



Advent (Part 2) - Compassionate

Clint Patronella - December 7, 2014

Good evening. My name is Clint Patronella. I'm one of the pastors at the Dallas Campus. Each week, we gather as the people of God to sit under the Word of God and then we break bread at the table of God for the glory of God. It is an honor this evening to open up God's Word with you. By God's good grace, I am a father to three boys named Bryton, Haddon, and Everett. Now, how our three boys ended up with British first names and an Italian last name is a different story for a different day.

As you can imagine, with three boys in our house, it's crazy. There is literally never a dull moment. Before we moved into the house we're in now, we lived over in The Village Apartments. Shout out, Village. Come on. A lot of you live there now. A lot of you used to live there. It's like a Dallas rite of passage. Everybody makes their way through The Village Apartments.

On Saturday afternoon, we're sitting at home, and I was like, "Oh, I need to go check the mail." That's what you do on Saturday, right? My son, Bryton, who was 3, said, "Dad, I want to go with you. Can I go?" I said, "Sure. Absolutely." We go. We walk out the door. As I leave our apartment, my eyes are focused on the mailboxes to the right while his eyes are focused on the street.

I looked away for a second and didn't notice him taking off. I don't know what it is about kids and the street. There is like a super magnet that just draws them with a tractor beam, but they're drawn to it. He's off, and I take off after him. As I clear the breezeway, I see full picture what is going on. I can see a car coming down the inner apartment street, going way too fast and paying far too little attention. Unfortunately, some of the worst things in life happen in just a matter of seconds.

Bryton was clueless to the larger picture. He couldn't see what I could see. He didn't even know he was in danger. The driver looked preoccupied, and he didn't know that he was about to meet a small child and that their meeting would be a tragedy. As I ran after him, I knew I didn't have enough sidewalk left to get my hand in front of him. I couldn't get a hand on him. My only option was to push him.

With his momentum and my force, he came down hard. The unforgiving ground scraped him up. The car flew by unaware. When he hit the ground, there was that silence, that gulping for air, that quiet before the storm of tears and crying, you know, that taking in of breath that kids do. The longer the silence, the more painful it is, and this silence was long and painful. It was followed by an earsplitting scream.

I think more than the physical pain of being thrown down, Bryton couldn't come to grips with the fact that it was me who pushed him. He couldn't make sense of it. The circumstances of his situation were too loud. He was running, having a good time, hanging out. I'm his father. I'm the one who protects him. I'm the one who is supposed to love him, and yet it was me who pushed him. It was me who brought him down.

As he wept, I will never forget the words, "Dad, why did you push me? Dad, why did you push me?" Our circumstances speak loudly, so loudly in fact that they can drown out all other voices and all other truths. The ringing in our ears hinders our ability to even hear ourselves think sometimes. The truth that might be stored up in our hearts that is begging to be heard in a situation like that is engulfed and suffocated by the clamor of this present situation.

Our circumstances sometimes in life scream to us that God doesn't love us. "He's mad at me, or he simply doesn't care. If there is a God, he's far. He's disconnected." I'm asking you, are you in any present circumstances that are screaming at you? Is it all you hear? Maybe for some of us in the room tonight, everything is fine right now, but what will you do when the volume of circumstances turns up again?

In the midst of our circumstances, we need a word that can drown out all other words. We need a word that can silence all other words. What we need, friends, is nothing short of the character of God. We need to see his truth. We need to see his goodness, and we need to see his beauty. We need to see that his compassionate character speaks a better word than our present circumstances.

This *Advent* series, I encourage you to dial in. Allow God's Word to read you and speak to you, just as it has to me as I've been preparing this week. This Advent, we're giving special attention to God's character. Last week, Matt taught on how God is a deliverer. He saves. He rescues. Tonight, I want to talk about God's compassion.

One of the great challenges of the Christmas and Advent season is that over time, the story and the Scriptures become familiar. We're going to read some passages of Scripture tonight, and you've heard them before. You've seen *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. You've seen the nativity scenes. You've watched all the movies. The words, the themes, they become common, they get lost, and we get bored.

