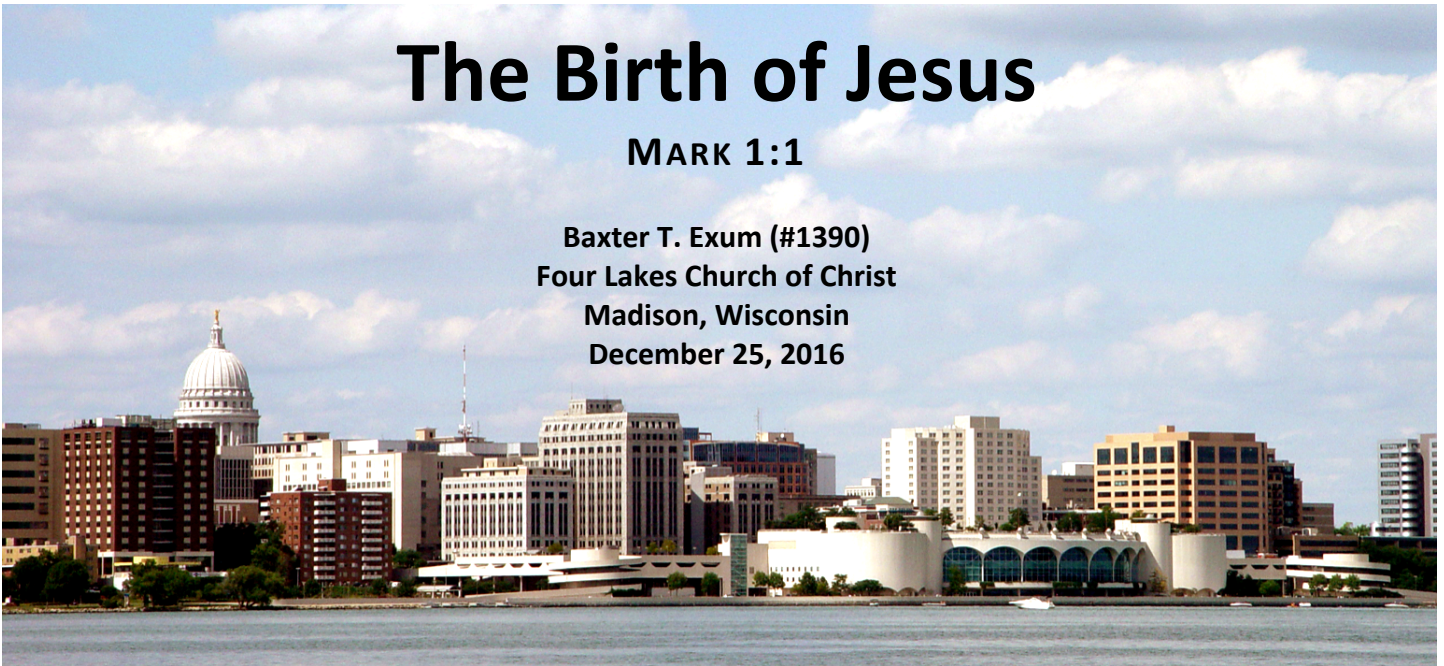


The Birth of Jesus

MARK 1:1

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This morning, I would like for us to take a few moments to think about the birth of Jesus Christ. Most of you know by now that I am not one to make a habit of preaching on topics that are tied to various holidays. In fact, over the past 16-½ years, we have only studied the birth of Christ twice during this time of year – in 2000 and also in 2012. And it is a challenge to me, at least, to decide on a topic or text for a day like today. The way I look at it, there are two extremes. On one hand, we have those who see today as the birthday of Jesus Christ, and they look at today as a day that needs to be celebrated as such. And so there are many churches who have all kinds of special programs this time of year – concerts and plays, Christmas trees set up in the entryway, and the emphasis is on the idea that today is one of the most important days of the year, that today needs to be celebrated as a religious holiday. In fact, just think about the word “holiday.” To many, today is, in fact, a “holy day.”

Then, on the other hand, there are those who understand that Christmas is NOT a “holy day” (which it is not). These are those who understand and emphasize the pagan origins of a day like today (and the day does have pagan origins). They know that December 25 is NOT the Lord’s birthday (which it is not), but to them the pendulum is at the other end completely. And they will approach today with the kind of zeal that prevents them from in any way acknowledging on this day the arrival of Jesus into this world.

