

A MESSAGE FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH

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I'm going to read the Christmas lesson from Luke 2:1-7. "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria and everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem, the town of David because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to be registered with Mary who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to her first born, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."

The story of Christmas is all about the story of eternal God in heaven giving us his Son and sending us through that son the message of who he is and what kind of opportunity awaits us, the opportunity of redemption, of forgiveness from our sin and of eternal life.

I would submit to you that it is no easy thing to get a message from heaven to earth. To show you how difficult it is we see how difficult it is to see how earthlings have tried to send a message to the outer reaches of space. The United States space program has tried to do this twice in the last number of years. In 1972 NASA launched an unmanned space ship Pioneer 10 on a journey to Jupiter, a billion mile journey. Pioneer 10 would fly within 87,000 miles of Jupiter. By now Pioneer 10 has long ago passed Jupiter and is moving of a velocity of 7 miles a second out into the universe. In about 80,000 years or so it is scheduled to reach the nearest star where there might be another planetary system. If it were to ever fly close to an inhabited planet not that there is such – we're never told in scripture that there is – but assuming that there is, the NASA scientists put on Pioneer 10 a plaque, 6 inch by 9 inch plaque, the brainchild of Carl Sagan and Frank Drake. On the plaque are figures drawn of earthly representatives. Our height is indicated by a scale drawing of Pioneer 10 in the background. On the plaque is a large star burst pattern which would tell an alien scientist even a million years from now from whence the spacecraft came and when it was launched.

Five years later in 1977 NASA sent another space probe into the universe – Voyager. It carried more information about earth life. It had pictures and sounds and music. In regard to the pictures there atomically drawings of principle species – pictures of human families, the natural environment of the earth, inland and seashores, deserts and valleys, the Snake River and the Grand Tetons. There were pictures of wild animals, a picture of Kathy Rigby somersaulting on the bar showing the elegance and coordination of the human frame. Shots of picking grapes, harvesting cotton, going to sea in fishing boats. Pictures of a supermarket and a super highway. A space shot. A flight of geese across a clouded sunset. And last of all a violin. The photographs were followed by greetings in 55 different languages and a speech by then President Jimmy Carter. These spoken greetings were then followed by a miscellany of terrestrial sounds such as those made by whales, rain, footsteps, heartbeats, blacksmiths, rockets and pulsars. Finally there was music which gave extraterrestrials if they existed a variety of concerts including music by Bach and Beethoven, Asian classical music, folk music, music of primitive peoples and even Johnny Be Good.

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One writer knowing that Bach was sent representing a part of earth's music said the best way we can explain ourselves to others in space is to send only music by Bach. "We would be bragging of course but we could tell the hard truth later."

As a footnote to this Voyager launch it should be added that space officials sent an urgent call to Cornell University a few hours before the Voyager record was to be engraved. The officials had come to realize that the message being sent out into the depths of time and space was incomplete. What was overlooked and needed to be added were the names of all the congressmen on the House and Senate science space committees.

God did not send a plaque or a plaque with photographs or the sounds of heaven. He sent a baby. His own Son. In sending that baby he sent himself to us. Not something outside of himself. But himself. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The eternal word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.

It staggers the imagination that the eternal God could become incarnate in the flesh in such a small little baby. But if we understand the omnipotence of God correctly, omnipotence means simply the power to do whatever you will to do, and the eternal God willed to become present in the flesh of a human being on a rescue mission to this doomed planet.

This Christmas God is saying to each of us that he has sent us in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior the very means of our redemption, our hope for this life and our hope for someday getting off this planet and dwelling with him eternally where he dwells in unapproachable light.

What can we learn from the message that God sent us in his Son? I realize when we ask that question it's so multifaceted an answer that we can literally spend hours looking at the various answers that could be given to the message of Christmas. But I want to focus on these two. These have been important in my life especially in the last few years.

First, God is in control of our lives. God is in control of this planet. God is in control of his redemptive history. God is in control even when it does not appear that way. Many times as we look at our lives, as we look at the Christmas story it looks like things are spinning out of control. But that is only the apparent view. The real view is that God's power is often hidden behind the curtain or tapestry of events. The Christmas story is telling us that God rules and God reigns. Even when it does not appear to be that way.