Instead of allowing the Scriptures to address me and you, we treat them as part of the holiday season. They get wrapped up in the lights and the tinsel and the gatherings, and those are all fine and good, but this is not a common story. We have to resist this tendency. This story, what we're going to talk about tonight, is the point. It's not *a* story; it's *the* story. It's not *a* miracle; it's *the* miracle.

This birth narrative (we're looking at Jesus' birth tonight) is not just historical information. This story is for your transformation. We are going to look at the birth narrative tonight. We're going to pay really close attention to the characters. I'm going to help us reach all the way back, and we're going to look at Israel as a character. Then we're going to look at Mary, look at Joseph, and we're going to look at Jesus.

Each one of these characters will reveal a particular aspect of God's compassion. Each one will become its own mini case study. Each character is faced with circumstances that on the surface seem to suggest that God has abandoned them or, at best, has mishandled their life. They've faced circumstances that seek to speak over God's character. Each person is going to be faced with a decision, not unlike decisions you will be faced with, where you can either listen to the circumstances or listen to God.

As we look at each case, we'll see an aspect of God's compassion come into glorious display. It's like a diamond where in order to see it for all it's worth you have to look at it from every angle. We're going to look at God's passion. We'll see four different aspects arise. As these aspects of God's character come into focus, each one of them will speak to us, inviting us to trust in God because he sees, cares, and acts when his children are in need.

When we cannot trust what we see God doing, we have to trust in his compassionate character, for he speaks a better word than our present circumstances. If you have your Bibles, go ahead and turn in them to Isaiah 9. We're going to have words on the screen, but I would love it if you would read these words out of the text itself. We're going to look at Israel first, Isaiah 9.

Now, before we get there, I need you to hang with me for a few minutes, nerd out a bit. I have to give you a quick summary of their history so you can hear their circumstances so we can feel them. Last week, we saw God's people delivered out of bondage of slavery in Egypt. Because of their sin, that delivered generation was not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

It is given to the next generation. They enter the land. They conquer the inhabitants, and they thrive. This little bitty nation becomes a strong confederation of tribes that grows into a dominant kingdom under Saul and David and Solomon. Then Solomon dies in 930 BC. Political unrest splits the kingdom, and they have a northern kingdom, Israel, and they have a southern kingdom, Judah.

As a result of their faithlessness and continual worship of idols, God brings judgment on his people. God brings judgment because he is far too kind and far too loving to allow people to stay in their sin, so he brings judgment on them. Israel, the northern kingdom, falls at the hands of the Assyrians in 722. Judah falls at the hands of the Babylonians in 586. The temple, which was the picture and the presence of God's dwelling presence among them, the symbol that God was for his people, was destroyed.

They were moved from the land, taken in captivity, and forced to live in exile. Though they're in exile, God raises up prophets to remind them of God's faithfulness in the midst of their unfaithfulness and that he is coming to deliver them. Because God is in control of the world powers, he makes good on his promise and, in 539, raises up the Persians to defeat the Babylonians and frees the people of God.

King Cyrus of Persia allows the Israelites to go back home, and they rebuild. They build up the walls. They rebuild the temple. As the Old Testament comes to a close, the people of Israel are back in the land, living in relative peace, though it is under the hand of another pagan ruler. Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, written around 460, talks about how although they are not a sovereign nation, the Lord is going to deliver them.

Like us, Israel was prone to wander. You would think that by now, they would get it. You would think that by now, they would stop. Yet they longed after false gods, so the Lord raises up Malachi to call the people back to the Lord. Malachi's final word, then the Old Testament ends, looking forward to the day when God's messenger would bring ultimate repentance.

Then there's a period of about 450 years of silence. I mean, some of you are already getting awkward, and that was about four seconds. Imagine 450 years of silence. That kind of silence is deafening. That kind of silence makes you think God has turned his back on you, giving you the silent treatment. During this period of history, between Malachi and Matthew, all the Israelites can see is a life marked by succession of increasingly malignant rulers.

The Persian way gives way to the Greeks. The Greeks give way to the Romans. This period is just marked by constant struggle. With each passing empire, there is an increased pressure on them to conform to pagan life and culture and lose their distinctiveness. This threatened their existence and purpose as God's chosen people, through whom he would bring blessing to all peoples.

