

# THE UNDERSTATED MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS

## Sermon, December 24, 2017

### The Fourth Sunday of Advent

**Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14**

*"Unto us a child has been born, unto us a son has been given, and the government will be on His shoulders." -- Isaiah 9:6*

With words very similar to these words from Isaiah, a messenger raced into the Roman Senate and proclaimed, *"The next ruler of the world is born!"* This was sixty-six years before the birth of Christ. For, in an aristocratic community of Rome, a child was indeed born, a son was indeed given. His name was Caius Octavius, and he was the grand nephew of Julius Caesar; those of you who know your history remember that Octavius would go on to be Julius Caesar's adopted son and heir. Octavius grew up in the palace. He was educated by the finest teachers of literature, philosophy, and government. At the age of eighteen (!) he ascended the throne of Rome after the March 15, 44 B.C. murder of Julius Caesar. The repercussions of this murder helped plunge the entire empire into chaos and intrigue. Fifteen years later, when Caius Octavius reached age thirty-three, his rule finally secured peace, stability and order throughout the vast Roman Empire, ushering in the "Pax Romana;" this son of Julius Caesar became known to his fellow Romans as the "Prince of Peace." That year, his thirty-third year, the Roman Senate conferred upon Octavius the title "Caesar Augustus," which roughly translates as "the Exalted One" (*Augustus is derived from the Latin "augere," which means "to increase"*). Now, as the uncontested ruler of the entire Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus just had to give the word and armies would march, ships would sail, and the *world* would move for him, the latter of which is exactly what happened in his sixty-sixth year ... thirty-three years after ascending the throne at age thirty-three, Caesar Augustus decreed a census be taken.

This is what Luke records for all posterity in Luke 2, this same Caesar Augustus sent out a decree *"... that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world."* Everyone was required to go back to their home towns to register. It was during this census that unto us *another* child was born, *another* son was given, in a rather unimportant village, in a rather obscure corner of the vast Roman Empire. No Roman messenger ran to announce this child's birth to the Senate. Instead, it was God's angelic messenger who announced the birth of Jesus Christ to the least of the empire's inhabitants, a small band of shepherds watching over their sheep by night: *"I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Christ, the Lord."*

Just as a brief aside, if I may borrow and slightly adapt that familiar jingle from that commercial for Bald Hill Kia (*a car dealer just down the road a bit from our church*)<sup>1</sup> to point out something obvious, but often overlooked ... this is all about *"Real People and Real Prices Places."* Luke goes to exacting detail to verify the historicity of this account; the pages of the entire New Testament, for that matter, have the ring of authentic historicity rather than the mythical (*and time-less*) language of fable and legend. These pages are rooted in reality of time, location and history. Luke tells us about this other child who was given who began his life in a humble manger, which is a feeding bin for animals. He wasn't raised in a palace, but in a common and very humble Jewish home. He was not educated in literature, philosophy and government, but in carpentry. And at age thirty-three, He too secured PEACE for His people not by ascending to a Roman throne, but to a Roman cross. In that ultimate act of sacrifice, Jesus, the one Isaiah refers to as the true Prince of Peace, became the King of a whole new kingdom that has long outlived and will continue to outlive every earthly empire. To this very day, He just has to give the word and His hope and salvation and peace, shalom, can break into any life in the world. We are here this morning because His hope and salvation has come into our lives.

Now, if you are here this morning and are still having some trouble grasping all this, believing all this, listen to the words of John 1:12 we read last week -- *"Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the power to become children of God."* You might say that, according to John, if you are to understand the real meaning of Christmas you will have to become a kid again. Recall the words of Jesus Himself in Matthew 19:14 -- *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."* Just as an aside, it's important to note that we are encouraged to be child-like, not child-ish, when it comes to matters of faith and life; but that's another sermon. I believe there are at least three reasons we have to become child-like to understand Christmas

(1) *The first reason is that those who are child-like find belief easier.* Children live in a world filled with mystery and possibilities. Children find it easy to believe it is possible to move from Kansas to Oz in a tornado (*as seen again on TV last night! The Wizard of Oz ran on TBS @ 8:00 pm*). Children can believe one can look down a hole and find a huge Wonderland below. In the children's world reindeer really can fly, and snowmen can come to life. Just as an aside, some Christian parents try to take all such stories away from children and teach "just the Bible"; however, I am not one of them. I never wanted to purge flying reindeers and Santa and snowmen coming to life from my children's

