



Advent (Part 4) – Christmas Light

Matt Chandler – December 24, 2017

Merry Christmas Eve. We're going to dive in. One of the more difficult parts of Christmas Eve for me is that I get 20 minutes as opposed to my normal 48 to 52. If you're a regular here, don't panic. They have dealt shrewdly with me in the space that I get.

Christmas Eve is probably a more difficult time for a preacher than you would think, and here's why. There's something cliché about all of this. There's something that's tied to nostalgia more than it's actually tied to any historic spiritual reality for many of us. That's not true for all of us, but it is true for many of us.

What I mean when I say *cliché* or *nostalgic* about it is that there are many of us for whom this is a cultural norm but not a spiritual reality. What I mean by that is this is what we do on Christmas Eve because this is what our family has done and this is what we have learned in our cultural context is right to do.

So whether we love Jesus or not or have surrendered our lives to Jesus or not or even understand what a little Jewish baby born 2,500-something years ago 7,000 miles away from here has to do with us or not... Whether we understand any of that, we're going to come, we're going to sing some songs that are kind of historic Christmas songs, and Lord knows, we'd better light some candles and sing "Silent Night" or we're going to lead a rebellion out of this joint.

This is one of those weird places where you know what I'm going to talk about today. It's not like I'm going to talk about the birth of Jesus and you go, "Wait. I thought that was Easter." We just know. So there's this kind of cliché thing here that ultimately is not good for our souls and that, ultimately, if we're right and God has put on flesh and dwelt among us, if Immanuel is true, if Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, coeternal with the Father, has always been and will always be, truly was born of a virgin and lived a life you and I are unable to live, weak as we are in our flesh...

If he lived our righteousness and then in his death and resurrection imputed that righteousness to us, then everything should change, and there shouldn't be anything nostalgic about this, and there shouldn't be any cultural kitschyness about this, but there should be something deeper underneath all of the shadows we're celebrating here, something that roots us and grounds us in an unshakable, unwavering way into what's actually true. So I'm just going to dive in. If you're like, "Wait. Was that you not diving in?" not quite. Let me read our text that's in Luke 2.

By the way, whenever I think of Christmas, I always think of this text, and then I think of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, the very last book, *The Last Battle*. Queen Lucy has this great line, where she essentially says, "Yes, in our world something was once born in a stable that was larger than our entire world," which was an allusion to Christ coming in a manger. In the coming of Christ, Christ laid in a manger. Christ himself was greater than our whole world. Let me read this text. There's so much about this that I like. Three things out of this text, starting in verse 8.

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, '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. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!' When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

Now three things I want to point out of this text quickly. The first one is not only in *this* text but really in *any* text. Where the divine meets humankind, humankind's response is fear. What we have

here is an angel of the Lord showing up, and if we could just use our divine imagination, that's going to be terrifying. They're in the middle of a field somewhere outside of Bethlehem. They're just watching over sheep at night, and all of a sudden the sky lights up with this angelic host surrounded by the glory of God.

What we see throughout the Scriptures is whenever the divine invades human space, humanity doesn't have a list of questions it wants answered about the divine. It never happens. When an angel of the Lord shows up, when divine power meets human limitation, humans never respond with, "Oh, praise God, an angel. Hey, can I ask about the origin of evil? Like, where did evil come from?"

Or "Okay, this has been driving me crazy, angel. Glad you're here. Could God make a rock so big he couldn't lift it? That has been driving me crazy. Because he's God, he's all-powerful, so could he make a rock so big he couldn't lift it? Because he's also all-powerful. Could God do that? So glad you're here." No, no, no. They all fall on the ground, and they are, according to the text, greatly afraid. It's not just they're afraid. It's not anxiety. It's not, "Ooh, I'm anxious about this." It's deathly afraid.

Now why would human beings be deathly afraid of the divine? Because we know us. Don't we? Our gut reaction to the divine showing up in our lives is "I guess they're here to kill me." We just know. We know who we are when no one is around. We know what we think. We know what's in our hearts. We know how much we're projecting. We know how often we feel like frauds. So if the divine is showing up, surely he's there to give us what we are due. Right?

Except in the coming of Jesus, the angel shows up not with a sword but with good news of glad tidings. When God intervenes here in this space he comes driving out fear. Not establishing fear but driving it out. "I get that you're afraid. I'm an angel. You're in the middle of nowhere. I just popped up. Don't be afraid. Good news for you. In fact, such good news it's going to become glad tidings."

What he meant by "good news that leads to glad tidings" is this is going to be something that humankind is going to talk about. This good news that the angel is coming with is going to become this thing people talk about. We're designed to worship. We're designed to cherish. We're designed to champion things we like.

I don't know about you, but I have been asked six billion times whether or not I've seen *Star Wars* yet. It's like the thing right now, no matter where I go. "Have you seen the new *Star Wars*? What did you think? Did you think it was too long? Did you think there were nine movies packed into one? Was it one of your favorites, one of your least?" We're just designed to rally around something and make a big deal out of it.

What the angel is doing is showing up going, "Hey, I know you think I'm here to kill you because you know you and you know God. I'm not here to kill you, though. I'm here with good news. In fact, the news is so good it actually is going to become glad tidings. We're going to be talking about this for eternity." Like I said, that question leads to what happens next. Not only do you have fear being driven out in the coming of Jesus Christ...

