

## Reconciled: 4. Reconciled with the World

Luke 2:7-12

December 20, 2020

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Every night after dinner, my husband, Jerry and I bundle up and take a walk. In addition to getting some fresh air and exercise, it lifts our spirits, especially this time of year when the days are so short. We live in Maple Grove's near Central Park, so these days, we intentionally walk by the Ice Skating Loop. We love seeing the Christmas lights and the ice skaters, hearing the Christmas music playing over the loudspeakers. For us, this year, it's a nostalgic reminder of what the Christmas season is supposed to look and feel like.

But there is no amount of nostalgia that can capture the real meaning of Christmas; that Christ has come for us, to rescue us from sin, fear, and death. We celebrate Christmas because we celebrate Christ becoming vulnerable, becoming weak, humbling himself to bring reconciliation between us and God.

But like Christmas itself, it's easy to become nostalgic about reconciliation rather than really embracing the messy grace and humility that it requires. If we are going to say, "Merry Christmas," and mean it, then we must adopt the passion of Jesus to step into the awkward, uncomfortable, humbling messiness that reconciliation requires. Today we'll look at what it means to extend reconciliation to our world, a world that really needs a little extra reconciliation these days.

We begin with a story in which we see the passion of Jesus as he goes out of his way to offer the gift of a restored relationship. In John 4, we read that Jesus had left Judea and was headed back to Galilee. It says, "*Jesus **had to** go through Samaria. He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar... Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me some water to drink.' ... The Samaritan woman asked, 'Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?' (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.) Jesus responded, 'If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water.'*"

Here we see Jesus stepping outside of the bounds of what was considered acceptable behavior. In this case, intentionally walking right into Samaria and then waiting at the well for the woman.

The most direct route from Judea to Galilee would be through Samaria, but Jews avoided traveling through Samaria at all costs. They actually went out of their way by crossing over the River Jordan and traveling through the mountains in order to avoid the people of Samaria. The Samaritans shared a lot of their history with the Jewish people, but their part of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and their people were exiled. When they returned to their land they found it inhabited by non-Jewish Canaanites. The Samaritans intermarried with the Canaanites and adopted their religious practices. This infuriated the rest of the Jewish nation. By the time we get to Jesus' day, the Jewish people had already despised the Samaritans for generations. They considered them to be heretics because of their religious practices. This was racism disguised as religious disapproval. Jesus certainly didn't **have to** go through Samaria, he **chose** to go there because he had a divine appointment with a stranger.

In this culture, women usually came to get their water in the cool of the morning. It was a social event and they usually came together to share stories about their families and the events of

their lives. But having been married and divorced five times and currently living with a man who was not her husband, this woman was an outcast. So she came alone at the hottest part of the day, perhaps to avoid the sideway glances and behind-the-back whispers of the other women. She was alone. And she was lonely.

Jesus asked her for a drink of water and she began pointing out all of the cultural reasons why he should not be asking her for anything. But Jesus wasn't looking for water, he was looking for a connection. Jesus going out of his way, going beyond cultural barriers, because he wanted to know this one Samaritan woman. He had a gift for her, the gift of living water; a personal relationship with God.

I have spent some time this week imagining all the places where Jesus might choose to go today, places where there is great injustice, war, and oppression. Places like the Palestine and Israel, a refugee camp in Kenya or a tent city in Minneapolis, or to a food shelf or school in your neighborhood, to the LGBTQ community, to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and other BIPOC communities. I think Jesus would choose to be right in the middle of all these challenging situations, to bring people together and mend broken relationships. He would be at work as an agent of reconciliation.

Throughout the gospels, we read about all kinds of divine appointments Jesus had which took him to marginalized oppressed people. Like when he got in a boat and told his disciples to take him to the other side of the lake, into the land where the Gentiles lived. When he told Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector, that he had chosen him to have dinner with that night. We see it when Jesus, at the request of the Roman centurion, went to his home and healed his servant, and we see it in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus offers blessings specifically addressing those living on the margins of society. He intentionally seeks out these types of encounters. In doing so, he is showing us the very heart of God, living into the words of the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah: *"Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."* He is showing us what it means to be an agent of reconciliation.

