

Preparing the Way for Christmas – 5. Testifying to the Light

John 1:1-9, 12

December 24, 2023

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When our daughter, Elizabeth, was eight years old, all she wanted for Christmas was the American Girl Doll, Molly. For months leading up to Christmas, this was all she talked about. She wrote to Santa making the request in writing. We visited Santa and she made her request in person. If that happened today, she might even have prepared a PowerPoint presentation to complete her request. She had covered all her bases, and her hopes were high.

But just days before Christmas, she changed her mind and decided what she really wanted was a My Size Barbie. Do any of you remember these dolls? They were just like the original Barbie dolls, but they were about three and a half feet tall, and they were the HOT item for Christmas that year. There was no time to revisit Santa as we were jumping on a plane spend Christmas with my folks in San Diego. I was sure the Elizabeth was going to be seriously disappointed when Santa brought her the American Girl doll and not the My Size Barbie.

My mother heard of Elizabeth's new, last-minute request and she began her search. And one should never underestimate the power of a grandmother. Right? She looked all over San Diego County for this doll and on December 23rd, she found one in North County. She drove 80 miles round trip to get this doll for her granddaughter. And on Christmas morning, Santa came through and there under the tree was Molly. But there also sat the My Size Barbie from Grandma. Elizabeth immediately embraced Barbie like she was her long-lost friend and she never even took Molly out of her box! Over the entire week that we were at my folks, Molly never came out of her box. So, when we left, Molly went into the closet to be saved for another day. Elizabeth was so distracted that she didn't recognize the gift so she couldn't appreciate the gift.

The point of this Christmas Eve service is just that... to remember and appreciate the Christmas story. Tomorrow morning, or perhaps later today, you might be opening gifts, gathering with family and friends, making phone calls to loved ones far away, or sharing a delicious meal together. That is all great but don't allow yourself to get distracted by all of this and miss the real gift. In fact, I think that's maybe why you are here today, to be reminder or come to know the real meaning, the real gift behind Christmas.

The gospel writers write to help us understand the Christmas story from very different perspectives. **Mark**, the first gospel written, makes no mention of the Christmas story. His gospel begins when Jesus is 30 years old as he is being baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. **Luke** tells the story of the birth of baby Jesus. You heard some of Luke's story read just a few minutes ago. **Matthew** makes no mention of the baby Jesus. He begins his story by telling us of the three wisemen who came from the east after Jesus was born, perhaps even two years after Jesus was born, bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Luke and Matthew write to tell us WHAT happened but **John**, John takes a completely different approach. He wants us to understand WHY it happened, the spiritual significance of Christmas. So tonight, we're going to focus on John's account.

Listen again to how John's Christmas story begins. *In the beginning was the word.* If you are thinking, that doesn't sound like any Christmas story I've heard, let me explain. Stay with me.

The word in Greek for word is LOGOS. This is where we get our word LOGIC. You see it in words like zoology, biology, cosmology, and astrology. Anything with the ending OLOGY means the truth about. In the first century, the word LOGOS was used to refer to the one who thought up and gave rise the universe. In other words, it was shorthand for God.

John continues.... *and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* The Word, the LOGOS, put on skin, became one of us and lived among us. Moved into the neighborhood.

Ancient philosophers used the word LOGOS to describe an argument based on logic and reason. So in John's Christmas story, he is saying that God chose to make an argument to us by sending a child. To help us know that God is real and that God exists. God says, see this child? This is what I am like. If you watch and listen to what he says and does, then you will better understand who I am. And by seeing what God is like, we can see what we are supposed to be like as well.

In the first century, most people believed in God, regardless of the name they gave God. They did not need to be persuaded that there was a God. It was evident to them. They knew that we have reason and intellect. Where did that come from? There were certain laws that governed the universe. Where did those come from? They looked at the stars in the heavens and said, how beautiful is that? Where did those come from? Most people believed that there was a LOGOs.. a Creator behind all that.

The late Steven Hawking was a theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author, who did not believe in God. His theory was that the universe was self-created. In 2018, his book *Brief Answers to Big Questions* was released. And the first question he tackled is, is there a God? Here's a quote from that part of the book:

When you look at the vast size of the universe, and how insignificant and accidental human life is in it, the existence of a personal God seems most implausible. I can understand that thinking and how some of you may feel that too. Let me show you this.