And this puts me as a gospel preacher in an interesting position. For years, I will be talking with friends or acquaintances in this community who know I am a minister (it happened again just this past week with my dentist), and they will say something like, “Wow, you must be really busy this time of year.” I am always nice and respectful, but I am usually thinking to myself, “No, not really. I am busy, but it is not directly tied to this time of year.” I’ve had some interesting interactions with a very nice man from this neighborhood who worked with me at the presidential recount a few weeks ago. As we got to know each other counting ballots together over those twelve days at the beginning of this month, he found out that I am a minister. He lives right here in this neighborhood, so we got to talking, and it turns out this man is an atheist. The morning after our first little discussion about religion, he comes up to me as we are waiting to get in the recount room, and he says, “You know, I drove by your little church at 5:30 this morning, and it looked so sad. There were no Christmas lights! It wasn’t lit up for the holidays!” And then he said, “I’m going to stop by and add some lights to your little building! I’m going to do some Christmas decorating over there!” We had a good laugh over that, but I told him, “If I show up and there are lights on our building, I’m going to know who did it!” But it was an interesting

interaction between us where we had an atheist disappointed by our lack of Christmas spirit, an atheist who was threatening to decorate our building!

Some of you might have noticed the piece on the Wisconsin State Journal last year where they asked various ministers in Madison to summarize what they would say in their Christmas message last year. Well, I was very kind, but I responded to the reporter by explaining that we do not really celebrate Christmas as a “holy day.” She said, “Oooo, that is very interesting! Would you be willing to write that up for us in 200 words or less?” I agreed, and this is what I said,

In Churches of Christ, we typically don't celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday. Our goal is to restore simple New Testament Christianity by using the Bible as our pattern, and the Christmas holiday was completely unknown by the earliest Christians. So instead, we leave it up to our individual members to decide how to celebrate. As Paul wrote in Romans 14:5, “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.” We are not anti-Christmas at all; rather, we believe that Jesus is the reason for every season, and we are thankful for what he has done for us every day of the year.

Again, I tried to not come across as a Scrooge or anything, but I tried to take that as an opportunity to educate a little bit, to let the community know what we are thinking on this day. I say these things simply to point out that there is a delicate balance – on one hand, some will celebrate as if this is a high holy day on the church calendar, but others will avoid it like the plague and will refuse to even mention the birth of Jesus on a day like this one. And personally, I'd like to think that we are somewhere in the middle on this – we know that Christmas is not any kind of true “holy day,” we know that it has pagan origins, and yet at the same time, we don't really go to the other extreme where we refuse to even talk about it.

This morning, then, I want us to just briefly summarize our thoughts from several years ago, and then I'd like to close with what we might refer to as the “So what?” section: What does all of this really mean for us today?

First of all, though, I want us to do just a brief overview of what we know by asking: What is the ONE THING that all accounts of the birth of Jesus have in common? Or we might word it in this way: Whenever a New Testament writer mentions the arrival of Jesus on this earth, what ONE DETAIL is always included?

I. And as we have outlined these various details previously, we start with the MANGER.

Obviously, this is one of the first actual physical items that many people will think about when they think of the birth of Jesus. And for the image up here, we're looking at something that's gone viral over the past week or so, something we might refer to as a “Hipster Nativity Scene.” We've got the animals over on the left eating their gluten-free feed (if you can see the fine print down there), we have someone who appears to be a shepherd on his i-Pad, over on the right we have the three very hipster-looking wise men on their Segway scooters carrying boxes from Amazon, and in the middle in the solar powered stable we have Mary with her Starbucks along with Joseph taking selfies with the baby, and then we have Jesus in the manger.

And the manger scene is definitely a part of Jesus coming into this world. There is a manger scene in our state capitol rotunda right now (along with a disclaimer from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, claiming that this season is completely made up). And yet when we look back to the scriptures, we will find that Jesus was, in fact, placed in a manger (a feeding trough) very shortly after his birth.