We see this in Luke, chapter 2, in the story of Jesus' birth. As Luke's introduces us to a young, poor, homeless couple, who are forced to give birth to their child in a cave. And so He comes... vulnerably, helplessly, wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in an animal's feeding trough. He is born among the lowest of the low and the poorest of the poor.

Next, Luke introduces us to the shepherds. Shepherding was a profession most likely to be filled from the bottom rung of the social ladder, by persons who could not find what was regarded as decent work. Shepherds were stereotyped as liars, degenerates and thieves. In fact, many towns had ordinances barring shepherds from even entering the city limits. They were classed with tax collectors and prostitutes, persons who were deemed sinners by virtue of their vocations.

Then the angels arrive with "good news of great joy for all people" but specifically, first, to these shepherds. I have come to think of God sending angels to shepherds as something bigger than just reaching outsiders. It's about reconciling relationships. Because if you spend enough time in the field, shunned by the decent and religious folk, disappointed by God, or overwhelmed by grief, you stop caring that you are an outsider. You give up on trying to get inside religion, maybe even give up on God. But God does not give up on us. God sends angels to people who have given up on God.

I know and love people like this; people who have been on the outside for so long they have given up on God. They are so down and so blue, so alone, so hopeless that this Christmas, they cannot even think about attending a Christmas service. And I suspect you know people like this too. But here's the good news. God is still sending angels out into the fields with good news of great joy. Often, those angels are people, people like you and me, who are willing to show up in challenging, messy situations and say "use me" to be an agent of change to bring hope and reconciliation to a hurt and broken world.

For 27 years, Sue Zietlow, a member here at Messiah Church, has volunteered as a guardian ad litem in the juvenile court system. A guardian ad litem is someone who is appointed by the courts to watch after a juvenile in a case where their parents aren't mentally, emotionally or physically able or simply not willing to safely and adequately parent their child. Over the years, Sue's worked with over 75 families and 170 children. Her job is to tell the judge what she believes is in the best interest of the child; what that child needs now, where they should live now and in the future. In order to do that she needs to learn as much as possible about the child. She does this by visiting and observing the child, their caregivers and school. She receives information and reports from therapists and doctors and other professionals. When she sees adults don't do a good job, when there's no money available for what is needed, no family available or willing to parent this child, it can be frustrating and heartbreaking. When I asked her why she continues to do it she said, "I know these kids need an independent person to advocate for them in the court system. They need someone who isn't motivated, guided or pressured by a team, supervisor, policy, or budget to speak in the child's best interest. It's a great joy to know that I've helped a child to have a better life and in turn, a win for society." Sue is an agent of reconciliation.

If you've been following the news in recent days, maybe you've heard about The Christmas Star that will appear in the night sky tomorrow, December 21st. I couldn't help but take a deeper look at how amazing it is that this occurrence would be happening in the year 2020.

2020 has been the year of multiple viruses—COVID 19, economic dislocation, racism, and political division. These are all intertwined, layered, and interactive. And the real pandemic these viruses are creating is a pandemic of nearly unbearable fear, anxiety, disorientation, and despair. This is not unlike the pandemic of tyranny, fear, and hopelessness that dominated the time into which Jesus was born. Matthew tells us that the Magi, these foreigners, found Jesus by way of this star. They followed the star until it rested where Jesus was and they began to worship him. In a time where it was dark, Light was brought into our world. Jesus, the light of the world, stepped into the chaos to bring peace.