Given their circumstances, it's not hard to imagine why they could not reconcile their faith in God and his promises in their current reality. They grew weary of subjugation to pagan masters, and there was a longing for God's coming kingdom. In the midst of the silence from God and increasingly bitter circumstances, the people of God began to divide into different political parties to try to usher in the kingdom themselves.

They figured, "God has grown silent. He has grown cold. We have to take matters into our own hands." People went each way as they thought they should. You have a group called the Essenes, and they thought they should separate and create their own society detached from the larger society. Then you had the Zealots who thought military action to overthrow their oppressors was the answer.

Then you had the Sadducees. They sacrificed doctrine and truth on the altar of assimilation. You had the Pharisees who tried to bring order to the chaos through legalism and right-wing reform. It was as if their exile never ended. Waiting and waiting, they wondered why God did not intervene to deliver them and to vindicate them.

They must have asked themselves what had become of the promise of God, what had become of the Promised One of God. Do you feel that unrest? Do you feel their unrest? Do you ask the same questions? "Where is God? Doesn't he see? Doesn't he care?" Like us, Israel lamented. Where was God's Prophet to break the silence? Where was God's Messiah to deliver them?

The silence from God made it hard for these people to see God's faithfulness and his love for them. Though God had not given them a new word, though he was presently silent, he had spoken to them

already. He had declared to them who he is. In the midst of their circumstances, they needed to turn to his character. Let's look at Isaiah 9, given that backdrop. This is what God's Word says. Verse 2.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire." Don't miss this. **"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore." Don't miss this last line. **"The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this."**

Israel's circumstances were bleak, yet in the silence, they started to lose hope. When we cannot trust what we see God doing, we have to trust in his compassionate character. Here, out of this text, we see that first aspect of God's compassion.

1. *God's compassion moves him to action.* He doesn't sit on the sidelines. God's compassion is more than just mere sympathy or even empathy. His compassion gives rise to action. God desires to alleviate their suffering. We just read this in Isaiah 9. In verse 2, it says that their land would get dark, even very dark, and that their land would be marked by a deep darkness.

This deep darkness... The Hebrew literally means the death shadow. There is a death shadow on the land, but God promises deliverance is coming, that the light will come and conquer the death shadow. In verse 4, God promises a release of oppression. It says the yoke of burden and the rod of the oppressor are broken.

In verse 5, it says there is an end to war, and all war-torn gear, which is now useless, will be thrown into the fire. In verse 6, we have the birth of the perfect ruler. He will be able to carry the

government. He is the Wonderful Counselor. He is the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace. His rule will have no end, and his rule will be marked by justice and righteousness.

We're told at the very end it's the zeal of the Lord that will do this. It's his zeal. It's his intense passion which drives him to action. God's compassion is not a dormant emotion but a settled decision to move on behalf of his people. God had been silent for 450 years, and all Israel could hear was the racket of their present circumstances.

They couldn't hear God's compassion anymore. Though he was silent, he had spoken and had promised to bring a light to their darkness to move. Let me ask you, brother, sister, friend, are you there right now? Do you feel like God has gone silent, he's gone cold? Your prayers seem to just go off into the distance, never being heard, never being received.

Do you feel like, as you're hearing me talk about God's compassion, that it's theory, it's theoretical? "Yeah, it's in the Bible, but there's no way God has compassion for me." Friend, God is here, and he is not silent. He has spoken. Because of his compassion, a great light has dawned, signaling the end of the death shadow. From Israel's story, we see that God's compassion moves him to action.

Now let's turn to Mary and see the second aspect of God's compassion. Flip over to Luke 1, and while you do that, let me tell you a little bit about Mary. Mary was a common young teenager from Nazareth. She has her whole life ahead of her. She is betrothed to a man named Joseph. Now, Jewish engagement, you have to understand, was more binding than our current-day concept of engagement. Today, any party can just go, "We're done," and an engagement can be thrown off.

In their culture, an engagement was just as binding as marriage. In fact, if you wanted to break off an engagement, you had to go and get a divorce. They were essentially married, though the marriage itself was not yet consummated. Joseph is a good Jewish boy from a good Jewish family. He's of the house and line of David. He is of royal heritage. Mary has kept herself pure, undefiled, and saving herself for him. For Mary, life is good.