By the way, I would say that fear is one of those things that is the root of all sin. I'll flesh that out. If you think about the questions that haunt us in places where we never actually figure out the words to the emotion or feeling that's gnawing at us, questions like, "Am I good enough? If anyone really knew me, could they love me? Am I worthy?" All of those questions are rooted in a fear, are they not? "I am *not* worthy of love. I am *not* good enough." This haunts us.

When Christ comes to drive out fear, he comes to replace those questions with a greater understanding of what God will do for us rather than what we are able to do for ourselves. So from there, you move into not just fear being replaced with good news but a right ordering of worship. Again, I'm going to put my Bible over here so we can use our sanctified imaginations.

Angel shows up and says, "I know you're freaked out right now. Don't be afraid. I haven't come to kill you. I've come instead with good news, glad tidings." Just about the time he's done with that, the sky explodes with, according to the Bible, multitudes of heavenly host. So you have this one angel who's like, "I haven't come to kill you," and then *Boom!* behind him thousands of angels singing. So now you're like, "Aaah!" These angels actually start to reorder worship. They start to correct or rightly place worship. "Glory to God in the highest."

Let's chat for a second. My guess is that at some point tomorrow afternoon you're going to begin to feel disappointed. There will be some kind of gnawing that occurs tomorrow afternoon. If you get everything you asked for and if crazy Aunt Jill doesn't freak out at lunch and throw her ham at someone, if all of your dreams for tomorrow actually take place, you'll still later tomorrow afternoon think, "Was that it?" Because all of this is an echo of a greater reality.

We say this a lot here at The Village Church. My wife is a really good gift of God's grace to me, and she is a terrible god. She will not be able to satisfy the deepest longings of my heart. If you're a big *Jerry Maguire* fan I know that's confusing to you, but she doesn't complete me. She's a good gift of God's grace to me, she's a great partner in gospel ministry, a great friend, but a terrible god. I love my kids. My kids are amazing, and they're terrible little gods. I love my job. Work is a good gift from God. It makes a terrible god. Stuff makes a terrible god.

So what's happening in this moment... Part of the good news is that worship is being rightly ordered so that the things we put our hope in, that we trust in, and that we go to to find satisfaction of our souls that time and time and time again show themselves to be bankrupt are now exposed in the light of the coming of Jesus. We're now "Glory to God in the highest." Now we have an establishment of where the soul will find its satisfaction, and true belonging and true healing can actually be walked in. Glory to God in the highest.

No one else will be able to bear the weight of your hope. A sure way to crush your marriage is to ask your spouse to save you. A sure way to make your kids resent you is to ask them to validate you. A sure way to have no concept of life once you retire is to put your work as your god, but Jesus steps in and says, "My shoulders are broad. In fact, all of the governments of the earth will be on my shoulders. I can take your hope." This is what's happening here. There's a reordering of worship around what's right, strong enough, and good.

Then lastly, and easily my favorite, is that you see the cosmos being flipped upside down. What I mean by that is that love floods in and replaces wrath and joy floods in and replaces shame. We don't have a lot of context for this because most of us don't know any shepherds. Is anybody like, "No, my best friend Bill is a shepherd out in Argyle"? My guess is no. What's happening here is this good news of great joy and glad tidings is first being delivered not to the wealthy, pretty elite but to the marginalized and oppressed.

Shepherds were viewed with a great deal of disdain in this day and age. In fact, let me just read you some first-century literature. This is from the Mishnah, which is Judaism's written record of oral law. It reflects the prejudice referring to shepherds. Here's a passage from the Mishnah: "Shepherds are incompetent. No one should ever feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who has fallen in a pit." That seems a little aggressive for a religion, doesn't it?

A dude is trapped in a pit. Look in there. If it's a shepherd, just keep going. He ain't worth saving. Do you preach that? Do you exegete that text out of the Mishnah? Then Jeremias in the sixth century writes back of this time period. "To buy wool, milk, or a kid [baby goat] from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property." Shepherds could not fulfill judicial offices or be admitted in court as witnesses.

They were viewed as dirty, incompetent thieves, and when the good news for all peoples was rolled out, who did God roll it out to? Isn't this crazy? This is what I mean by the cosmos gets turned upside down. People with superior skills and talents and wealth almost always get the firstfruits of that which is good. If you've ever been a place and somebody famous strolls in, my guess is *your* tail with *your* family is going to keep waiting and *their* posse is going to go right in to the seats.

This is not how it works in God's economy. In our economy, the wealthy and the powerful get the first place in line, and in God's economy it's the broken and contrite and outcast who get the good news first and get to see Jesus first with their own eyes, born of peasant parents in a Podunk, terrible little town in which they're now in a barn in that town. This is the economy of God. It's shocking and scandalous.

God with us, Immanuel, driving out fear with good news, driving out the questions of "Am I good enough? Can I be loved? Do I matter?" driving out the fear with his love, showing up and in all power and might reordering our affections so that "Glory to God in the highest" becomes our mantra. Then from there we see this profound sense of God's desire to pull in from the least of these those he will call sons and daughters.