your brothers and sisters. So let's take one last look at this beautiful image. Maybe this week you could just google nativity scenes, because they play it out, they capture different things in different ways.

And there you'll see a little picture of what his will is for each one of us. Let's bow our heads in a word of prayer. So whether you are here just new, the last weeks or today is your first day, or whether you have been here for years, and you have known him for years, together we pray the same prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, I want you to be my savior. Let's pray it in your hearts. I want you to be my savior, and I want that your father would be my father.

I want to know God as my father, not in name alone, but I want to be loved by him. I want to be affirmed by him. I look to him.

I want everything that he wants to give me, and I want to be part of his family. I want to love and be loved. I want to know others deeply, and I want to be known deeply.

Oh, let him speak to your heart. Oh, let him speak to your heart. All who truly turn to Christ and away from your sins.

All who seek to be reconciled with your neighbors and intend to lead the new life.

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