I would encourage you to be turning with me to Luke 2. You might remember that Caesar Augustus decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire, and the law said that all families were to return and register in their home cities. Mary and Joseph left the city of Nazareth and returned to the small village of Bethlehem. Because of the census, though, all of the rooms were full, and when Jesus was born, he was placed in feeding trough, or manger. Please notice Luke 2:7, ***“And she [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”*** Now, in my own mind, I had always assumed that Jesus was born in a stable. After all, that is the picture that we often see on all of the cards. However, as I studied for this morning’s lesson, I learned that a stable is never mentioned with regard to the Lord’s birth. All we know is that Jesus was placed in a feeding trough. We could probably assume that he was born in a stable, but he could have been born outdoors. He could have been born in a tent, or a cave, or even in some kind of storage room (as various commentaries have suggested).

The manger, though, is an important part of the birth of Christ. It is recorded in the Bible; therefore, God wants us to know about it! However, did you know that the feeding trough (or manger) is only mentioned in the book of Luke? The fact that it is mentioned in only one of the accounts may or may not be significant, and yet there is something about the coming of Christ into the world that is mentioned in all four gospel accounts, and the manger is not it.

II. Perhaps, then, we could consider the SHEPHERDS AND THE ANGELS.

The shepherds and the angels always seem to go together, and they are important. Again, going back to Luke 2, I want us to notice what the Bible tells us about the shepherds. Notice, please, Luke 2:8-20:

⁸ In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹¹ for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” ¹⁵ When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

We know that when a baby is born today, it is very common for people to send out some kind of birth announcement. Today, we usually hear about it online – complete with pictures and videos. This passage we’ve just read is God’s birth announcement! And it is impressive! Here are these shepherds minding their own business in the dark in the middle of nowhere, and suddenly there is this bright light and thousands of these amazing creatures all praising God.

And the announcement is made, not to kings and various world leaders, not to the religious elite, not to the wealthy, but God announced the birth of his Son to a group of shepherds watching their sheep in the middle of the night. And I believe that just in the announcement we start to see something of the kind of leader Jesus would be – a servant, paying attention to those who were often overlooked. So the announcement made by the angels to the shepherds is significant, and yet did you know that the shepherds and the angels are only mentioned in the book of Luke? And so there must be something else about the birth of Christ that we really need to appreciate.

III. Maybe we could consider the WISE MEN AND THE STAR THEY FOLLOWED.

Please notice Matthew 2:1-12,

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ² “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.’” ⁷ Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” ⁹ After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

Most people, when they think of the wise men, they picture three men standing around the manger. In fact, that is the way it is almost always pictured when we see it on any kind of a greeting card. However, did you notice something about the timing in this passage? Back up in verse 1, these things happened at some point **“after”** the Lord’s birth. In fact, the wise men did not even arrive in Jerusalem until **“after”** the Lord was born, and only then (according to verse 11) do they come to find Jesus in the **“house.”** In other words, the Lord was no longer in the manger, but he was in a house of some kind. In fact, we piece together a timeline, and it seems much safer to assume that the wise men first see Jesus when he is about a year old. The wise men, then, are disconnected from the manger. Those are two different scenes.

I hope we also noticed that we are not told how many wise men there were. As I mentioned earlier, we often picture three; however, we do not know how many there were. They are referred to as **“men,”** so there must have been at least two, but other than that, we do not know. They did bring three gifts, and yes, there might have been one gift from each man, but that might not have been the case at all.

These men are an important part of the account, but did you know that the wise men and the star are only mentioned in the book of Matthew? They are important, but there is something else about the birth of Jesus that we really need to understand.