These are some recent images from the James Web Space Telescope. They are just breathtaking. In fact, to get some perspective of what you are looking at, imagine holding up half of a postage stamp at arm's length. That's the approximate size of the scope of these photos. Look at all the galaxies, 100's of thousands of them. And every one of those galaxies, like our own Milky Way, has hundreds of billions of stars. So, when you look at this, one can't help but be blown away by the vastness of it all. But when Hawking looked at this, he concluded that a personal God makes no sense in a cosmos so big.

On the other hand, the psalmist, who never got to see this image, looked at the vastness of the universe and concluded that this makes no sense apart from God. So, it's a matter of how you choose to look at things. The psalmist, while looking at the heavens wrote, Psalm 19:1

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

What he is saying here is that God's first logos, his first handiwork, is the universe itself. It was created as an expression of God's love for us, reminding us of God's power and might and beauty. And so, some see the universe as a case for God and some do not. So God, recognized this and said, maybe if I came to them, wrapped in flesh, like one of them, I could walk with them, show them, help them to see who I am and what they are meant to be, and that there is always light and there is always hope. This is what God is saying in Jesus.

Jesus, who was 100% human and 100% divine, came to show us that there is always hope for us, even when we have blown it. As he hung on the cross, being tortured to death, he prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He was saying that no matter how bad you've been or what you've done, God can and will forgive you. After he died, he was buried in the tomb and on the third day, he rose from the dead. And in his resurrection, he said, "No matter how dark your life may be. No matter how difficult your circumstances may seem, the darkness, evil, hate, sin and even death, will never have the final word. There is always hope." That was God's argument, wrapped in human flesh, born as a baby and grew to be a man, who laid down his life and ultimately rose from the dead. This was God's argument for us. Even when you feel all alone, you are never all alone. I am with you. I have a hold of you, and I will never let you go.

In Matthew, we read that his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us. There are times in your life when you just have to trust that is true; that there is a God who will take you out of your darkness. Jesus came to make a compelling argument from God that says, I am with you. I forgive you. I will never leave you. There is always hope.

Okay, back to John's Christmas story. In the middle of his story, he switches to talking about a man named John. So many Johns. Let me clarify. John the gospel writer tells the story of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. Here at Messiah Church, we've spent the last four weeks, studying the life and ministry of John the Baptist, leading up to tonight. Listen to what John the gospel writer says about John the Baptist.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

So who is the light? Jesus said, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*

So that is our mission. To trust in him. To follow him. To allow his light to live in us and then to live in his light. That is the symbolism of what we will do here in a few minutes when we pass the light of Christ through this room-online space wherever you are.

Jesus also said, *I am not going to be with you forever. Someday I will be gone. And when I am gone, you are to be the light of the world. Your mission is to testify to the light and then to reflect that light so that others see My light shining in you, that they might see your good works and then give glory to God who is in heaven.*

If you hear nothing else from me tonight, here's what I want you to remember. Your life's mission is to let God love you, love God in return, walking in the light of God's love. And then let God's light through you through your acts of compassion and care for others. I don't need to tell you that we live in a dark world where many folks do not understand that this is their life's mission. You are meant to be people who take light into this dark world.

Let me give you a couple of examples of what this looks like.

In 2008, John McCain ran for the presidency. During that time, he was interviewed by Time Magazine, and they asked him about his faith. This is what he said:

When I was a prisoner of war in Vietnam, my captors would tie my arms behind my back and then loop the rope behind my head and ankles so that my head was pulled down between my knees. I was often left like that throughout the night. One night a guard came into my cell. He put his finger to his lips, signaling for me to be quiet. And then he loosened the ropes to release my pain. The next morning, before his shift ended, the guard returned and quietly tightened the ropes, never saying a word to me. A month or so later on Christmas day, I was standing in the dirt courtyard, when I saw that same guard approach me. He walked up. Stood silently next to me. Not looking at me or smiling at me. Then he used his sandals foot to draw a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly looking at the cross. Remembering the true light of Christmas, even in the darkness of a Vietnamese prison camp.

That prison guard was a Christian who could have been put to death for reaching out to a prisoner in compassion. But instead, he risked everything by alleviating his suffering if just for a moment. And in the end, he wanted McCain to know why he did it. And so he stood there next to him and made the sign of the cross in the dirt. And McCain never forgot that. That is what Christianity looks like. That is what Jesus looks like, the alleviating of suffering.

