

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 1, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

LUKE 2:10

“...the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.’”

WILL CHRISTMAS BE ANY DIFFERENT THIS YEAR?

Are you ready for Christmas? Some of you are saying, “Wait a minute; you’ve got to be kidding!” Immediately you think of a mental “to do” list! There will be decorations to put up, presents to buy, meals to prepare, toys to assemble -- How is Christmas going to be different for you this year?

For some of you it’s going to be quite different -- you’ve gotten married, or you’ve had your first child; some of you have lost a loved one. Some of you have had major changes in your finances, either for better or for worse. Maybe you became a Christian this year. What’s going to be different? How is Christmas going to be different spiritually? How do you really discover the true meaning of Christmas? Sometimes you think, “Well, this year is going to be the year that’s really special” Well, what makes it special?

I’ll tell you what makes it special -- the way you respond to Jesus Christ makes it special. Have you ever thought about the fact that at the very first Christmas, almost the entire world missed it! There were just a few select people whom God chose who were a part of it. Why did God choose the people who were part of that first Christmas? Most of you have a Nativity scene in your home. What was the response that caused God to say, “I want that person involved?”

1. What about Mary? Of all the people whom God could have chosen to be the mother of Jesus, why did He choose Mary? She was a teenager, scared to death, unmarried, pregnant with her first child, and poor as poor could be.

How would you respond if you were in her position? “What are my parents going to think? Will Joseph break off the engagement? Will anyone really believe my story?” Why did God choose Mary of all people?

I believe the reason God chose Mary was because Mary listened when God spoke. Mary’s response to Christmas was CONTEMPLATION. Listen to Luke 2:19 (Good News Bible): “Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them.” And Luke 2:51 (Good News Bible) says, “[She] treasured all these things in her heart.” When God spoke, Mary listened. I think that’s what set her apart. She paid attention when God spoke to her. She was humble and reverent and obedient. Tradition says that the reason why we have the Christmas story in Luke is

because Mary recounted the story herself to Luke the physician. How else could Luke have found out this specific personal information concerning the Holy Family? Mary treasured these things in her heart and thought deeply about them. Mary's response to Christmas was contemplation.

2. What about Joseph? He was chosen just as much as Mary was chosen. I heard about a Christmas pageant put on some years ago by young children. And Joseph goes up to the door of the inn and knocks and says, "I need a room." And the little boy playing the innkeeper said, "I'm sorry, I've no room." And Joseph said, "But you must give me a room!" This little kid was really getting into it! He said, "You don't understand. You see, I've got to have a room because my wife is going to have a baby." And the innkeeper said, "Well, I'm sorry, but that's not my fault." And Joseph replied, "Well, I'm sorry, but it's not my fault either!"

Why did God choose Joseph? How would you respond if, one day, your fiancée phones you and says, "Honey, you're not going to believe this, but the strangest thing happened...!" Would you buy that line? "Right, Mary -- sure!" Why did God choose Joseph? Because God knew that Joseph's response to Christmas would be COOPERATION. Even when it seemed ridiculous and farfetched and incredible and absurd, Joseph said, "Well, maybe." And the Bible says that an angel appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, everything's going to be all right; it's all going to work out" (see Matthew 1:20). And Joseph cooperated. And Matthew 1:20 says, "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife." You see, Mary's response was contemplation -- she listened when God spoke. But Joseph's response was cooperation. He was submissive to God's will.

3. What about the shepherds? Why of all people did the heavenly host appear to these men first? Most people don't realize that shepherds were the uncouth outcasts of that day. For one thing, they didn't smell very good! They smelled like the sheep. And their job was a poor paying job, and they were the low life of society. Why did God choose the shepherds? Later Jesus would say, "I am the good Shepherd" (John 10:11). He identified with them. And I think it is significant that the news about the "good Shepherd" was shared with the shepherds of Bethlehem first.

Why did God impart the good news to the shepherds first? I think He told the shepherds because He knew they would be excited! "God has come to earth!" Indeed, they ran all the way to town, and they were rejoicing; and look what the Scripture says, "[The shepherds] found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him... they returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen..." (Luke 2:16 and 20).

Tell me -- with whom do you like to share good news? Is it somebody who says, "Hey, that's great!" or somebody who says "very nice"? Do you like to share good news with somebody who's really going to get excited, or with someone who says, "Ho hum"? Those shepherds got excited. They realized that God had come to earth, and they grasped the meaning of it. The problem with us is that so often we are bored with Christmas. We have heard the story so many times, and the jingle of the bells grates on our ears, and it just isn't fresh, and we don't grasp the life-transforming truth that we are celebrating the invasion of Planet Earth by God Almighty! And the shepherds rejoiced. They celebrated. The response of the shepherds was

CELEBRATION. They got excited!