Then God shows up and interrupts her life plan. He sends the angel Gabriel to give her world-changing news. He tells her, "By the way, you will give birth to the Son of God. His name will be Jesus. He will be the King, and he will reign forever." Friends, Mary is not slow. Okay? Don't read into that first century going, "Oh, they didn't really know how people got pregnant." No, they knew how people got pregnant.

Mary is going, "Okay, so I'm going to... Wait. Hold on. I'm a... You're a..." She's trying to do the math there. She asks a fair question to the angel. She says, "How will this be?" Right? The angel says, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...**" I can't help but think about Genesis 1 when it says the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep at the beginning of creation.

Here, God is doing unusual things to point out the unusual manner of this birth because of the unusual nature of the one to be born. He is the unique Son of God. What the angel says is just as important as what the angel doesn't say. He doesn't tell Mary, "Hey, don't sweat it. I'll go to Joseph. I'll tell him what's going on. I'll bring him inside on our plan." He doesn't tell her, "Don't worry. Your family will believe you."

"You're saying the Holy Spirit got you pregnant?" Right? He doesn't tell her that the village will understand. She knows this will have serious implications. Her family won't understand. Joseph will likely divorce her, and she will be publicly ridiculed. Mary asks, "How will I know that this is what's happening?" The angel gives her a sign. He says, "Your relative Elizabeth is already six months pregnant."

Now for Mary, her jaw would have dropped. She knows her relative Elizabeth is old, not just kind of old, but old old. She has been praying her whole life for a child, and she has been barren. When Mary hears Elizabeth is pregnant, she rejoiced. Mary says, "**Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.**" Her faith in the Lord was strong even though her situation will be the cause of embarrassment.

She becomes an example of trust, a willing vessel in God's hands to do God's will as he has instructed. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth to see this great thing and confirm that the words of the angel are true. She can hardly contain the joy she feels, and when she sees Elizabeth and sees that it's true, her joy bursts into a song called the Magnificat. It's a song of praise. Look with me in Luke 1, and we'll jump down in verse 50. This is Mary's song.

"And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his

servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." Did you see the second aspect of God's compassion declared in the song?

2. *God's compassion is driven by his mercy.* He's moved to action, but it's motivated by mercy. He doesn't treat us as we deserve. He's kind. He's forgiving. He is coming to the aid of the very ones who have rejected him. They're in a desperate situation like us, and God intervenes, and he does so in a tender and benevolent way.

He fills the hungry. He exalts those of humble estate, and he remembers his promises. God's compassion is driven by his mercy. Mary's plans were interrupted and changed by God, and she would feel this on all fronts. Physically, she would experience all that pregnancy entails. Relationally, she is going to have to face Joseph, not knowing what he is going to do.

Socially, she would be open for public shame and ridicule. Yet, in the presence of very chaotic circumstances, the merciful compassion of God was her anchor. We have to stop here for a minute. What is your anchor in the chaos? When your plans are interrupted and altered and crushed, where do you turn? Hear me. Wherever you turn, that's what you're ultimately trusting.

When you're looking for that comfort, when you're looking for validation and vindication, wherever it is you turn, that's who you worship. That's your god. Let's be honest for a minute. This one is hard for me. Put the gloves down, the pastor glasses off. This one is hard. In my own pride and my arrogance, I think I know best. I'm type A to the core. Everything is planned.

When God shakes things up, I don't say it out loud. I put on a happy face. You don't say it out loud, but in my heart of hearts, I feel this anger stir up. "How dare you, God? How dare you stir things up? How dare you crush and alter and change my plans?" When this happens, we have to see his merciful compassion. He is not out to get you. He is willing, because of his love, to take us down roads we would never go for good we cannot even see.

We need to see that his compassionate character speaks a better word than our present circumstances. His compassion moves him to action. His compassion is merciful. Now let's look at Joseph to see the third aspect of God's compassion. Flip back to Matthew. Matthew's gospel focuses on Joseph. Luke's gospel focuses on Mary. We'll be in Matthew 1. Remember where we are in the story, in the narrative.

