

LOVE HAS COME

LOVE HAS COME // CHRISTMAS EVE

Luke 2:1-19 // Craig Smith

December 24, 2017

CRAIG: Merry Christmas.

I am so glad that you're here. So honored that you would give us this time together as we get ready to celebrate Christmas Day tomorrow. I also, if I'm gonna be completely honest, I'm also just a little bit intimidated because Christmas Eve is the hardest message of the year for a preacher. And I think it's because of the familiarity because we all kind of know the story, right? We all kind of come in here going, "I've sort of got this."

If I were to tell you today that Mary was a virgin, anybody here gonna be shocked? You've heard that? Yeah. How about if I said that when they got to Bethlehem, there was no room in the inn? Anybody gonna be like, "Whoa, plot twist, did not see that coming?" We know the story, right? This is an incredibly familiar story, but the problem is that the more familiar we are with something, the less impressed by it we are.

I mean, think about it, I remember years ago for the first time ever, I went to this website I'd heard about. It was called google.com. And I went there and I typed in something I was interested in, and I got like thousands of pages, thousands of pages of whatever it was I was looking for, and I was blown away but I was so impressed by that. That's not how I feel about Google today. Nowadays, my feeling is probably more summarized. It's like this. It's like, "Do I really have to open a web browser and go to Google and type in what I'm interested in? Couldn't Google just already know what I want and give it to me? Like what is this? The 1890s?" I'm not impressed anymore.

When was the last time you pulled your smartphone out and looked at it and went, "This thing is unbelievable?" No, most of us, even though we're carrying around more computing power than they used to put the men on the moon, most of us look at our phones and go, "I hate this thing. It's kind of slow sometimes." Right? See, the more impressed we are with something, the less...or the more familiar we are with something, the less impressed we are. And that's a problem when it comes to Christmas because Christmas is the most impressive thing ever. It should be.

I mean, think about it, that the God who made the universe, who simply dreamed up the entire cosmos and who flung stars across an expansive heaven, so vast, we can't even begin to wrap our heads around it, that God loved you and me so much that He came to earth to save us from our sins. That's either the silliest thing you've ever heard or the most significant thing you will ever hear. And yet the temptations go, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Angels, manger, Magi, frankincense. Tell me something I didn't know." And I can't. I can't.

Not and be faithful to the story that we're all here to celebrate. So maybe rather than trying to bring something new out of the Christmas story, let's do something a little different. Let's try to find our place in it. Let me set the stage. God loved us so much that He made us. I know that seems backward when we're talking about, "Well, God made us and then He loved us." No, no. God made you because He loved you. He made you so that He could love you. That's how much God loves you. His love for you actually called you into existence.

But out of His love for us, God gave us a choice, that is, we could do life with Him or we could do life without Him, and we chose and we choose on a daily basis to say, "Thanks very much, but I got this. I'm gonna do this thing on my own." And the Bible calls that choice to do life in disobedience and apart from our relationship with God, it calls it sin. And the reality is that that doesn't ever take us anywhere good. 2017 is filled with plenty of reminders that there's nothing good that comes from a life apart from God, right?



We've got mass shootings, we've got devastating hurricanes, we've got trusted political figures...well, okay, that may be an oxymoron, right? And we all laugh at that, but do you understand how sad it is that we laugh at that? It's so cliché that the people leading us can't be trusted, but that's sin. That's what sin has done to us. That's the world that sin has created. That's the world that we have created by our sin. It's not just them, it's us too. And the worst part is that not only is sin choose to walk away from God, but it drives us further and further from God because sin blinds us to the reality that so much of what we face is a result of our sin. So many of the problems and the pains and the struggles that we deal with are a result of living life apart from God, but sin blinds us to that reality, and it causes us to blame other people. It's him, or it's her, it's them, or it's those people. Maybe it's even God Himself, right?