The reason I say that is based upon this text from Luke 2:1, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree..." I would submit to you that that statement is an indication that God rules. Has it struck you as odd that Mary and Joseph arrive at Bethlehem so late in the pregnancy? They arrive apparently the very night that she was to be delivered. That is not a normal thing for a couple to do, especially for this virgin mother expecting her first child. To take this donkey ride out of the hilltop town of Nazareth to Bethlehem, in order to arrive the very evening the child would be born. I wonder why they didn't get out of Nazareth earlier. I wonder why as a young couple engaged to be married – a formal arrangement far more binding than our custom of engagement – if they didn't say to each other, "Is the child supposed to be born here?" And Mary say, "When the birth was announced to me by the angel but he has not come back."

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That is the strange way that God often works in our life. That God comes to us in special seasons and there is a real and manifest presence of himself in our lives. We go on the basis of that presence. But then there might be a long period of silence. That happened with Mary. The angel came to her and announced that the child would be the Christ. But then the angel does not show back up. The angel is not giving them directions to move out of Nazareth to go anywhere.

Mary would have turned to Joseph. Joseph was guided not by an angel but by his dreams. Four times in the gospel of Matthew we are told that Joseph is led by dreams. Mary could have said, "An angel hasn't come to me. But Joseph have you had a dream? Do you have any indication of what we should do?" And Joseph would have had to say no.

Mary's parents and family would have been saying Stay here. So how was it that they made this last minute trip to Bethlehem? There was no angel telling them to go. There was no dream telling them to go. This young couple does not even appear to be consciously aware of the prophecy from Micah 5:2. They don't appear to go to Bethlehem consciously to fulfill that prophecy. The prophecy is fulfilled simply because its there not because Mary and Joseph set out consciously to fulfill it.

Luke provides the reason they came to Bethlehem. It was the decree of Caesar. It was that decree given across the water in Rome that on a certain day by that day all persons were to have gone to their ancestral homes for a head count of the number of people in the realm. It was that decree that brought God moving the whole world in order to get one family where he wanted them. It was an extravagant display of God's power, that he would move the world to their ancestral homes in order to get one family out of Nazareth to Bethlehem that the scripture might be fulfilled.

Here is this great Augustus Caesar, the grand nephew of Julius Caesar and his successor. Ruler of the world from the time he was 33 years of age in the year 30 B.C. until the time he was 77 years of age in 14 A.D. It was said that he had found Rome at the beginning of his reign brick and left it by the time he had died, marble. It was his decree that reached across the ocean and propelled the holy family to get down to Bethlehem in time.

What got into Caesar to issue such a decree and issue it at the very time in his reign when for the rest of history his administration would be divided into B.C. and A.D.. The early Christians knew what had gotten into Caesar's head. God had put it in his mind. It was a due date established by Caesar and the family in Nazareth finally said, We have got to get down to Bethlehem because that due date cannot be postponed any longer.

God could have flown Mary by angel express had he so desired from Nazareth to Bethlehem but he had a different plan. He would use the decree of Caesar to show that his power was manifest through an historical event where the participants in that event were not even conscious of the fact that it was God who had slipped the idea into the Roman administration. That's why we as Christians never become too troubled with what the government is doing. We know in the last analysis the Lord is in control and can do what he wills when he chooses to do it.

Christians in the first century had a difficult time under a number of different Roman emperors. But they never doubted who the real power was. The real power was not Caesar Augustus under whom Jesus was born. It was not Caesar Tiberius under whom Jesus died. It was not under

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Caesar Nero under whom the early Christians in Rome suffered and Paul himself was imprisoned and perhaps executed.

The early Christians knew this. There was a throne above Caesar's throne and it was the wonderful humor of the Christian church that they could open their Bible to Luke 2:1 and say in the worst of times, God motivated Caesar. Even Caesar someday will realize that he is not the Lord and he is not the ruler.

Behind every human scene is a divine scene. That is the way to approach the Christmas story. It is the way to look at human power. It is the way to look at reverses in your life. It is the way of looking at things in your life that have happened to you even this year which seems so wacky and out of control and depressive and have absolutely pinned you to the wall wondering how in the world God could be present in your world with this out of control event happening. It is God's way of saying, I am the ruler yet. Though the wrong seems so strong I am the ruler yet.

From the human point of view it often appears that God is not active in human history or that God is not active in our own lives but we read the hand of God in the degree of Caesar and we say, Christ with us, Christ among us. He has promised in this age to plant his internal reign in our heart. We will not see the manifestation of his external reign until the age to come. Therefore we have disease. Therefore we have accidents. Therefore we have people who are unfaithful to one another. Therefore we have depression. Therefore we have all kinds of things.

