

## **The Full Christmas Story.** (slide.1)

As Mark shared last week, we are using this Advent season to look at the multi-faceted nature Christ's kingship. Today we're looking at Jesus as our Future King who promised to return and to usher in what Scripture calls "the new heavens and new earth." Jim and Kimberly already read our verses, so let's begin today by looking to our Lord in prayer (slide/black.2).

I suppose it's no surprise to any of us that, of all the *Christian* holidays, the one holiday the world around us is most attracted to is Christmas. That's especially true in the West. And yes, our culture gets a lot of things wrong—things like (slide.3) Frosty, Rudolf, Bob Ross Chia Pets, round-the-clock Hallmark movies, and Taylor Swift's version of "Santa Baby." These aren't all horrible. But even the best of them falls well below the scope of the Christmas story as told to us in the pages of Scripture. On the other hand, whether intentionally or not, there are at least a few things the world around us gets right (or at least close to being right)—things like (slide.4) shepherds, angels, the manger, the stars in the sky, and especially the last five minutes of the "Charlie Brown Christmas Special." It's no secret that (slide/black.5) our culture embraces Christmas in a way that it has never embraced Good Friday or Easter Sunday or the Ascension. And I guess the reason why is because most of the world around us sees Christmas as something that is affirming. For much of our culture, Christmas is all about love, and goodwill, and human potential, and what we imagine to be the *best* about ourselves. So because of that, the story is limited to the manger, and that stary night, and those well-scrubbed animals.

But as we look at the Christmas story in Scripture, we see something bigger. Zechariah (slide.6) speaks of Christ's birth as the fulfillment the holy prophets and of the covenant He gave to Abraham. Mary (slide.7) speaks of the birth as God's work of justice and mercy as the proud are humbled and the humble are exalted. As Mark shared last week (slide.8), even Simeon, while holding baby Jesus in his arms, points to the crucifixion and speaks of the sword that would pierce Mary's soul—a sword that would include her seeing her Son ridiculed, scourged, crucified, and killed.<sup>1</sup> What do we see in the telling of the Christmas story? *We see allusions and foreshadows pointing to the rest of the story* (slide/black.9).

What happened in a manger in Bethlehem,  
and in the streets of Galilee,  
and on a hill called Golgotha,  
and in a borrowed tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea,  
are brought together as one continual act.

They are (in a sense) the evening and morning of the same day. They point, not only to Christ's birth—but also to His life, death, and resurrection. Furthermore, they point to the promise of Christ's second coming, to His return. For those who follow Christ, *this too* is part of the telling of the Christmas story.<sup>2</sup>

And we see this even in the songs we sing during this time of year. For example, earlier in our service we sang (slide.10) *O Come, O Come Immanuel*. Now when we did that, we were not praying for Jesus to show up for the first time. We're well aware that this already happened some 2,000 years ago. Yet the words do double duty. They harken back to the longing of the people of ancient Israel, but they also reflect our own longing and our own sense of captivity and exile. The words reflect our desire for the return of Jesus, and for the healing and redemption of the world, and for His peace and righteousness to reign. The song points to the past, but it also points to the future. It points to the *first* coming of Christ, but also points to His *second* coming. It reminds us *who we are* in Christ, but it also reminds us *what we are to become*. And the same is true, not only of this song, but of *many* of the other songs we've been singing (and will continue to sing) throughout this Christmas season. And this is equally true with many of the verses that are traditionally associated with the Christmas season—in particular the verses read by Jim and Kimberly (slide/black.11).