With the shortest amount of daylight, tomorrow is literally the "darkest day" of 2020. And it is on this darkest day when we will be able to see the Christmas Star. Scientists tell us that what appears as a "star" was actually the close passing of the planets Jupiter and Saturn. This occurs every 20 years but it hasn't been visible to earth in over 800 years. I think it's fitting that in 2020, we get to see this beautiful reminder, that even in our darkest of times, Light will, and has, overcome the darkness. That's the nature of light—every time it encounters darkness, the light wins! In our darkest of times, Jesus is here, with us. We are not alone.

So tomorrow, as you look out in the night sky for the Christmas Star, and then forward into days ahead, may you be reminded of God's power and Light and "good news for all people". It takes courage to be an agent of reconciliation. But this is the season of Emmanuel, God with us, you are not alone in making this journey. Let's do what we can to make sure others are not alone either.

Let us pray: O Wisdom, Lord and Ruler of All, Root of Jesse, Key of David, King of the Nations, Bright and Morning Star, Emmanuel. Come, Lord Jesus, Come.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 20, 2020**

**Weekly Prayer:** Loving God, help me remember the birth of Jesus so that I may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and worship of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love in my heart and all over the world. Let kindness come through me with every gift and good desire and with every greeting. Amen.

### **Monday, December 21, 2020**

#### **Scripture: John 4:1-6**

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

**Observation:** Jesus went from Judea (southern Israel) to Galilee (the north). In between lay Samaria, an area many Jews skirted. Hatred and distrust between Israelites and Samaritans went back over 500 years, to Israel’s return from exile in Babylon (Ezra 4:1-5). Jesus’ fellow Jews saw Samaritans the way many Israelis today see Palestinians, and vice versa. But Jesus saw Samaritans as people who needed his love as much as anyone else, and treated them that way. He went through Samaria on purpose, and reached Jacob’s well at noon.

**Application:** John said Jesus “had to go” through Samaria. He did not need to save the three days He could gain by passing through this ill-regarded province rather than crossing the river and going up the eastern desert route.... the Father had sent Him into the whole world—not just part of it. Does God’s love ever call you to go to places that human divisions tell you to avoid? How can you break down barriers between you and other people in your day-to-day life?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you needed to rest, and often I do, too -- emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. I’m so thankful that your steadfast love never rests, but is always there to support me. Amen.

### **Tuesday, December 22, 2020**

#### **Scripture: John 4:7-10**

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

**Observation:** John gave non-Palestinian readers the key background to understand why this conversation was remarkable— “Jews and Samaritans didn’t associate with each other” (vs. 9). According to Jewish tradition, a Samaritan woman was continually unclean; it was therefore

impure to drink from her vessel. But Jesus initiated contact, asking simply, "Give me some water to drink" (vs. 7).

**Application:** In addition to Jesus asking the woman for a drink, his disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food (vs. 8). How can asking another person for help of some kind break down barriers that may separate you from them? Are you willing to ask for help when you need it?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, you were willing to ask for, and accept, help even from unlikely people. Give me that spirit. Keep me open to the ways your living water can quench the deepest thirsts of my heart. Amen.

**Wednesday, December 23, 2020**

**Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23**

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy.

I will feed them with justice. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

**Observation:** Ezekiel prophesied during Israel's exile in Babylon (some 550 years before Christ). Through him, God said the self-absorbed spiritual leaders in the little kingdom of Judah had failed. They pursued their own interests while ignoring the material security, and even more importantly the spiritual growth, of their people. Ezekiel portrayed God as a good shepherd who would "seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded, and strengthen the weak."

**Application:** [Ezekiel's] metaphor goes beyond the normal responsibilities of making sure that the sheep are protected and fed. Instead it focuses on the remedial duties, caring for the sick and finding the lost. These equate to the need for kings to bring about justice for alienated and disenfranchised people. What are some ways you individually, and Messiah Church actively support and work for justice for alienated or disenfranchised people today?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, when I lose my way, you search for me. And every time you find me you call me to join in searching for others who need the warmth and safety of your loving embrace. Thank you for your finding and your call. Amen.