Mary has left Nazareth to go visit her relative Elizabeth. She stays with her, the Bible says, for about three months. Then she goes home. When she comes back, she is about four months pregnant and showing. As she walks back into town, people are wondering, "Hey, Mary, where have you been? No, really, Mary, where have you been?"

The rumor mill gets started. "Did Mary and Joseph bypass the law and sleep together? Is that why she left in such a hurry? Was she overridden by guilt and shame that she had to get out of here? Or did Mary go on vacation and cheat on Joseph?" You need to enter into the story and feel the weight. I know for us, in the twenty-first century, this is tame. This would never make the nightly news. Our nativity scenes and Christmas pageants clean this whole story up, but this is R-rated. This is like *Jersey Shore*, Galilee edition.

Matthew's gospel tells us that Joseph was a just man. Mary is pregnant, and he knows he didn't do it, so he is well within his rights to divorce her. Jewish law actually makes a provision for this situation. If a woman is found caught in adultery and being unfaithful during the engagement, he can divorce her. In fact, doesn't Joseph need to? Doesn't he need to protect the integrity of his family line? He is of the house of David.

Does he really want to raise someone else's child? Does he really want to bring shame on himself and his family? We also see in this text that Joseph is a kind man. He is resolved to divorce her, but he's going to do it quietly, not publicly. He doesn't want to add to the shame she already feels. He wants to help her keep what is left of her dignity. Then we pick it back up in Matthew 1, and we'll look at verses 20-23.

"But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)."

Joseph's plans to divorce Mary are stopped by a dream. The angel tells Joseph, "Mary has been faithful. This child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit." The angel reminds him of his family, reminds him of his heritage. He says, "Joseph, son of David, remember the promise given to your

family of the return of the King whose reign would never end." The angel tells him, "He will name this son Jesus." He gives him an explanation.

Jewish names always have meaning. They're packed with meaning. He says, "**...Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.**" It's custom for Jewish fathers to name their sons, but here, God does not allow Joseph that prerogative. Here, God names his Son because God is his Father. Isaiah 7:14, the prophecy is fulfilled because this child is God with us, Immanuel. God is making good on his promises, and he's doing so in unexpected ways. As Joseph wakes, the Bible simply says, "He did as the Lord commanded."

He took Mary as his wife. He did not know her until she had given birth, and he gave him the name that the Lord had given him, Jesus. Throughout the rest of her pregnancy, I imagine Joseph must have thought long and hard about the names this angel had used for this baby, that he's Jesus and Immanuel. Jesus, which is Yeshua, means God will save, Immanuel, God with us. Together, these names declare who this baby will be and what this baby will accomplish. This brings us to the third aspect of God's compassion.

3. *God's compassion draws near.* The word *compassion* comes from the Latin word which means co-suffering. It means to suffer with. True compassion enters into the suffering. True compassion doesn't keep people at a distance. It's not enough just to want to help and to have mercy, but you have to enter in. God is not distant. He has come near. We see this on glorious display in this text. Immanuel, God with us.

Not only is he with us, but he has made himself accessible. All throughout the Old Testament, whenever God comes down, he comes down in ways that are, quite frankly, terrifying. When Job asks for an audience of God, he comes down in a whirlwind, a tornado, a hurricane. To Abraham, he's a smoking furnace; to Moses, a burning bush; and to the children of Israel, he was a pillar of fire. In the tabernacle and temple, just stepping foot inside the most holy place would end up in your death. Now God has come to be with us in the form of a baby.

There is nothing threatening about a baby. I'm not saying babies are easy to raise, because they're not, but they're not a physical threat. Babies draw people in. I mean, is there anything that melts a heart more than the smile of a baby? Friends, this is the miracle of Christmas. You can know God and be with him. The wake of Joseph's circumstances left him hurt and confused. Quite possibly, he was angry.

Yet, knowing that God was entering in brought stillness to the fray. Again, I ask, do you feel like Joseph? Do you have circumstances that are tangled in a knot right now with no hope of untangling them? Things are so complicated right now you don't even know where to begin. Take heart. You don't have to untangle them alone. God has come near.