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jUqtA-rb2g>

experience during this magical season. I'm with those parents who believe the capacity of children to accept wonder needs to be nurtured. The capacity of children to believe in a mystery-filled world, to believe what their parents say just because they say so even if it doesn't appear logical ... that all needs to be nurtured and enjoyed. I know others will disagree with me, but there's a huge difference between outright lying and wink-and-a-nod make believe. After nearly six decades, my brothers and I still laugh about the time fifty-seven years ago when the Santa Claus who visited our house one evening had on his feet the exact same shoes our Dad wore just about every day ... and we really did see Mommy kissing Santa Claus! Were my parents being deceptive? Or were they playing the loving parental role of fertilizing the soil out of which wonder, trust and belief can later flourish? I'm convinced that exercising and nurturing that child-like capacity of wonder and trust and acceptance of mystery helps children more readily accept the grander, true mysteries as they grow older. It helps them more readily accept by faith what their Heavenly Father tells them, even if it seems to fly in the face of logic at first. In a word, it helps them prepare for a lifetime of living by faith.

*"Fine for children," someone might say, "But let's be grown-ups. Reindeer can't fly. Snowmen just melt. And virgins don't give birth. Gods don't become human beings."* No, there are some mysteries that really ARE true. We don't fully understand them, but they are nevertheless true. The meaning of Christmas is not just the nostalgic story of Mary and Joseph and shepherds and wise men, but it is also about the high drama of God entering into our everyday life, changing the way it is, conceiving saving grace and hope in the midst of all the messy circumstances of real life. It's about trusting God to work His salvation in the most difficult of situations, even if we cannot fully understand how or why. These aren't fantasies and fairy tales; if anything, these are the truest words you are going to hear this week. But to believe them, you will have to recover the child's ability to accept wonder and just believe.

(2) *The second reason you have to become a child to understand Christmas is that children know Christmas is primarily about receiving.* Not many kids I know are talking about how stressed they are about Christmas. That's because young children aren't worrying about how much they have to do. They don't max out their credit cards. They are not in a lather about Christmas cards they have to mail. The main thing children worry about when it comes to Christmas is if they can possibly wait for it to get here! They know something wonderful is about to happen, and they know they are going to be on the receiving end of it. Children are very good at receiving. It is only as adults that we start to think that Christmas is primarily about giving. But according to the Bible, there is only one Giver at Christmas, and that is God Almighty Who loved us so much that He gave His only Son for us to receive.

Now, I understand the value of giving presents; something deep inside compels us to give because we know we are not going to be happy without giving to the people we love. We really do want to give of ourselves to the people we love, so we give presents. I'm convinced we are that way because we are made in the image of One Who delights in giving to those He loves. Our Heavenly Father loves us. And in Jesus Christ, He gave us Himself. Our gift giving at Christmas is an imperfect symbol of the greatest gift called salvation which we must receive ... but the older we get, it seems the harder it is for us to simply receive. Christmas is not about all the "stuff" we have to do to get ready for it. It is about receiving ... really receiving ... what God has *already* done in giving us a Savior.

(3) *A third reason is that children have hope and a future.* Children have wonderful dreams about what they can do and what they want to be. They are as of yet unencumbered by their limitations and failures. The world exists for them as unexplored possibilities, and they find it easy to hope. But as adults we spend so much time managing our mistakes and sins and limitations (*both real and imagined*) that we begin to lose our ability to believe in the future. We focus too often on the failures of the past, and we lose hope. How many times have you heard or said, *"I would give anything to go back and undo and/or unsay what I did and/or said."* There isn't an adult in this room who hasn't wished that at some time or another. All of us have made mistakes. All of us have some area(s) of life where we would love a "do-over." But, we know, it is not possible. We can't go back. We're grown-ups. We can't go back to being children. We know we can't make our way back to being that child with the clean slate. And we know it's so hard to make our way back to being the child who is good at receiving. And we have become so jaded and cynical that we can't make our way back to being the child who finds belief in mystery to be easy. After all we have seen, after all we have said and done, we know it would just take a *miracle* to become a child again.

### **RIGHT!**

That is what Christmas is all about!

That is precisely what Christmas is about! The miracle of Christmas is not just that God became a child, which is indeed miraculous. The understated but tremendous miracle of Christmas is that we, too, can become a child ... we can become a child *again* precisely because of Christmas. A child of God! Reborn! Because of Jesus Christ, we can become a forgiven child who has had the slate wiped clean by the wonderful grace of God. We can become a child who has hope, real hope, for a future in which God will indeed make all things right. And by the grace of God given at Christmas, we can become a child who knows how to accept the wonder, the mystery, the joy and the life changing power of a grace we may not fully understand, but can certainly receive and celebrate.