IV. We could consider the TOWN OF BETHLEHEM.

And again, Bethlehem is often pictured on cards. We sing about the “little town of Bethlehem.” Nearly everyone understands that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. I say “nearly” everyone, because there is one major denomination in the world today that teaches otherwise. If you talk to someone from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (commonly known as the Mormons), they will most likely offer you a copy of the Book of Mormon. If I were you, I would accept the book, and then ask one of their very young teenage “elders” if they know where Jesus was born. They will say Bethlehem. At that point, turn in their book to Alma 7:10. That verse makes the prediction that the Savior will be born of Mary in Jerusalem. And so, the Book of Mormon makes a false prediction about the location of the Lord’s birth. Notice: Herod did not ask the wise men where the Lord was to be born, but he asked the religious leaders, and in response to that questioning, the religious leaders were unanimous in their conclusion that the Lord was to be born in Bethlehem, and the reason they were unanimous is because of a prophecy in Micah 5:2 (I would invite you to be turning to this passage – Micah 5:2). Micah 5:2 contains a prophecy that was made several hundred years before the Lord’s birth. In Micah 5:2, the Bible says, ***“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be a ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”*** And so we see that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (and not in Jerusalem). Matthew refers to this prophecy in Matthew 2:5-6 (he quotes from the book of Micah). Bethlehem, then, is significant. It proves Old Testament prophecy. And yet in the New Testament, only Matthew and Luke specifically point out that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

There are so many other details that we could go on to consider, but so far this morning we have learned that the common thread in all four gospel accounts is not the manger, not the shepherds or the angels, not the wise men or the star, and not the village of Bethlehem.

V. Instead, the common denominator in all four gospel accounts of the Lord’s birth is the fact that JESUS CHRIST IS GOD’S SON IN HUMAN FORM.

In Matthew 1:18, the Bible says that Mary ***“...was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.”*** In Mark 1:1, Mark starts his gospel account by saying, ***“The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”*** Luke explains in his version of events that ***“...the Holy Offspring shall be called the Son of God”*** (Luke 1:35). And in John’s account, the Bible simply says, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”*** (John 1:1,14). Even the apostle Paul referred to the Lord’s birth in Galatians 4:4, ***“But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman.”*** The one common element in all references to the birth of Jesus is that Jesus is God’s Son. His purpose in coming to this earth was not so that we could celebrate the manger, and the shepherds, and the angels, and the star, and Bethlehem, and the wise men. These are important details – but in the big picture, the most important truth about the coming of Jesus is that He is, in fact, God’s Son. In fact, believing in the birth of Christ is one of the most important facts in the Christian faith. And we will get to more on this as we get back to our series on 1 John in the very near future. But for now, the most important truth concerning the Lord’s birth is that Jesus is God’s Son in human form.

Conclusion:

As we close, then, we get to the “So what?” section. What does God coming to this earth in human form mean to us? I would suggest three very important applications this morning.

First of all, God coming to this earth in human form reminds us that **GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES**, that God keeps his word, that God is faithful. All the way back in Genesis, God made a promise to Abraham that through his descendants, all the nations of this earth would be blessed. And the rest of the Bible tells the story of that promise being fulfilled, coming to somewhat of a climax with the arrival of Jesus as a descendant of Abraham. That is why the book of Matthew starts by introducing, ***“The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham....”*** Jesus is God’s word in human form, the fulfillment of prophecy. So first of all, in Jesus, God keeps his word. God is faithful.

Secondly, the arrival of Jesus in human form proves that **GOD LIVING WITH US IS IMPORTANT**. Going back to John 1:14, the Word of God ***“became flesh and made his home among us.”*** In Matthew 1:23, Matthew has the angel quoting from Isaiah and saying that the child will be called ***“Immanuel,”*** which translated means, ***“God with us.”*** God came to this earth to live here with us, to experience what we experience, to feel what we feel.

There is a third lesson for us to learn from the birth of Jesus, and that is: By coming to this earth, **Jesus showed us what it means to be a SERVANT**. As Bill read for us earlier from Philippians 2, God ***“emptied himself,”*** he poured himself out into human form and took on the form of a bond-servant. And Paul’s application of what Jesus did there is that we need to pour ourselves out as well – not looking out for our own personal interests, but looking out primarily for others.

So, that is where we leave it this morning: Although the details are important, it’s not about the manger, it’s not about the wise men and the star, it’s not about shepherds and angels, it’s not about Bethlehem, but it’s all about God coming to this earth in human form – keeping his promises, living with us, and taking on the form of a servant to demonstrate how we ourselves need to be living.

As Paul goes on to explain in Philippians 2, Jesus didn’t just come as a servant, but he came to suffer and die on the cross. He came to save us. And before he left this earth he promised to come back, and commanded all people to repent and be baptized. And so, if you have not yet been baptized, we would love to talk with you to discuss any questions you might have. If you have something we need to pray about, let us know. But if you are ready to become a Christian immediately, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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