And so our sin drives us away from God, but it doesn't drive God away from us. Our sin might drive us away from God, but it does not drive God away from us. That's the story of Christmas. It's the story of a God who loved us so much that from the moment that we sinned, from the moment that sin ruptured our religion, from the moment that the sound of the apple hitting the ground was still echoing in the garden, God was setting a course for Christmas. And the entire Bible, the entire Old Testament especially, is filled with promises with this resounding refrain from God that basically boils down to, "Hold on, love is coming. I'm not gonna leave you here. I'm not gonna leave you where you are. Love is coming." And in Christmas, we celebrate its arrival.

I'm gonna read the story of Christmas from Gospel of Luke Chapter 2. I'm gonna ask you to do something for me tonight, and that is I'd like you to listen to this familiar story with a little bit of a different lens. As I've said, I'm not gonna try to bring anything new out of the story, but I'm gonna ask you to find your place in it. As I read the story, as we encounter these different characters, my question to you is this, which of these characters is most like you?

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 while Quirinius was the governor of Syria. And everyone went to their own town to register. And 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 the line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. For today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

And suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace to those on whom His favor rests." Now, when the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem. Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and they found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in a manger. Now, when they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things, and she pondered them in her heart.

So where do you see yourself in the story? Who are you most like? Caesar Augustus? Anybody? Yeah, well, you think, "No, no, no, because he's the ruler of a vast empire." But honestly, his place in the story here is a little different. His only real place in this story is that he commanded the census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, right? The thing that strikes me the most about Caesar in this story is that he's clueless. He's clueless about this incredible thing that God is doing right under his nose. He has no idea. He might be mighty and powerful, he might be a big shot, but he has absolutely no idea what God is doing in his backyard. He's clueless.



And he's clueless because he's consumed. His mind is on other things. He's consumed by money, honestly, because that's the only reason that you command a census if you're an ancient Roman governor. You command a census because you wanna know how many people live in your empire so that you can make sure you're getting all of your tax dollars. He's consumed with money. And maybe that was a selfish thing, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe he was just leading to make sure he got all the money in because so he could run this empire. It's an expensive thing. So maybe he's just consumed with this thing that he's responsible for. We don't really know. All we really know is that he's consumed and clueless.

And maybe that's you, consumed and clueless. Maybe you're consumed by anxiety, fear, or money, or your career, or your family, or your parents, or "Keeping up with the Joneses" or your stuff. I mean, there's so many things that the world throws at us as, "Here it is. This is the thing. This is the thing that your eyes should be fixed on. This is the only important thing. This is what all your attention needs to be on." What happens is we become consumed by these things and we become clueless to the much more significant things that God is doing around us and longing to do in us.

So if that's you tonight, if you're consumed and clueless, then hear the word of God that says no matter what it is that's occupying your attention, no matter what else you're consumed, no matter how big it seems, it is insignificant compared to what God wants to do in your life. And honestly, to what God is probably already doing around you, but we often miss because some of the biggest things God does, He begins in the smallest ways.

Or maybe you're like Joseph. I feel for Joseph because Joseph, Joseph had a little bit of stress in his life, right? Anybody else here? I mean, if you think about Joseph, the poor guy, so he finds out his fiancée is pregnant, right? That's stressful. And she's like, "No, no, no, no, it's okay. It's God's." Okay. So either you're a terrible liar or you're crazy. That's stressful, but then an angel shows up and says, "No, no, she's telling the truth. She is pregnant but it's from God, but it's okay. It's just the Son of God." "What do you mean just a Son of God?" What? How am I...what? Huh?

Stress. And to make matters worse, it's not like the angel showed up and told everybody else the truth. So they all believed that Joseph and Mary are involved in a pretty scandalous situation, which is not good when you're trying to get a business started. He's a young carpenter trying to build clients out, but he's in the middle of a scandal. Nobody is thinking well of him, which by the way is why when he gets to Bethlehem because Caesar manages to screw everything up and order the census, he has to pack up and get to Bethlehem, is why when he gets to Bethlehem, he has to look for a room in an inn. We skim over that. It's just part of the story, right? It's a familiar part of the story. Yeah, there was no room in the inn. We don't ask, "Why was he looking in an inn?"