One more story. On February 24, 2022, Riccardo Muti, the now retired music director of the Chicago Symphony, walked onto the stage at Orchestra Hall. The attention of the audience was focused on this world-class orchestra preparing to perform Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, often regarded as Beethoven's greatest work. Its final movement contains the piece exalting the well-known *Ode to Joy* that audiences so eagerly anticipate. But before the orchestra began to play, Muti picked up a microphone and turned to face the audience. Just two days before, Russia had launched its full-scaled invasion of Ukraine. This is what he said:

The stage where we make music should never be a place where we make political announcements or statements. We make music that brings joy and peace. But we cannot play this music dedicated to joy... without thinking of the suffering of the people of Ukraine. What we are seeing from Ukraine is horrible. Tonight, in the final movement, the text speaks about joy, joy, joy, but we will think in that moment, that joy without peace cannot exist. I hope from this wonderful hall, from the orchestra, from the chorus, from you— a message would arrive to the people of Ukraine that those who are creating violence, hate, and this strange need for war, we are against all that."

Since then, the war in Ukraine has continued on and the darkness in our world has continued to spread. In the past couple of months, we've seen pictures and heard unimaginable, heartbreaking, personal stories from the war in the Middle East. We need the light of Christ, now more than ever and we need to reflect that light into the world. It's like the full moon in the night sky. If you were to look at it through a telescope without a filter, it would hurt your eye. And yet, it produces no light of its own. It simply reflects the sun. That is what we are to do.

And so tonight, I invite you to accept the light of Christ, the true light that came to us over 2,000 years ago. To remember that matter how dark your life may be. No matter how difficult your circumstances may seem, the darkness, evil, hate, sin and even death, will never have the final word. There is always hope. And that together, we can testify to that light and push back the darkness so that the world can be changed. That is the true meaning of Christmas. Let's pray:

Thank you, God, for loving us. Thank you for sending Jesus to be the Light. Help us to walk in your light, reflecting your light to push back the darkness. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 24, 2023

Weekly Prayer

God of hope and light, your good news has been announced to the world, the great night of Jesus' birth. You have given us a new chance, a reminder of your continual love for us. Guide our thoughts and our actions. Heal and restore us. For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, December 25, Christmas Day

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Observation

On Christmas day, we reflect on the birth of the child who showed us God's kind of power—the power of selfless love. For Jesus to be born in a parking garage (that's what a stable was), lying in a bed of straw where the animals ate, was an amazing revelation of God's love for us. The apostle Paul wrote that Jesus didn't cling to his status as God, but "emptied himself...by becoming like human beings" (Philippians 2:6-7). The long-awaited Savior arrived in a humble, quiet way few would have predicted.

Application

The King of kings was born to a young couple whose income placed them on the lowest rung of society, and he was born homeless. In Jesus' birthplace, we see that the God of the universe identifies with the lowly. Spiritually, we are all poor and homeless without God. How can grasping the deeper meaning(s) of Jesus' birth open your heart to praise God, and to love and show more compassion for all the people Jesus came to set free?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, your birth was just the start of an amazing story that is reshaping and uplifting my life today. Be born anew in my heart this Christmas day. Amen.

Tuesday, December 26

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child.

Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

Observation

History tells us that when Rome crowned an emperor, they gathered an audience of nobles, gave the new emperor the title “Savior” (among others), had choirs sing the new ruler’s praise, and declared the emperor divine. Luke structured his story to suggest that at Jesus’ birth the same scenario took place—audience (shepherds), Savior, choir (angels), divinity on earth. The point was that from his birth Jesus, not Caesar, was the true Savior, King and God.

Application

We see nothing unusual about the shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. But in Jesus’ day, few even noted shepherds, much less valued them. They were obscure (like Mary and Joseph). Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn’t observe “holiness” rituals. Yet after hearing the angels, the shepherds said, “Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened.” What moves you to “go right now” to learn more about God’s purposes, especially as revealed in Jesus?

Prayer

Lord God, December 26 has become a day for returning gifts. I don’t ever want to “return” your gift of yourself in Jesus. Help me keep growing a life in harmony with my Savior’s teachings. Amen.

Wednesday, December 27

Scripture: John 1:1-8, 15

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.

The Word was with God in the beginning.
Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.

What came into being
through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.

A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn’t the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

John testified about him, crying out, “This is the one of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.’”

Observation

The “man named John” (verse 6) was not this gospel’s writer, but John the Baptist, the preacher/prophet we’ve studied this Advent. In varied places, the Bible saw the good versus evil conflict as “light” and “darkness.” The gospel writer saw the “light” as a person. The Jesus he

had seen/heard/known, he said, was the light shining in the world's darkness. Jesus, the life and light, could (and can) deliver us from our world's and our own darkness.