**Thursday, December 24, 2020**

**Scripture: Luke 2:1-20**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of

Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

**Observation:** The Roman Empire said that Caesar's brutal power brought the *Pax Romana* (Roman peace). Caesar Augustus, a human who thought he was a god, issued a decree that forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with Mary nine months pregnant. Jesus, the true God become human, spent his first night on earth in a humble animal shelter. When Rome crowned an emperor, they gave him the title "Savior" (among others), choirs sang, and they declared the emperor divine. Luke structured his story in a way that said that from his birth Jesus, and not Caesar, was the true Savior, King and God.

**Application:** A song called "The Star" describes Jesus' birth poetically: "Just another homeless family/hoping for a stranger's charity/Just one night in one safe place to stay/Underneath a star so far away/She carried everything they had, and more/The little one the world was waiting for.../Born beneath that star so long ago." \* God didn't stride into our world like a Marvel superhero. What does Jesus' low-key arrival (a helpless infant with poor peasant parents) tell you about the kind of "kingdom" of which Jesus is Lord?

\*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krCrMS3I-Ts>

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you didn't just talk about humility and service as virtues. You lived them out from the very start of your earthly life. Keep guiding me to better grasp the counter-cultural power of your values, to be a light in the darkness and an agent of reconciliation in this world. Amen.

**Friday, December 25, 2020**

**Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In

Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

**Observation:** The Greek word *magoi* usually identified students of the stars. They most likely came from modern Iran, though “from the east” could mean a whole range of places. They arrived, not on the night of Jesus’ birth, but an unspecified amount of time “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem.” Israel was just a minor Roman province. No one would expect non-Hebrew scholars to travel far to see, much less worship, a “king of the Jews.” Yet these notable visitors said, “We...have come to worship him.”

**Application:** There’s a tragic irony in this story. The “legal experts” could rattle off Micah’s prophecy about Bethlehem but didn’t seem to care about whether it actually meant anything for them. King Herod only cared out of political paranoia. Yet the guests from far away, foreigners, truly sought the new king. How can your worship and Bible study in 2021 nurture a holy curiosity like the magi’s, not the settled, routine boredom of the scribes?

**Prayer:** Lord God, we’ve kind of reduced this story to a bumper sticker: “Wise men still seek him.” Give me the gift of true inner wisdom, the ability to value and wonder at what your power is doing in our world and to be an agent of reconciliation. Amen.

**Saturday, December 26, 2020**

**Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16**

You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

**Observation:** Today we can control and create light far more easily people in Jesus’ day could. Oh, they had oil lamps, candles and torches—but no one then could even imagine a phrase like “light pollution.” We can light empty parking lots more brightly at 2 a.m. than the main street of Rome or Jerusalem was ever lit. Jesus used one of the Bible’s most potent symbols to say his followers “are the light of the world.” The Bible is enveloped by the imagery of light, both literally and figuratively. At the beginning of the biblical narrative, physical light springs forth as the first created thing (Gen 1:3–4). At the end of the story the light of God obliterates all traces of darkness: “And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light” (Rev 22:5). Between these two beacons the imagery of light makes nearly two hundred appearances.

**Application:** Jesus’ second image was a lamp in a dark home, or a city atop a hill, seen from miles away. On a dark night, especially if you are not sure of your way, there is something

wonderfully reassuring about a light. Scholar William Barclay wrote, people “are to see our *good* deeds. In Greek there are two words for *good*. There is the word *agathos* which simply defines a thing as good in quality; there is *kalos* which means that a thing is not only good, but that it is also winsome and beautiful and attractive. The word which is used here is *kalos*.” Are there settings or relationships where you feel like putting “a basket” over your light, hiding God’s presence in your life? This Christmas season, prayerfully choose one appealing way you’ll shine your light to in the weeks ahead.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, in this darkened, lonely, hurting world, make me more and more transparent so that your light can shine out of me like a beacon, spreading love, grace and peace. Amen.