My opinion is that God is bored with an awful lot of churches. He thinks, "Can't you folk come up with something better than that?" So, let's put some heart into Christmas. Enjoy it! Celebrate it! We try to create an atmosphere of celebration here at Faith, because that's what God wants in worship. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord'" (Psalm 122:1, King James Version).

I heard about a lady who was in a little church visiting for the first time, and in the middle of a song she started clapping along with the music; and an usher came up to her and said, "Lady, you're going to have to be quiet." And she said, "OK." But when another hymn was sung, she started clapping again, and the usher approached her once more and said, "Lady, you're going to have to be quiet, or you'll have to leave." And she said, "Well, I'm sorry, but I'm just so happy in the Lord!" "Well," he said, "you certainly didn't get it here!"

The angels celebrated, and the shepherds celebrated, and God chose those shepherds to hear the good news because He knew they would rejoice. Do you know something? I think it's even more appropriate to sing about Christmas than it is to speak about it, because it's such a time of joy. Perhaps that is why the wonderful old Christmas carols have such a perennial appeal.

4. What about the Wise Men, or the "Wise Guys" as one little boy called them? Why did God choose them? There are a couple of misconceptions about the Wise Men. In the first place, they didn't make it there the first night. They came "from Eastern lands" the Bible says (Matthew 2:1, Living Bible). And it says that when these Wise Men arrived, Jesus was "a little boy." And they went to His "house." They didn't come to the stable that night even though we put them there in our manger scene. They came later, because it took them about two years to get there - it was such a great distance.

Another misconception is that there were only three of them. In fact, we don't know how many of them there were. The Bible doesn't tell us. All it says is that there were three gifts, so people have assumed. - three gifts, three Wise Men.

Now, why did God choose the Wise Men to come to Jesus? Why did He let them get involved? I think it was because of their DEDICATION. It took them a long time to find Jesus. They searched for Him. They followed that star unflinchingly. Perhaps some of you have been searching for Jesus for months, or maybe even for years. "Nah, I've tried everything. I've tried the therapies; I've tried the seminars; I've read the books and listened to the tapes. I've tried this church and that -- and I haven't found the answer to life." And you've been searching.

I think God got the Wise Men involved because of their dedication. Look what it says happened when they came. It says, "When they saw the child... they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and incense and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11). God chose those Wise Men because they gave their best to Jesus. They were dedicated.

Now that was the first Christmas, 2,000 years ago. What about Christmas 1991? That was

their response. What is your response going to be in 1991? If you want to make your Christmas different this year, I'll tell you how - make the same four responses that those people made that first Christmas. "Advent attitudes" you may call them - getting it in gear, making the right response. Let me briefly give you four things you can do this Christmas to make it special:

1. Like Mary, make this commitment, "I will meditate on God's Word." That was Mary's response. Luke 2:51 says, "She treasured all these things in her heart." That simply means that she reflected on them; she meditated on them; she hid them in her heart; she thought deeply about them. The Psalmist, in speaking to the Lord, says, "I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You" (119:1). That is the best treasure (God's Word), in the best place (in my heart), for the best purpose (that I might not sin against God).

You know, folks, sometimes we're so busy watching Christmas specials on TV that we don't take time to read the Bible! And if there's one thing I want to do this morning, it's this: I want to challenge you to set aside a quiet time each day during this Advent season, a time when you will be quiet before the Lord as you meditate upon the written Word, so that Christ, the living Word may speak to your soul. Listen to Him in Scripture and talk to Him in prayer.

Sometimes we're just in so much of a hurry! Tell me, when God wants to talk to you, does He get the busy signal? Or does He find that you've put Him on hold?! Someone says, "God never speaks to me." Maybe it's because you're not listening. Maybe it's because you're too busy and don't take the time to listen. Say with Mary, "I will meditate on God's Word."

2. And then, like Joseph, say, "I will cooperate with God's will" - no matter what that involves. Say, "Lord, any time, anyplace, anywhere, I want to have the attitude Joseph had. I want to do what You want me to do." Read these verses with me: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths" (Proverbs 3:5,6).

I heard about a pastor who was invited to preach one Sunday in a black church, and just before he was to deliver the message, the choir got up and sang a beautiful song entitled, "Yes, Lord, Yes!" There were just the three words, "Yes, Lord, Yes." And they sang it, "Yes, Lord, Yes!" and it built up into a tremendous crescendo, until finally they were really belting it out, "Yes, Lord, Yes!" And the choir sat down, and the host pastor got up and said, "Now, Lord, You've heard our answer in advance. Now just tell us what you want us to do"; and he introduced the preacher.