Application

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" wasn't just poetry—it's elementary physics. As we saw in our Christmas Eve services, a large room of darkness does not put out the light of one small candle that comes into the room. When has it felt to you as though darkness was trying to put out God's light in your life? How do spiritual practices like worship, Bible study and service to others help to keep any kind of inner or outer darkness from putting out God's light in you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you didn't have to go online to find a Christmas gift for me. You shined the life-giving light of your love and grace into my life, and you keep doing it. Thank you. Amen.

Thursday, December 28

Scripture: John 1:19-28; Matthew 3:13-17

This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?" John confessed (he didn't deny but confessed), "I'm not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" John said, "I'm not." "Are you the prophet?" John answered, "No." They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied,

*"I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,
Make the Lord's path straight
just as the prophet Isaiah said."*

Those sent by the Pharisees asked, "Why do you baptize if you aren't the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered, "I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don't recognize. He comes after me, but I'm not worthy to untie his sandal straps." This encounter took place across the Jordan in Bethany where John was baptizing.

At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

Observation

John the gospel writer said John the Baptist's fiery preaching of repentance moved the authorities to send messengers to ask if he claimed to be the Messiah. John humbly said he was only carrying out Isaiah 40:3. His task, he said, was to point people to "someone greater." Matthew added that John (who called people to repent and baptized them when they did) tried to refuse to baptize Jesus, but Jesus modeled baptism for us. These passages give us a clearer view of the deep humility with which John the Baptist worked to prepare the way for Jesus.

Application

John's baptism was a physical symbol of inner washing. People came tired and defiled, but God washed them clean, and gave them a fresh start. Jesus did not need that kind of baptism—he

was sinless. Yet he asked John to baptize him anyway. Jesus humbly identified with our humanity, as he would do even more fully on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:14-21, Hebrews 2:11-18). What does that tell you about how much he values you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for your willingness to identify with the human family, with me. Your humility opened the way for me, with all my flaws, to see myself as part of your heavenly family. Amen.

Friday, December 29

Scripture: John 1:29-34

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

Observation

In this remarkable passage, John the Baptist first told the people listening to him that Jesus was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That title was a clear signal that Jesus' self-giving life and death would fulfill all the symbolism of Israel's long-standing system of sacrifices. And John had even more to say: "I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

Application

The way Mark structured his gospel story, no one called Jesus God's Son until a Roman centurion who had watched him die on the cross said it (Mark 15:39). Twenty or thirty years later, John's gospel wove that crucial Christian belief throughout his very first chapter. On what basis did John the Baptist reach that belief? What leads you to believe and testify that Jesus "is God's Son"?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, out of your greatness as the Son of God, you took on the role of the self-giving Lamb of God. Teach me what true greatness means in your kingdom and help me become willing to live your kind of great life. Amen.

Saturday, December 30

Scripture: Luke 3:19-20

But Herod the ruler had been criticized harshly by John because of Herodias, Herod's brother's wife, and because of all the evil he had done. He added this to the list of his evil deeds: he locked John up in prison.

Observation

To human eyes, Herod Antipas (a son of the Herod the Great who killed infants in Bethlehem) may have looked strong when he jailed John the Baptist. But ambitious, malicious Herodias seems to have used him. When Antipas traveled to Rome in c. A.D. 29, he visited his brother

Herod (Philip), who apparently lived in one of the coastal cities of Palestine. While there he fell in love with his niece Herodias, who was also his brother's wife. She agreed to marry Antipas when he returned from Rome provided that he divorce his first wife. Get it? His own niece ditched his half-brother to marry Antipas, who had a higher political title—and he went along with her scheme. John the Baptist boldly decried that kind of royal depravity, and Herodias hated him for it.

Application

The Jewish historian Josephus says that Antipas imprisoned John in his Perea fortress Machaerus, which included a dungeon. (Perea was on the east side of the Jordan.) As messengers of God, prophets were supposed to have immunity to speak freely; the entire Mediterranean world regarded the abuse of messengers or heralds as a terrible offense. Herod Antipas confined the prophet of open wilderness spaces in what was likely a cramped, musty dungeon. Who looked like the powerful winner then? Today we remember John the Baptist with respect, and Antipas with contempt. In what ways does a longer-term view shift your sense of who was stronger?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, if I have any of Antipas' human hunger for earthly power, help me to replace it with John the Baptist's courageous moral compass. Amen.