We keep wanting God to rearrange our circumstances when the kingdom of God in this age is within us. From time to time God in his gracious mercy chooses to move some of the future age into the present by a means of a supernatural manifestation of his power and glory which we call a miracle. As Christians we have this divine tension between the present age and the age to come and even when this present age manifests all of its wicked and evil face at us we know that because Jesus is born and because Jesus died and because Jesus has risen again from the dead that the ultimate control of this universe belongs to God almighty, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the ruler yet. "This is my Father's world, let me ne'er forget. That thou the wrong seems O so strong, he is the ruler yet."

The second point of my message is that God is not only in control when it doesn't seem that way, it is this, God chooses to appeal to us on the basis of love rather than on the basis of power. I think this is the companion truth to the first truth. The first truth is God has power God is in control.

But the second corollary truth is that God chooses to appeal to us not on the basis of his power but on the basis of his love. Certainly at Christmas he is doing that.

If I'd been planning Christmas I would have appealed on the basis of power rather than love. I would have made some of the Christmas story much different than we read it in the scripture. Because power would have made changes that love was unwilling to make.

For example, if I were arranging Christmas here's some of the things I could think of that would have made Christmas a whole lot easier for the parties concerned.

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First of all I would have given Joseph a dream at least three months before the birth to tell him to get from Nazareth to Bethlehem, get a decent job, rent a house and have some health insurance for his wife.

Failing to do that, if they're going to arrive at the last moment then I would have sent the angels to somebody other than the shepherds. The shepherds in those days were regarded as rogues and their testimony was not even admissible in a court of law as a witness. It doesn't make sense to send the angels to shepherds. They were of no earthly utilitarian advantage to the holy family at all.

Send the angels to the innkeeper. How about that? He'd be duly impressed and yield his best room if a mighty angel is standing in his presence.

Why didn't they at least round up some midwives who could help in the birth? How about getting the angels to the wise men so those three guys could get there on time? By the time they arrive Jesus is in a house and could have been as old as two years of age. And this crazy thing of sending an angelic choir to the shepherds. God wasted the best music ever heard on earth on shepherds.

I would have terminated Herod all together. Just wiped him out. The guy deserved to be terminated. If the angel had killed Herod then Jesus would never have had to be taken down to Egypt.

I would have had a comfortable bed for Mary and medical help and a crib and certainly diaper service. Better than those swaddling clothes.

But the changes I would make in the Christmas narrative reflect our human tendency to protect ourselves from pain, risk, hardship and vulnerability. All of us would like to live in a thermostatically controlled environment. To insulate ourselves from people and events that hurt us. I think you could identify one or two events in your life if you had the power to change them you would. We would like at times to rearrange the data of our life.

But God did not rearrange these circumstances of Jesus' coming among us. If Jesus had been born in a house or inn could anyone have found him or be welcome to come in? Could the poor have ever identified with him? If Herod had been eliminated at Christmas to what extent could God be willing to continue insulating his Son from the effects of other person's evil choices. We live in a world of cause and effect relationships. When a person makes a wrong choice either negligently or intentionally often the innocent person suffers the consequence of that. God knew that the baby Jesus and the babies of Bethlehem would suffer the consequence of Herod's evil choice but he chose to let the cause and effect relationship continue until the end of the age when he makes all things new and when he judges the world in justice.

We measure things by utilitarian standards. But God does things simply not for their practical value but for the joy and the serendipity of them. If Christmas had been mine to plan I would have avoided the manger. I would have avoided the poverty and the vulnerability but then I would have avoided the cross as well later down the line. But God chooses to appeal to us on the basis of love. He chooses to give us a baby that can identify with us and with whom we can identify to let us know that God is approachable. That God is loving. That God is willing to risk for us. That God went through this great stretch of coming out of the eternity of his existence

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into the temporal presence of time. Himself. He didn't send an angel to do the job. He did it himself. He did it himself by coming in the form of Jesus, the Christ, to lay down his life ultimately for our sins. Then gather it back up again through his resurrection from the dead.

Are you estranged from someone this Christmas? If you're estranged from someone perhaps the tendency that you would have is to use power in some way, to use manipulation in some way to end that estrangement.

But the pattern that God chose in ending that estrangement was to reach us with more love. And to keep pouring his love out upon us until we can say truly of his love, that we are persons who have been lavished with the love of God. God reaching us, God caring for us.

I have no doubt in my own mind from the scriptures and now having the opportunity of having lived more than half a century that God's power and love is present in our lives. I don't know what I would do without the presence of Jesus in my life. I don't understand how a person can go through with the hardships that are present in life without the power of this Jesus to help. I've found times in my own life I would have crashed in my own experience had it not been for the fact that the Lord himself held me. That the Lord was in control of my life and that the Lord dearly and deeply loved me.