That's the attitude that God wants us to have, the attitude of Joseph who said, "You know, God, I don't know what this is all about; I don't know what You're doing to me; this situation just doesn't make sense, but I'm going to cooperate with Your will. I'm going to go along with what You're planning to accomplish in and through our family."

And in an act of faith and commitment you and I can and should say, "Lord in 1992 I don't want to hassle You. I don't want to resist You. I want to be more sensitive to what You want me to do with my life."

And, how about the shepherds? What can we learn from them?

3. Like the shepherds, say, “I will celebrate God’s presence.” Folks, God is in heaven, but He is also here with you! The angels told those shepherds, “Today a Savior has been born to you!” and by the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit those men understood that God had come to earth; He had stormed the beaches of time! And their response was that they glorified and praised God! (see Luke 2:8-20).

The Psalmist says to the Lord, “Your presence fills me with grief” - No. “Your presence fills me with joy!” (16:11, Good News Bible). Do you want to be happy? I’ll tell you how. Develop an awareness that God is with you every single moment. You are never alone!

You’ve all heard of that famous 17th century Christian, Brother Lawrence. After a career as a soldier, he entered the Carmelite order at age 44 and was employed as a cook in the monastery where he learned to live a life of almost constant awareness of God’s presence. And the book he wrote, The Practice of the Presence of God has for long been a classic in the literature of Christian devotion.

We too must learn to celebrate God’s presence in our lives. The most joyful people I know are the people who are in touch with the Lord on a constant basis. They have a direct line to headquarters. They realize, “I’m never alone!” Look at Psalm 23:4 (Good News Bible): “Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for You are with me!”

Why is it that at Christmas time some people go through major depression? I think one of the reasons is that often they’re lonely. And yet the Bible says that if you’re a believer, you’re never totally alone. God is with us! That is the meaning of our Lord’s most beautiful title -- “EMMANUEL” (Matthew 1:23).

Now what about the Wise Men? What can I learn from them? Well,

4. Like the Wise Men, say, “I will dedicate my best to Christ.” I’m going to give Him all I’ve got during the days and years ahead.”

Have you ever seen those catalogs that are put out for “the person who has everything?” What do you give Jesus for His birthday? Have you ever thought about that? What do you give the Person Who’s got everything? There are three things that Jesus does not have, and you can give them. to Him this Christmas.

- You can give Him your time. He doesn’t have your time unless you give it to Him. So, won’t you say, “Lord, I’m going to make as much time as possible for You in my schedule each day, to get to know You better through Bible study and prayer, to witness for You as opportunity arises, and to live for You so that others may be drawn to You through me.”

- You can give Him your talents to be used in any way He sees fit.

- And you can give Him your treasures, just as the Wise Men did. “Lord, this is Yours.

You gave it to me in the first place, and I gladly return to You that portion that costs me something.” Give Him your very best! As Paul so beautifully expressed it, “Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to His service and pleasing to Him” (Romans 12:1, Good News Bible).

You know, there were some people that first Christmas who heard about Jesus’ birth, but they didn’t have the attitude of contemplation, or cooperation, or celebration, or dedication.

- Think of King Herod. His attitude was intimidation. He was scared to death of Jesus! And yet, the first thing the angels said when they came to earth to announce Jesus’ birth was, “Fear not!” (Luke 2:10). Do you know that there are 365 “Fear not’s” in the Bible? - that’s one for every day of the year! Do you get the message? Don’t be afraid! Jesus came to earth to save us, not to scare us.

- And then there was the innkeeper. His attitude was one of irritation --“I’m too busy. I don’t have time to seek out accommodation for these people. It doesn’t fit my schedule.”

Erma Bombeck was standing in line at a store at Christmas time, and a lady in front of her said, “My birthday is on Christmas Day.” And she was lamenting the fact that it was such a hassle having her birthday and Christmas at the same time, and another lady in the line said, “Thank God, I don’t know anybody else whose birthday is on Christmas.” And Erma Bombeck said, “Thank God, I do!”

What are you going to give Jesus for His birthday this year? Give Him your time, your talents, your treasure, your life! The Bible says that after the Wise Men had seen Jesus, they were warned in a dream not to go back to King Herod in Jerusalem, so they went home “another way.” You know, once you’ve been with Jesus, you can never be the same again, you can never go back the same way you’ve always gone. You’re on an entirely new road!

AMEN.