Remember, this is his hometown. This is the family home. There's all kinds of cousins and aunts and uncles, there should have been all kinds of homes that was over there. That's where he should have been staying but apparently, none of those homes are open to him because nobody is believing the story that he and Mary are telling about this child. So all those doors are closed. He has to look in an inn, and there's no room there. So he ends up in the barn. And of course, Mary decides to go into labor while she's in the barn. Have you ever been so stressed that some new stressful thing happens and your only response is, "Might as well." Have you ever been there? And that's Joseph that night, right? Yeah, why wouldn't you? Why wouldn't you give birth right now? Yeah, really, seriously, why would you not? It's perfect. Let's just do that.

This is a guy with a tremendous amount of stress in his life, right? But at the same time, the picture I get of Joseph is that he's steadfast, like it keeps piling on but he just keeps going, "I'm gonna do the right thing. I'm gonna provide. I'm gonna protect. I'm just gonna keep moving. I'm gonna keep going forward." So that's Joseph. He's stressed but he's steadfast. And maybe that's you. Maybe you're stressed but steadfast. The obligations seem to keep piling up, the pressures and responsibilities seem to keep piling on, but you're the dependable one, right? You're the one that everybody counts on. You're the one that your family knows they can always count on, the people can come to and you're gonna take care of them, you're gonna provide, you're gonna protect, you're gonna keep going on. You're gonna keep going forth. You're gonna be steady and steadfast no matter how stressful it might get. And that's great. That's great.



The only problem is that steadfast people have a tendency to start to believe that it's really all on their shoulders. That they really have to carry the burden alone, and if they don't, it's not gonna get taken care of. If I'm not the one who did it, who's gonna do it? And so steadfast people have a really hard time letting God carry their burdens. And yet, this child that Joseph was so steadfast in providing for and protecting, this was the same child, the same God, who grew up to say this, He said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

These steadfast people have a hard time letting God do exactly what He came for, just to bear our burdens because we feel like it's all on us, and I say "we" because that's where I am in the story, like I get Joseph. But if you're like me, if you're stressed and steadfast, then you need to hear the voice of the Lord saying tonight, "It's not on you. It's not all on your shoulders. Let me bear your burdens. It's why I came."

Or maybe you're the shepherds. You know, again, we get so familiar with the story that we lose track of how weird it is that shepherds were the first ones to greet baby Jesus, right? Because they're not really the appropriate first visitors for a king. Like it should have been the Magi, right? It should have been the foreign dignitaries with their fancy gifts. They are the ones who should have gotten their first. But if I understand the timeline that the Gospel of Matthew gives us, it was probably a year, maybe as many as two years before the Magi actually showed up. And I know that messes up all the nativity scenes.

But the truth is that it wasn't foreign dignitaries with fancy gifts. The truth is that it was shepherds who were invited to greet Jesus first. And shepherds have no gifts to bring, right? I mean, I'm sure they brought some stuff in, it was just...it wasn't stuff anybody wanted. Many had dirt caked on their clothes from sleeping in the fields. They probably had much less pleasant stuff caked on their feet. They didn't bring any frankincense but I guarantee you, they brought some powerful aromas in as they crowded into that manger. And I always guarantee you that at least one of these sort of rough and unkempt people that had crowded into the barn and saw that there really was a baby in a feeding trough, I guarantee you one of them went, "Holy Beep... This is crazy."

Because, see, the thing is they're not polished people. They're not guys that have it all together. In fact, in the ancient world, shepherds were...they were considered the humble. Not in the sense that they were full of humility, but in the sense that they were considered lowly. They're the ones who didn't quite measure up. They're the ones that, "Yeah, you're doing an important job, but if you could just do it back there, if you could just do it out of sight, that'd be great because you know what? You make me a little uncomfortable. Your life is not quite together. You're rough around the edges. You're just not quite up to the standards." That was the shepherds. They were humble.

