

What does the Nativity Teach Us About God's Love?

December 24, 2018

Merry Christmas. It is great to be together as a church family as we prepare to celebrate the birthday of Jesus, our Savior. If your house is like mine, you have it decorated for Christmas. We have a tree decorated with lights and ornaments that is topped with a star. Cindy placed garland around the house and poinsettias on tables. We also have a little nativity scene. Do any of you have one in your home? If you do, put up your hands. We have a simple nativity. Let me show it to you. We have the wise men on one side and the shepherd on the other. I think we were ripped off because we only have one shepherd on the other side. Maybe this was a discount nativity scene. We also have Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus in the middle.



Nativity scenes have been around for a long time. Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first nativity in the year 1223, and it has been popular since that time.¹ When it comes to Christmas decorations, what I like about the nativity scene is it helps keep Christ the center of Christmas.

For all the decoration and energy we put into celebrating Christmas, the Bible doesn't actually say much about Jesus' birth. There are only four chapters in the entire Bible about the birth of Christ — two in Matthew and two in Luke.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nativity_scene

Mark and John didn't even think the birth of Christ was notable enough to talk about in their Gospels. That doesn't mean the birth of Christ was unimportant. The Bible says this about all of itself.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 (ESV)

This means what God did tell us about the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke is important for us to know. It tells us things we need to hear about God and God's character. Tonight, using the nativity scene as our guide, we are going to look at what we need to know about God from the birth of Jesus, as told to us in Matthew and Luke.

The Wise Men

The Gospel of Matthew tells us about the wise men at Jesus' birth. The Gospel of Matthew was written primarily to the Jews. Matthew could have told us many things about Jesus' birth. Why did he think the visit of the wise men was important for us to know? What does the visit of the wise men teach us about the character of God? Let's find out.

The first thing we need to know is the presence of wise men in the nativity scenes at the birth of Jesus is inaccurate. They were not there for Jesus' birth. A careful reading about the wise men in Mathew tells us that when the magi came, Mary and Joseph were in a house, not in a stable. It also tells us that when Herod realized he was tricked by the wise men, he killed the babies two years of age and younger in Bethlehem, not just newborns. If the wise men were at the birth of Jesus, and Jesus was a newborn, why did Herod kill the children that were up to two years older? It wasn't like the wise men took a long time to travel

from Herod's palace to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. Bethlehem was only 2 miles away from Jerusalem. This tells us Jesus was no longer a newborn baby when they arrived. In addition, the Greek word used to describe Jesus when the wise men visited Mary and Joseph is the word for a young child, not the word for infant. There are different words in Greek used to describe an infant and a toddler. It was the Greek word for toddler used to describe Jesus when the wise men visited.

This leads us to the conclusion that the magi were not present at Jesus' birth. They most likely came shortly after Jesus began to walk, when he was around a year in age. This is the reason I typically place the wise men in my manger scene far away. At Jesus' birth they either hadn't left or had just begun packing for the long journey.

That being said, because Matthew included them in the story, and because they are associated with Christmas, we will study them anyway.

There are a few other things in our nativity scene with the wise men that don't accurately represent them. How many of the magi or wise men came to see Jesus? Most of us think there were three. Does the Bible doesn't say there were three. The Bible says they gave three gifts — gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It doesn't tell us how many came to visit.

The other thing to realize is the wise men in our nativity scenes look pretty decked out. They are wearing a lot of gold. They have plenty of bling. That also probably wasn't true. The world at this time was a wild and lawless place. Three men dressed like a walking jewelry store traveling a long distance would be

robbed in an instant. Most likely there were more than three magi. Most likely, since they were high-ranking in their culture, they traveled in a caravan that included military protection. This makes sense. It explains why when they arrived in Jerusalem, they were instantly able to gain an audience with King Herod. When important people arrive in town with their own security detail, the king is always interested in hearing their story.

Where did they come from? Matthew said they came from the east, which is ambiguous. These men were not astronomers. They were astrologers. They studied the stars and the planet for the purpose of knowing the future. They were men that were specialists in horoscopes. When we put that data together, it leads us to believe they came from the ancient land of Babylon. Astrology was a huge part of the Babylon culture. Babylon was to the east. Astrology was something God's people were forbidden to practice, so these people were far from God.