This child that was given to us at Bethlehem has promised to remain with us. He as an adult said, "I am with you always. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I am with you to the end."

Especially at Christmas time I as pastor am sensitive to persons who are going through difficulty. I realize the majority of the congregation will be having a great time with the family. They probably don't need a whole lot of stimulation. There's enough stimulation in the season. But my heart as pastor always reached out to whom those that this Christmas would represent the first time a place at the table was missing through death, through divorce, through a loss of some kind. Or where there was suffering of one kind or another. Or perhaps the last Christmas unless God intervened that a member of the family would be present.

In those times today the Christmas story says to us no matter what is going on in our life, no matter how out of control it looks, God is in control. The scriptures do not say, *We feel* God is working for the good. The scriptures say, *We know* God is working for the good. As a Christian personally whose trying to do my best to mature I am trying to learn more and more to differentiate my subjective feelings with my objective knowings. Jesus is risen from the dead. That is he predicate. That is the basis. That is the foundation for my faith. In the times when life goes wildly spinning out of control I know from his vantage point it is not out of control. He is in control and his love reaches me. His love embraces me. And his love cares for me. I know that's the same in your life as well as you open your live to him.

It was 1987 that I preached my last Christmas sermon as your pastor. If you recall one of the things I usually snuck in somewhere along the line at Christmas was this story which I have to repeat today just because it's my favorite Christmas story. It wouldn't be Christmas if I didn't tell it.

It's the story of Wally. I think it eloquently illustrates reaching out to God in love. It appeared in *Guideposts* magazine. It's the story of a nine year old boy. Wally was nine that year and in the second grade though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he

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had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still Wally was well liked by the other children in his class all of whom were smaller than he. Though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally asked to play ball with them. Or play any game for that matter in which winning was important. Most often they would find a way to keep him out. But Wally would hang around anyway. Not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one and a natural protector paradoxically of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away it'd always be Wally who would say, Can't they stay? They're no bother.

Wally fancied the idea of being shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year. But the play's director Miss Lombard assigned him to a more "important" role. After all she reasoned, the innkeeper didn't have too many lines and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

So what happened was the usual large partisan audience gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of shepherd's crooks and Christmas crushes of beards, crowns and halos and a whole stage full of squeaky children's voices. No one on or off stage was more caught up in the magic of that night than Wally. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lombard had to make sure he didn't wander on stage before his cue.

Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted backdrop. Wally, the innkeeper, was there waiting. "What do you want?" demanded Wally swinging the door open with a brusque gesture. "We seek lodging," Joseph replied. "Seek it elsewhere!" Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. "The inn is filled." "Sir," Joseph said, "We have asked everywhere in vein. We have traveled far and we are very weary." Wally looked properly stern and shot back, "There is no room for you in this inn!" "Please, good innkeeper," said Joseph. "This is my wife Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired." Now for the first time the innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment. The prompter whispered from the wings *No, Be gone!* Wally repeated it automatically, "No. Be gone." Joseph draped his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband's shoulder and the two of them started to move away.

The innkeeper did not return inside his inn however as he script called for. Wally stood there in the doorway watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears. Suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all others. Wally called out "Don't go Joseph! Bring Mary back!" And he said with a bright smile, "You can have my room!"

God's appealing to us with love gives us the opportunity to voluntarily open our hearts to him. He has the power to force us to open the door. But he never will. He only comes at our invitation. His power is always revealed in love. He limits his presence to our permission. Will you let him be present to you this Christmas? If you've never received him as Lord and Savior will you embrace him this Christmas as your Lord and Savior. If you're in a difficult spot at this moment in your life, even though you are a Christian and maybe you've lost a lot, may I encourage you this Christmas to say, you've not lost the most important thing. You have not lost Jesus. He is present with you and he will always be present with you.

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Father, we thank you for the great gift you've to us. We've been busy shopping for others in these last few days. But we're here at this Christmas time because you gave a gift to us. Not a plaque, not a book not a record or photograph. But your own dear presence in the person of Jesus our Lord. How grateful we are to come into your presence not with fear but with wonder, with joy, so humble and grateful that you reached out to us across the long stretches of eternity and time, across the long span between the throne where you are and place where we are. You reached us with your love. We thank you. Lord, there may be times in our own life where we have struggled much to change the manger scene of our own life. We've tried with all our might to rearrange your grand design and make it better. Help us to see that in you our Christmases are best the way they really are. Not as we might wish or them to be. Be present in each one of our lives and each of our families at this Christmas time. May we respond to you ever in love. We ask through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.