But they were also hopeful. I mean, they get this incredible invitation to go see what God has done, and I love the way that Luke says it, he says that they hurried off. They didn't saunter off. They hurried off. They went quick and I can't help but wonder if that wasn't at least partly because they were afraid maybe the invitation had been misdirected. They're probably thinking, "We're not the ones who should have gotten that invitation, but we're gonna go on still good." Because they were hopeful that even though I'm sure they thought, "It doesn't make any sense that God would invite people like us to greet His Messiah," they were hopeful enough to go but just maybe. Maybe it's all true. Maybe the invitation is real. Maybe God really is inviting people like us to go and say, "Hello and welcome to the world."

So maybe that's you. Maybe you're humble but hopeful. Maybe you're very familiar with that feeling that says, "I'm not good enough. I don't measure up. I don't have it all together like him or her or like those people. I don't quite meet the standards. My life is kind of a mess." By the way, if that's how you feel, welcome to the church because that's how we all feel. I mean, sometimes we're pretty good at putting on the image to make it look like we've got it all together, but the reality is the church is made up of a whole bunch of people who are constantly wondering if they're good enough, and afraid somebody is gonna find out that they're not.



And honestly, if we're honest, afraid that maybe God is gonna come to His senses and realize that we're not good enough. So we keep trying, but the thing is God doesn't come for perfect people. Do you understand that? Like if we had it all together, if we were perfect, we wouldn't have Christmas. God doesn't come for perfect people, God comes to perfect people. Do you hear me? He doesn't come for perfect people, He comes to perfect people. He comes to meet us where we are and to change us into what He dreamed us up to be and what we always longed to be. We can't ever get there but He can take us there. That's what He came for.

And so if you're here tonight and you're familiar with that feeling that, "I'm not good enough," my question to you is, "But are you hopeful enough to ask the question, could it all be true? Could it be that this God that everybody says loves me actually does? Not just me in a generic sense but me, messed up me, really loves me?" If you need to hear the Word of God that says, "Yes, yes, He loves you."

Or maybe you're Mary. I'd like to be Mary, honestly. Not in the sense of what she was called to do but in the sense of how willing she was to do it, to go through with it. Like her willingness challenges me. I long to be that willing to say yes to whatever God asks me. And what He asked her to do was hard, right? I mean, an angel shows up and says, "Hey, good news, you're pregnant." "That's not good news." "It's the son of God." "This is getting worse. This makes no sense." "And He's gonna save your people from their sins. He's gonna save all people from their sins."

How do I raise a child to do that? What does it look like to be mother to your maker, right? How do I do this? And yet, what she said after the angel gave her this very scary request was, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." That's her response. She gets this incredibly scary call and her response is basically, "Okay, I'm God's girl. Let's do this thing." And she's willing. I love that about her. But don't think for a second that just because she was willing doesn't mean she didn't have questions. And don't think for a second it didn't mean that she wasn't wrestling with that. She was.

It's interesting to me that as the story closes, the shepherds go off and they tell everybody and everybody is amazed, and then we're told, "But Mary treasured up all these things." And I want you to notice that "but." She says, "But Mary treasured up all these things, not and, not the shepherds were amazed, everybody was amazed, and Mary was doing this." No, it's, "Everyone is amazed, but Mary." There's a note of sort of disquiet to it. There's a little bit of an unsettledness to it. There's a sense that this is difficult. She treasured up these things and we're told that she pondered them in her heart.

Now, the word pondered, it doesn't mean to think about casually. It means to wrestle with. It means to think deeply about... this is a girl who was willing but she was also wrestling. She's going, "God, what does this mean? Why are you doing it this way? How can I, and what are you?" And she's wrestling with all of that. That's Mary. She's willing but she's wrestling. Or she's wrestling but she's willing, and I don't know which one comes first but they are mixed together for her. And she keeps moving forward, she keeps trusting God.

And maybe that's you. You're wrestling. Maybe you're wrestling with the circumstances you're in right now, and you're wrestling with why God would have you in this particular place because you don't wanna be there but He hasn't released you yet. Or you're wrestling with something that He's called you to do that's hard, and honestly, you don't wanna do it and you don't know why He's calling you to do it, and you don't know how you're gonna do it. Or maybe you're wrestling with why God hasn't done something for you that you sure thought He would have done by now. And you're familiar with this wrestling.