It would be enough if he were just God, but praise be the name of the Lord that he is God with us. God's compassion moves him to action. His compassion is merciful, and his compassion draws near. Let's look at Jesus and see the fourth aspect of God's compassion. Back over in Luke 2, we're going to see the birth of Jesus. Now, Joseph and Mary are law-abiding citizens. They have to go back to Joseph's hometown for the census.

They travel to Bethlehem, which is the city where David was born. It's the city where Joseph was born. It's his hometown, and he goes back. Each Jew is to be registered. We pick it up in chapter 2, verse 6. **"And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."**

Now, we have to let the text guide our understanding of the story. Don't be mad, but I am going to kind of crush the snow globe version of the story, the nativity scenes and the Charlie Brown Christmas special. We're going to let the text tell us what is happening. There is no mention of a frantic search for a place to stay, which leads people to think they found the very last place they could find, some stable, some barn.

There is no mention of a harsh innkeeper. When I was reading this story, I was like, "Where is the innkeeper? I know he's there. He turns them away. Where is he? He's not here." The text simply says, **"And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth."** There is no mention of a hurried birth or stable. You see, what's going on here is in Jewish culture, hospitality is highly valued. It's one of their supreme values.

You could show up in a town, and they would know you were a visitor because you're not from there. You have luggage. Someone would come to you and say, "Stay with us. Come stay with us." Travelers were not left to fend for themselves. People took strangers in. Joseph is no stranger. This is his hometown, not to mention, in an honor-shame Jewish culture, to turn away a pregnant woman would have brought untold shame upon the family.

We get this idea of a motel or an inn because of the very last word in verse 7, "**...because there was no place for them in the inn.**" The Greek word there is best translated as guest room. The reason we know that is because Luke is going to use that very same word later on in his gospel when we get to the Lord's Supper. Jesus is going to tell his disciples to go prepare the Lord's Supper. He's going to tell them they're going to meet a man and use his guest room.

It's the same room translated as inn. If you're asking, "Does Luke have an idea or a concept of a motel?" the answer is yes. In Luke 10, in the parable of the good Samaritan, when the Good Samaritan pays the innkeeper to take care of this man, he uses a completely different word. Bethlehem, being such a small town, probably wouldn't even have had a motel anyway.

What's going on here is this little family is not looking for a room at the Best Eastern. There you go. Yeah. First-century homes were simple, and they included a built-in stall for animals. Every family probably had a few animals. It was kind of the way they lived back then. You would walk in the house, and the very first thing you would walk into was an animal stall.

If you turned to your right, you would see a few steps and go up like a half floor, three or four feet. You would walk up those steps, and right there next to the animal stall would be these feeding troughs, a manger. As you turned to the right, as the room opened up, it would be the family room. This one room is where everybody lived, everybody slept, everybody ate, everybody cooked. Doesn't that sound awesome, to all live in one room?

If you were a person of means, you would have a guest room. It would probably be attached on the end of the house, depending on your property. If you didn't have space for that, because roofs were flat, you might build one on top. What Luke is saying here is that this little family took shelter in an already crowded house. Can you picture it? Can you see it?

The birth of Jesus came with no fanfare. Though his conception is miraculous, his birth takes place in a room on the fringe of an already crowded residence where the animals and family stayed. After his birth, he is wrapped in swaddling cloths, and he is placed in the feeding trough, a manger. No one could imagine a more humble birth.

Not only was his birth humble, but no birth is clean. Birth is messy. I've been stirred to worship this week, just considering the fact that the God of the universe would humble himself to make his

entrance into the world through the birth canal. Here we see the fourth aspect of God's compassion, his vulnerability.

4. *God becomes vulnerable.* In fact, in *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis says it this way. "To love at all is to be vulnerable." Jesus reveals the vulnerability of God's compassion. He is the image of the invisible God. It's on magnanimous display. Jesus could have looked at his circumstances. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, for crying out loud. If he has to come through the birth canal, doesn't he at least deserve a kingly birth, a dignified birth? Yet, he had a humble birth.

He becomes the perfect example of vulnerability. In Jesus, the impenetrable becomes pierceable. The omnipotent became dependent. The eternal Word of God that is larger than the universe became an embryo. The invincible became breakable. The dignified one became undignified. The powerful became vulnerable. Vulnerability, by way of definition, lays down rights and lays down defenses.