Once we know these men came from Babylon, it tells us how the Jews felt about these people and their culture. Babylon was the place where the Jews were taken into exile in the Old Testament. It was the Babylonians who ransacked the treasures of Solomon's temple bringing them back to Babylon to display as spoils of war. It was the Babylonians who burned Solomon's temple to the ground. The Babylonians were hated by the Jews. They were enemies. Why did representatives of the Jews ancient enemies come to visit Jesus and honor him at his birth?

That leads us to an interesting backstory. In the book of Daniel, we find that even while the Babylonians were oppressing God's people and using them

as slaves, God was unfolding a plan to bring these demon worshippers that were far from him, close to him. The book of Daniel tells us how God placed Daniel and his three friends as high ranking government officials in the Babylonians government. From their positions of power, these Jewish captives were witnesses for the true God of the universe even though they lived and worked in an evil society. The influence of Daniel and his three friends was effective because in the middle of the book of Daniel we find Nebuchadnezzar, the egomaniac leader of the Babylonians, gave his heart to the true God of the universe and began following the God of Daniel. Even while God's people were captive in Babylon, God was working to bring the Babylonians that were far from him, near to him.

Another interesting part of the back story is that in Daniel 2:48, we find Daniel rose to become the head of all the wise men and astrologers in Babylon. Just as Daniel had a tremendous influence on King Nebuchadnezzar, while it doesn't say it in the Bible, I am sure Daniel also had a tremendous godly influence on the guild of wise men and astrologers in Babylon. I am sure that influence lasted for generations. What we find is God somehow did something in the stars that revealed to the wise men and astrologers in Babylon that his son was born and where he was born. This led them to travel a long distance to Bethlehem to worship Jesus.

We find God's plan for the Babylonians never stopped. He was about the business of bringing people that were far from him, near to him. This included demon-worshipping pagans like the Babylonians.

Why did Matthew include this part of Jesus' birth? The Jews Matthew wrote to would have instantly thought along nationalistic lines when they heard about the birth of Jesus. Jesus is the savior of the Jews! The problem is Jesus is not just the savior of the Jews, he is the savior of all people. Right at Jesus' birth the Jews reading Matthew's Gospel were forced to realize God is still in the business of bringing people far from him, near to him. He even works to bring to him the demon-worshipping Babylonians that they thought of as their arch enemies.

When we look at the wise men in the nativity scene, the message they bring to Jesus' birth is that Jesus came to be the savior of all people, even people that are far from God, people we would consider our enemies.

This is good reminder for us. All of us have people we think of as enemies of God that we can't wait for God to punish. Right now, one of the most hated enemies of God that come to mind are militant ISIS men who decapitate young girls. Instinctively, we want God to judge them. Yet, when we see the wise men at Jesus' birth, we are reminded God's heart is that he would prefer to save them instead of judging them. God loves people far from him. He is in the business of bringing them near to him.

Tonight, maybe the person you view as God's enemy is the person that stares at you in the mirror when you get out of bed in the morning. You need to know that no matter how far you have run, it doesn't matter what you have done, God loves you. Jesus came to die for you. He came to bring people that are far

from God, near to him. That is the good news of the wise men at Jesus' birth. It is good news all of us can use.

The Shepherds

The next group of people we see in the nativity scene are the shepherds. Unlike the wise men, they were there at Jesus' birth, but they didn't look like the shepherds in our nativity scene. In my nativity scene, the shepherd has perfect hair and a boyish complexion. His clothes are spotless.

That isn't accurate. Luke tells us there was more than one shepherd and they were in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. If you slept in a field at night, your hair would not look like the shepherd in my nativity scene. You would have major bed head. If you slept in a field most nights, your clothes would not be clean. They would be covered in dirt.

Something else that is important to know is that shepherds were at the bottom of the food chain. You were a shepherd because you couldn't get a better job. No father hoped his son would grow up to become a shepherd. Shepherds were so low in society that they were not allowed to testify in court. It was assumed whatever they said couldn't be trusted or wasn't of value.