## **Isaiah 65.**

The passage (slide.12) Jim read from is one of the very last chapters in the book of Isaiah. We read of the future fulfillment of God's covenant promises. It sounds like something out of a dream or a fantasy, but it's not. Through the "Suffering King" Mark spoke of last week, God promises the creation of new heavens and new earth. He also speaks of troubles and pain as things of the past to be forgotten. He (slide.13) then exhorts those reading to "be glad and to rejoice forever" in what God will create and speaks of the re-creation of a Jerusalem into something that will be "a delight." Furthermore (slide.14), God makes clear that this new earth/Jerusalem will be different. Where it was once a place of weeping and of crying, the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it "no more."<sup>3</sup>

This transformation will extend to the created order itself. Toward the end of the chapter we read that (slide.15) "*The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.*" Eden is restored as old enmities are gone, and fears are removed, and natures are changed.<sup>4</sup> Wolves and lions change their diets (which is good news for lambs), but not so good news for the (slide.16) serpent. The curse upon the serpent from (slide.17) Gen 3:14-15 is made complete as he is condemned, not only to crawl in the dust, but to eat only dust forevermore.<sup>5</sup> The peace,

the "shalom" God had promised since the beginning are made full and complete. Not simply the absence of conflict, but God's "shalom"—that sense of divine flourishing and wholeness as the world becomes what it was meant to be (slide/black.18).

## **Revelation 21.**

So then we get to the passage (slide.19) Kimberly read for us (we get to Revelation 21), and on the one hand it is a reboot and a fulfillment of Isaiah 65. But there's also more taking place. Like Isaiah, John is using symbolic language, yet the description is of something physical. Nowhere in Scripture do we see the culmination of the Christian life as an escape from the material world. Nowhere do we see a final destiny consisting of an amorphous, non-material, celestial world of disembodied ghosts sitting on clouds and strumming harps. After all, from "page one" of our Bibles we read of a God who both created a literal, tangible, physical world and pronounced that same world "very good."<sup>6</sup>

Now the part about (slide.20) the sea being "no more" is a little odd. I don't think John is saying that God is not a fan of the beach. After all, God applied the same pronouncement of (slide.21) "good" to the sea (Gen 1:10) as He did the rest of His creation. And yet, in both the OT and in the ancient world as a whole, the sea was often depicted as a symbol of death and chaos. It was common for ancient maps to mark the borders of the known world with the words (slide.22) "Here Be Monsters." The language used is symbolic (slide.23). To say that there will be no sea is again another way of referring to the fullness of God's "shalom" in the new heavens and the new earth.

We then read of (slide.24) the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." The portrait is one of God and humanity, heaven and earth coming together as one. It's what we read of in the (slide.25) next passage as God pronounces from His throne the restoration of His dwelling place with man as He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and He will be their God. This is the overwhelming, over-the-top promise of the OT coming to fruition. A promise mentioned (not sporadically, not just here and there) but (slide.26) multiple times in Scripture—explicitly at least some thirty times, but implicitly, hundreds of times more.<sup>7</sup> It's the promise of God (slide.27) "tabernacling" with His people as heaven and earth kiss and the Genesis mandate declaring creation as "good" is restored. This is not a minor feature of the faith; this is what we are made for. After all, God does not want a relationship with us that is mechanical (as if all of life is a religious duty). Nor does He simply want us to marvel Him from afar (like a piece of theology on a whiteboard). No, He

wants to share His life with us. And in doing so, His future promise in this new heaven and new earth is the promise to (slide.28) wipe away every tear, and to get rid of death, and while He's at it, to get rid of mourning and crying and pain—*"for the former things have passed away."*

But it's more than that. We also read in (slide.29) verse 5 that Christ is *"making all things new."* It's true this is most fully realized at the end of the age, and Christ's second coming, but the verb is in the present tense. It speaks, not only of something that *will* someday happen, but of something that is taking place, even now.<sup>8</sup> (slide/black.30)

### **All Things New.**

Back in the late 1980s, around the time this church was planted, there was a huge restoration project in Rome. It concerned the (slide.31) ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Centuries of dirt, and grime, and soot, and smoke from candles and incense had built up. The paintings were cracked and chipped. Furthermore, there had been some awful attempts to fix Michelangelo's ceiling in ways that brought more harm than good. It reminds me a little of the silly (and sometimes stupid) things we do to supposedly "fix" our lives on our own.

It turns out some lesser artists pulled out their paintbrushes and tried to "touch up" Michelangelo's handiwork. Still others tried to preserve what remained by slapping thick coats of varnish on the ceiling. What may be the dumbest idea took place in the 1700s. Some genius got it into his head that you could clean the paintings on the ceiling *with red wine*. Obviously (much like our own lives when we try to do things on our own), not one of these attempts helped, and in fact made the ceiling even worse.

