

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Christmas Eve
Saturday, December 24th, 2016

Sermon: Not a Fairytale¹

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Focus: Jesus was born to save us from our sins.

Function: That they would believe the Christmas story and be saved.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Christmas is not a fairytale. It is not something invented by the imagination or thought up in a dream. Oh, to be sure, we've *made* it into a fairy tale about a fat man in a red suit who jumps down the chimney at night to deliver presents. (In some jurisdictions, that's known as home invasion!) To this we add a toy shop at the uninhabitable North Pole and a productive team of elves who get paid in cookies and candy. (I think they need to unionize to get a better deal!) To this we add more modern myths from the 1960s, such as *Frosty the Snowman* and Dr. Seuss's *Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. It is almost impossible to count the number of sequels the TV networks made for all those stop-motion animation movies about Rudolph, the Abominable Snowman, and the Island of Misfit Toys.

Besides the fact that our Christmas fairytales distract us from the true meaning of Christmas, they also have a tendency to trick us into the unfortunate tendency of also treating the birth of Jesus like a myth. It has all the stock characters requisite for a Disney classic: little Mary, the damsel in distress; Joseph, her fiancée and protector; the villainous King Herod; the

¹ This is my Christmas Eve installment for our sermon series, *The Word and the Wonder*, "God's Word to the Angels and Shepherds."

bumbling “wise” men, a mysterious star, and even the doe-eyed cattle and fuzzy donkey. The blonde-haired, cherry-cheeked cherubs are not so unlike the fairy godmothers from Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. And what could be more wonderful for a story than a cute, cuddly baby Jesus? Meek and mild, cooing away in his manger, there is nothing threatening or offensive about Mary’s baby, is there? Let’s start casting the voice actors!

If Christmas is a fairytale, then we can take it or leave it. We are safe. The baby Jesus makes no demands of us. We can ignore the angels’ message. We pass by the stable without kneeling in worship of our King and go right along our merrily way, even singing a verse of “Silent Night” for old time’s sake. Just as children grow up and stop believing in the magic of Santa Claus, so also we can outgrow belief in the baby Jesus. After all, did not St. Paul himself say, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Cor. 13:11)? But there is a big difference between acting in childish ways and having a child-like faith (cp. Matt. 18:3).

Christmas is *not* a fairytale. It is grounded in the human history of time and place. Christmas *really* happened. Jesus really *was* conceived by a virgin through the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 7:14). The eternal Son of God really *did* become a human being. In our Gospel reading, St. Luke carefully lays out the historical context for us: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:1-2, ESV).² The Christmas story does not begin “once upon a time” or “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away” (*Star Wars*). The Christmas story begins around 4 B.C., during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, and his governor, Quirinius. And you could point to the places mentioned on a map of

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

the Middle East: Syria, Galilee, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Judah. The names of the people and places given in Luke 2 are all mentioned in history books. It *actually* happened.

And because the birth of Jesus really did happen in human history, we must take it seriously. We cannot just brush it off as a fairytale, parable, or even mere sentiment. Christmas is more than just a jolt of joy and light in a dark, bleak, midwinter night. Christmas is not about a universal spirit or feeling of goodwill. Even though the phrase, “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men,” appears even on secular greeting cards, Christmas is not about world peace or a humanistic love for our entire race. Christmas is about the peace that comes through the forgiveness of sins (cp. Rom. 5:1-2) and the grace and favor (goodwill) *God* has for humanity. Peace on earth and goodwill toward men are the *result* of Christ’s coming—not a metaphor to substitute in his place.

Christmas might mean many different things to different people, depending on your perspective. But according to the Bible, Christmas means only *one* thing: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The “glad tidings of great joy” which the angel proclaimed to the shepherds was that a Savior had finally come. “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). This is the message of Christmas: that God sent a Savior, a Rescuer, not just to the world in general or the shepherds in particular, but God sent a Savior *to you*, to me.

Jesus is the Savior. That’s what his name means: “The Lord saves” (cp. Matt. 1:21). And if we wish to celebrate Christmas, then we must grapple with the message of Christmas. For if Jesus is truly our Savior, then that means he came to save *us* from something or someone. That Jesus is Savior says as much about *us* as it does about *him*. If Jesus is Savior, then we need

to be saved. We need to be saved from our sins—our rebellion against God and his Word and ways. We need to be saved from our selfishness, arrogance, and pride. When it all comes down to it, we need to be saved *from ourselves*.

We live in a world full of people who need saving, both people who are hurting and people who hurt others. Because of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, there are now more refugees than at any other time in world history since World War II. Tragically, despite the abolition of slavery in the West during the 19th century, there are now more slaves than at any other time in history, many of them women and girls forced into sex trafficking. There are other people who need to be saved too: mass murderers, corrupt politicians, drug addicts, the terminally ill, the elderly, the unborn, the depressed and oppressed, the poor, the rich, immigrants (legal and illegal), and people full of fear the world over. Above all, there is a growing sense, especially in the West, that life is an accident without meaning or purpose, the inevitable result of an evolutionary and socialist perspective on life. And despite all of social and government programs, whether a Square Deal, New Deal, Reaganomics, the Salvation Army, United Way, EPA, FEMA, or Homeland Security, we have been unable to save ourselves. All of our best intentions are either not enough or too much to rescue the world. As a race, humanity is hopeless and helpless, utterly and completely lost. The government cannot save us. Science and technology cannot save us. Not even the Church can save us. That is the bad news.

But the Christmas angel brings “good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). The Good News is that Jesus saves. The Good News is that “to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given” (Isa. 9:6). The Good News is that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law...”

(Gal. 4:4-5). The Good News of Christmas is the *best* news the world has ever heard: that Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord, that the babe of Bethlehem was born to die in order to save us from our sins. The Good News is that even as the star of Bethlehem shone down on the manger scene, the shadow of the cross was already looming large in the background. For even as “gentle Mary laid her child lowly in a manger,” wrapped in swaddling clothes, someday he would be laid in a tomb wrapped in linens and burial cloths. But three days later, God would raise him from the dead.

Without Christmas, there is no Good Friday or Easter. But without Jesus, there is no Christmas. And even though, over the years, I have received Christmas cards from Muslim friends, Buddhist neighbors, and even atheists, Christmas is distinctly Christian. If we wish to celebrate Christmas rightly, then we must mark this night as a remembrance of the night that changed the world forever more than 2,000 years ago. For Christmas is about a real God who loved real sinners and sent his Son to become a real human being to save us from our sins. “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). Christmas is not a fairytale. Christmas is the Good News of a Savior born to die for you. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.