Yet, when Luke wrote his Gospel, he wanted us to know that God chose shepherds to be the first to know about the birth of his son. God wanted the shepherds to be the first to share the good news about the birth of Jesus.

Why did Luke highlight this point? Remember the Gospel of Luke was written by Luke, who was a doctor. He was highly educated. Luke's research for the Gospel of Luke and for Acts was underwritten by a rich a man named Theophilus. We read about that in the opening lines of Luke's Gospel. Luke

wanted everyone to realize Jesus wasn't just born as a savior for rich people. Jesus was born as a savior for all people. God loves forgotten and lonely people in this world, people like the shepherds. God chose lowly shepherds to be the first to know of his son's birth.

This is incredibly encouraging. In life, many of us are not significant. We work behind-the-scenes jobs providing for those we love, struggling to make it through to the next paycheck. While the world doesn't place value on us, the shepherds remind us how much God loves the forgotten and lonely people who love him in this world.

Mary and Joseph

The last part of the nativity scene is Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus in a manger. One thing that is abundantly obvious about that is that Mary and Joseph were dirt poor. Joseph was a carpenter that worked with his hands. As a family, they lived paycheck to paycheck. They lived in Nazareth. That was a poverty-ridden backwater town with a terrible reputation. Mary and Joseph were so low in society that when they made it to Bethlehem and Mary was nine-months pregnant, nobody considered giving up their bed to provide a little comfort for a woman soon to give birth. Mary and Joseph were forced to sleep in a filthy stable with road-weary animals. In that filthy stable, Mary gave birth to Jesus on a manure-laden floor. Jesus was laid in a manger, which is an animal feeding trough, because that was the best they could do for the birth of God's son.

When it came time for Mary and Joseph to make the offering at the temple that was to be given after the birth of a firstborn son for ritual purification, they offered two pigeons because that is all they could afford. That is the Old

Testament equivalent of putting food stamps in the offering plate. One thing that is clear when we look at Jesus' earthly parents is they had it rough. They scrapped to make it through life.

When we go through hard times, one of the lies Satan tells us is God doesn't understand our pain. He wants us to think God doesn't understand the pain of our loss. He wants us to think God doesn't understand poverty and hunger. When we look at Jesus being born into the home of Mary and Joseph, we know that Jesus grew up in a family that had a hard life. Jesus understands what it is like to be hungry. Jesus understands what it is like to be poor. Jesus understands what it is like to work long hours and late nights. That is what his family needed to do in order to survive. Jesus was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

Hebrew 2:17 tells us Jesus was made like us in every way. He understands every temptation and struggle we face. He understands every hard time we face because he faced hard times, scarcity and financial challenges too. When we see Mary and Joseph in a stable when Mary gave birth to Jesus, it is a reminder that Jesus lived a rough life. Jesus understands our pain. He can empathize with our lives, especially when life is tough.

His name is Jesus.

The most significant part of the nativity scene is not the wise men, the shepherds or the poverty of Mary and Joseph. The most significant part of the nativity scene is the baby in the manger and the name Joseph was told to give him by the angel. His name was to be Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins. The name Jesus means God saves. That is why Jesus came.

Jesus didn't come primarily to empathize with our pain. He came to save us from our sins. The best part of the nativity scene is Jesus and that he came to save us from our sin.

Conclusion

What does the nativity teach us about God and his love?

- The wise men teach us that God is in the business of bringing people far from him near to him. He is still in that business today.
- The shepherds teach us God loves those who are lonely and forgotten in this world.
- Mary and Joseph, who provided Jesus' home, teach us that God understands our pain.
- The baby in the manger, who is Jesus, teaches us that God came to save us from our sin.

Communion

Tonight, we have an opportunity to respond with gratitude to Jesus and thank him for his coming. We are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper together, but we are doing it a little differently. There are five communion stations around the room. While the worship team plays we encourage you to get up as a family, go to the communion stations where you can take some bread and dip it in some juice. Before you take the communion, take a few steps with your family away from the table, get in a circle, and have the head of your family pray, thanking God for sending his son to save us from our sin. When you are done praying, return to your seat and we will sing one last song together.



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