The 450 years of silence, on that that night, is shattered. God's Word, the Word became flesh, breaks the silence, ends the silence. On our long night of silence, death and decay was broken as Jesus the Christ, Immanuel was born. It's the dawn of a new and glorious day. This is the gift of Christmas, that the unassailable, omnipotent God became a baby, giving us the ultimate example of letting our defenses down. Christmas tells us that God became breakable and fragile.

What do we do with all this? I have a couple of quick applications before we close. God's compassion means we need to stop using him. The simple message of Christmas is that the Creator King of the universe became a human being. God's compassionate love motivated him, moved him to act first, to cross distances we could never travel to get to us. We have to ask ourselves some honest questions.

Does the way we treat God show gratitude for what he has done for us, or do we simply use him as a means for our ends? We owe it to ourselves and to each other, family of God, to be honest with these questions. Is Jesus the reason you get up in the morning? Is Jesus the one around whom everything in your life revolves? Are his desires, his will, his love for you what helps and informs when you make your decisions? Does he have the highest priority in your life?

I wrote these questions down so I couldn't escape them because everything in me wants to run far away from them, but we can't. I need to evaluate. I need to recalibrate. Maybe you do too. This is a

great time of year to do that. If he is God and he has come, he does not belong in the corner. He does not belong on the periphery. Do you only come to him when you have problems or when you want that promotion or when you have that goal you want to see realized?

Don't you see that when you do that, you're using him? We don't want him; we want his help. We want his things. We want his fix. It reveals what we really want. He's on the periphery. He becomes a handyman who we call when something is broken. Look at what God did to get near to you. Look at what he did to become God with us. He left every comfort and glory of heaven to come and be dependent upon the very hands he created.

The all-powerful one put down his guard so that one day he would be vulnerable, pierceable to the point of death. In light of that, what are we doing to get near to him? What is keeping you from him? What are you unwilling to lay down? Is it a habit? Is it a relationship? Is it the lack of a relationship, a job? If you're honest, is it just a lack of discipline? It cost him to get to you, and it will cost you as well.

Hear me when I say this. Whatever cost you have to give up will pale in comparison to the fullness of joy and life you will have in him. He's here. What's stopping you? Not only does God's compassion mean we need to stop using him, but God's compassion means we need to start trusting him. Some of us in here have put limitations on God. We have come to faith, and we've said, "Okay, God. You can have this part of my life, and you can have this part of my life, but these are off limits. You don't have access here."

If he really is God, is there anything that is off the table to him? Some of you have decided that some things are just the way they are. "It is what it is," whatever that means. Some of you have decided you don't want to trust him with your life. Now, you've never said that out loud. We don't say that. This is the Bible Belt. We don't say that out loud. People come in and out of this church. They'll come down here after the service. They'll call us. They'll email us and talk about the things that are going on in their lives.

When the gospel starts to get down and penetrate, and something is revealed that needs to be worked over, they go, "I don't know about that." We've put limitations on him. Friends, he can fix your marriage. He can fix that addiction. He can bring you to a place of peace in the midst of your fears. He can give you victory in your purity. Stop being so cynical and believing the lies of what God can and can't do. He has come.

If he can do the miracle of entering into this world, what can't he do in your life? Start trusting him. Because Jesus has come, life has meaning. Because Jesus has come, we have a real solution to our most significant problem. Because of Jesus, there is an end to sin and death and guilt and shame. If our most significant problems have their solution in Jesus, then how much more do our lesser problems find their solution in Christ as well?

Trusting him ultimately means coming to grips with his terms. You don't get to dictate the terms. You don't get to say what is or isn't on the table. Trusting him means giving yourself fully to him. Friends, you'll never stop using him, and you'll never start trusting him if you don't believe in him, if you don't really believe he has come.

For the skeptic in the room, you're hearing me, and you're going, "The God of the universe, the person I'm supposed to give my life to, was born. He came through the birth canal, and he died for me." Everything about this narrative speaks to its authenticity. Think about it. If you're trying to duke the world, pull one over on them, you would never write this story. It's too unbelievable.