So a crew was assembled. The goal was to carefully clean the surface and remove the dirt and grime and grease. And that's what happened. And as that happened (slide.32) beautiful colors were revealed. But here's the weird part. Even though there were clear records dating back to the 1500s indicating that Michelangelo's original colors were in fact bright and vibrant and beautiful, there was this fear that the ceiling was being ruined. I guess people had grown used to the dirt. In fact, many wondered, "Maybe this (slide.33) is the way it's supposed to be; maybe this is what it's supposed to look like."<sup>9</sup> People had been living with the ceiling for so long that they could not imagine it looking differently.

And maybe we do the same thing. We get stuck. We begin to think that we're an accident/mistake. **But that's not true.** If you are in Christ, you are (slide.34) that painting. You are that art that will be resurrected and restored—and is being restored, even now. It's the (slide.35) **work of Christ** we read of in Rev 21:5, the declaration that He is "*making all things new.*" It's the (slide.36) **promise of Christ** we read of 2 Cor 4:17, Paul's assurance to us that, despite our circumstances, God by His grace is "*producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.*"

But this happens, not simply because you and I are "decent." No, if we examine our hearts and our actions, we realize that we're not decent at all (slide/black.37). Not really. We're jealous, and we're petty, and we're proud, and we're fearful and insecure. But God sends His Son. The Son of God leaves the beauty of eternity and instead puts on human flesh and is born in a manger. And He leaves the sweet aroma of heaven and instead smells the dung of cows and donkeys. And He removes the splendor of His heavenly robes and instead is wrapped in swaddling clothes, and later stripped naked and hung on a cross. And He does so for those He calls, for those who trust Him and behold the wonderous mystery. So with Isaiah (61:10) we can say (slide.38),

He has clothed me with garments of salvation  
and arrayed me in a robe of His righteousness,  
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

So unlike you and me, God doesn't lie about our human condition (slide/blank.39), but instead understands it and heals it, and *kisses* our brokenness and takes upon Himself our sin. And in exchange, He places upon us His righteousness. And He gives us a new song to sing—a song of two Advents. And Advent that *already* took place and Advent the one that has *not yet* taken place (at least not fully). Yet these two Advents shape us. And make us *who we are*, but they also make us *what we're becoming*.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> For the view that Simeon is including an allusion to Calvary, see John of Damascus, "Orthodox Faith 4.14," in *Luke*, ACCS, vol. III, 50; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 87-88; Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, WBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church Year* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 121; Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Time* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Pratt holds that the mention of infants and the aged in verses 20-24 are "poetic understatements expressing the unending life that will come at the climax of the restoration from exile." *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, ed. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1188. Motyer adds that the passage "is not meant to suggest that death will still be present. This would contradict *forever* (18), *no more* (19) and the death of death in 25:7-8. It simply affirms that, over the whole of life, the power of death will be gone." J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 450-451.

<sup>4</sup> J. Alec Moyter, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 531.

<sup>5</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Barron, "New Heavens, New Earth," *Word on Fire: Bishop Barron's Sunday Sermons*, 4/24/26; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 62;

<sup>7</sup> Gen 17:7; Ex 6:7; Ex 25:8; Ex 29:46; Ex 34:24; Deut 4:20; Deut 7:6; Deut 14:2; Deut 26:18; Deut 29:13; Lev 26:12; 2 Sam 7:24; 1 Kings 6:13; 1 Chron 17:22; Jer 7:23; Jer 11:4; Jer 24:7; Jer 30:22; Jer 31:33; Jer 32:38; Ezek 11:20; Ezek 14:11; Ezek 34:24; Ezek 36:28; Ezek 37:23; Hos 2:23; Zech 2:11; Zech 8:8; Zech 13:9.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 234.

<sup>9</sup> David Jeffery, "A Renaissance for Michelangelo," *National Geographic Magazine*, December 1989, 696-97.