And my question is, but are you willing to mix in the willing part? It's okay to wrestle, but it's when we're willing to trust God in spite of the wrestling that we find ourselves getting to the place where we have the answers that we long for. And I'm not telling you that it's a shortcut. Trusting God is not a shortcut to clarity. Sometimes, He takes us through some pretty roundabout country in the process of getting to those answers we're looking for but trusting God is the only way to get to the place where those answers that we long for are given.



I mean, Mary understands all that. She had these questions at Christmas, but honestly, her Christmas questions paled in significance to the questions she must have been asking when she found herself at the cross, don't you think? That moment when she saw this child that God had given her, who'd grown into this man that...and she saw. She saw what God was doing. She saw Him gathering huge crowds of people. She saw Him doing miracles and she was like, "This is it. This is what I was waiting for God. Now it's coming." And then she saw her child taken and nailed to a cross? At that point, the questions must have been so much bigger than the questions she had back in the barn, right?

At that moment, she's going, "God, it can't end this way. When are you gonna fix this? When are you gonna split these guys and come in and keep this from happening? God, what are doing? When are you...why would you...?" And then she watched that last breath go out and not be drawn in again. And she watched her child die. The questions then had to be just enormous. And yet, she was still willing. She continued to move forward. She continued to trust, which is why three days later, she stood outside of an empty grave. Her risen Son stood beside her and she went, "Oh, that's what you were doing, God. That's what this was all about? That's what the plan was all along?"

It was there at the empty grave that she got the answer to the question. Like the question that we all find ourselves asking, that we all have to find an answer to at some point. It's the question that says, "Hey God, do you really love me? I mean, I know I've heard that you do, and maybe I can believe in about them or there, but do you really love me? Do you really love the consumed and clueless me? Do you really love the stressed but the steadfast me? The humble but the hopeful? The wrestling? Do you really love me?"

And it was there that we get the answer to that question. We hear God say, "Do I love you? Yes. Yes, I love you. Would you like to know how much?" "Yes please." "I love you from heaven to earth. I love you from Christmas to the cross. I love you from swaddling clothes to grave shrouds. I love you from life to death and then back to life again. Yes, I love you." See, that's Christmas. It's the announcement that that love has come. It's a love that's not so much within our reach as a love that is reaching out for us. It's a love that we celebrate at Christmas, not just the infant King born in the barn, but that same King's passionate relentless longing to love us in a way that would change everything if only we will let Him. If only we'll let Him love us.

And you go, "How do I do that?" And the answer is, it's a gift. It's a gift. How do we deal with any gift? Thank you. We accept it, right? I mean, some of you are gonna open some presents tomorrow unless you go crazy and open them all tonight, right? And when somebody hands you a gift, you don't reach for your wallet and go, "Let me pay you for that." We don't go, "Let me earn that. Let me go do some things." When somebody hands you a gift, you just accept it, right? You say thank you.

If you're here today and you have never accepted the gift of God's love, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of eternal life, there's absolutely no reason why you can't accept that gift tonight right now. In fact, let me ask everybody, just bow your heads and pray with me. And if you're here tonight and you've never accepted the gift of forgiveness, the gift of eternal life that God wants to give you, that that Child came to the barn to give you, that that Child went to the cross to give you, that that Child rose from the grave to give you, if you're ready to accept that gift tonight, you simply say this to Him in your heart. You say, "God, thank you for loving me enough to send Your Son. Jesus, thank you for loving me enough to come for me. Thank you for loving me enough to go to the cross in my place to forgive my sins. Thank you for rising from the dead to offer me new life. I need your forgiveness. I need your love. And so I accept them. Come into my life, take your place on the throne, and let me begin a new relationship with you. Thank you. Amen." Merry Christmas.

AUDIENCE: Merry Christmas.