The very fact that it's so unbelievable is what makes it so believable. Men and women died for this story. Jesus' birth does not give us an option for a third way. We have to choose. In our culture, none of us are so bold as to completely and outright reject Jesus, so we want to create this third way, but it's a lie. You will either ignore him or you'll marvel at him. You will either run to him or you will run away from him. You will either trust in his deliverance or you'll trust in your own.

Now, we don't loudly or boldly reject him. We want him. In fact, we need him on our resume. We need that here, but we don't want him as Lord. Don't believe the lie of a third way. You either embrace him fully or you will reject him in a thousand different ways. You'll come up with your own. If you believe he has come, do you believe his compassionate character speaks a better word than your present circumstance? If so, it's time to stop using him and to start trusting him.

The curse in Narnia is that it's always winter and never Christmas. The birth of Jesus is the end of winter. Jesus is God's undeniable word that breaks the silence to say emphatically, "God is compassionate. He is moved to action, merciful to our needs. He is the God who is with us who enters in, and he became vulnerable, made fragile so that he might break so we could be mended."

That afternoon, when Bryton was crying and saying, "Dad, why did you push me?" I needed him to see that I love him and that I did what I did precisely because I love him. I needed him for a moment to stop listening to the circumstances and remember what I've proven to him over and over, that I love him, and that I'm for him. In that moment, all he could hear was the clamor of circumstance.

As I got down and wrapped up my boy, I spoke my love over him, and in time, he calmed down, and he began to trust again, to hear my love for him. We need a word to drown out all other words. We need a word to silence all other words. By God's mercy and grace, he has given us this Word. His name is Jesus. Jesus proves God's compassion. Will you take him at his word? Let's pray.

Father, thank you that you did not remain silent, that you shattered the silence. You conquered the death shadow in your Son, Jesus Christ. God, now I ask that you would move in this place, that we wouldn't leave this room without answering some tough questions. For the person who has yet to believe, who is finding a hundred different ways to walk away from you, Lord, that he or she tonight would begin to marvel and embrace and accept your path, your plan for deliverance.

Lord, I pray that you would stir belief, that you would stir wonder, and you would stir love for the Savior. Father, for my brothers and sisters in this room, Lord, I pray that you would help us to recalibrate. Would you speak to us? Would you bring conviction where we need it? Lord, would this be a place tonight of freedom here for confession and repentance? We pray these things in the name of Jesus, the Word God became flesh. In his name we pray, amen.

We're going to enter into a time of Communion. If you're one of those covenant members who are serving with us tonight, go ahead and stand. Make your way to the back. You can actually go ahead and begin passing out the elements, first the bread and then the cup. If you're new at this, let me tell you a little bit about how we practice Communion.

We believe as the Scriptures teach that this is a family meal. This is for those of us who have put the full weight and trust in God's plan for deliverance. We have shucked off our own ways, our own path for deliverance and said, "He has come. He did come near, and we want his deliverance. We want his salvation."

Believer in this room, I want you to take the elements tonight, and I want you to look in your hands and see that you hold in your hands a tangible picture of the gospel. This bread is the broken body of Jesus Christ who was broken so that our bodies would not be broken. His blood was poured out

so that our blood would not be poured out, that we might never taste the ultimate sting of the second death, that for us, the death shadow does not reign, for the great light has dawned.

Come with an examined heart. Don't run too quickly to this table without examining and thinking about all the ways in which God is stirring in you now for confession and repentance and a turning of your life. If you're not a believer in this room, we ask that you would abstain from the elements. Let them pass you by. This is not to be mean or rude or inhospitable, but it is to be speaking truth to you in love.

Maybe this is the first time anyone has ever been willing to love you enough to say that you cannot dictate the terms in which you come to God. You see, we do fence this table, this meal. You can't just hop in, grab the elements, and run out, to take God out on your own terms. If you want to come to this table, you have to come through the door, and his name is Jesus Christ. There is room at this table, plenty of room at this table.

If you would like to talk to someone tonight about coming through the door, Jesus Christ, to know him, to sit at his table, to receive his love, we will have men and women up here at the end who would love to pray with you about that. "The Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took the bread and broke it, and he said, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" The body of Christ, the bread of heaven.

"In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, and he said, "This cup is the cup of the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink of it in remembrance of me.'" The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation. "For as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." And God's people said, "Maranatha."