

## “Christmas?”

Last Saturday evening our friend Jim Prescott made the observation to me that the swaddling cloths used to wrap Jesus after His birth were essentially the same sort of cloths that were used to wrap up His crucified body for burial after His death. The symmetry of that thought struck me and got me thinking. I wondered what other similarities might there be? Are there other things at Jesus' birth that reappear at His death and Resurrection?

As I thought about this question, I began to see a definite pattern. I thought of the stable. The real stable where Jesus was born and laid in a manger was certainly not the kind of stable we see in our typical manger scenes. The wooden stable that we see in most nativity sets is the product of our western European ancestors, who interpreted "stable" in light of stables common in England, France, and Germany in the middle ages. But if you make the trip to Bethlehem today and go to visit the place of Jesus' birth, guess where you end up? You end up in a cave. And, whether or not it is the exact cave that served as the stable where Jesus was born, His stable was no doubt in a cave just like it.

Now we see the connection: Jesus was born in one cave adapted for use as a stable and buried in another cave adapted for use as a tomb. And, the manger; it could have been free standing, but just as likely and perhaps more than likely it was a naturally occurring shelf in the cave or dug into the wall of the cave. So, Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in the manger just as He would be wrapped in burial cloths and laid on a ledge in the tomb.

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Next, I thought about the shepherds and sheep, which came to see Jesus at His birth. I asked the question: "Why shepherds and sheep?" The answer came back, "Jesus was the lamb of God, given to take away the sins of the world. Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger because He was destined to be the Passover lamb, the "lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

I thought about the gifts brought later by the wise men. They brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And, I remembered that Jesus was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver and that fragrant spices were used in the preparation of His body for burial. Myrrh in particular was one of the primary spices used to prepare the bodies for entombment.

The women bringing spices to anoint the body of Jesus reminded me of Jesus' mother Mary. I thought of Mary experiencing the pain of labor and delivery when Jesus was born and the greater pain of watching His agony on Golgotha's cross and of participating in His burial.

There is a lot to think about here, isn't there? And there are probably some things I've missed. There was the star that appeared when He was born and the solar eclipse that occurred when He died. There was Gabriel telling Mary that her child would be called "the Son of God," matched by the testimony of the Roman Centurian at the cross, saying "surely this man was the Son of God." Are you beginning to get the picture?

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Last but not least there were Angels. There were angels to announce His coming and His birth. Gabriel came to Mary and an angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream. Angels comforted Jesus at the conclusion of His temptation in the wilderness that was at the beginning of His ministry. Angels reappear at the tomb to announce His resurrection. The life and ministry of Jesus are book-ended by Angels.

The proper translation of the Greek word for angel is "messenger." And, it seems to me that the question we need to ask this morning is "What is the message? What are the angels and the multitude of other similarities found at the beginning and end of Jesus' sojourn on earth telling us? What is this all about after all?" What meaning does this shed on "Christmas?"

There is another connection between Jesus' birth and death, a connection of water and blood, the water and blood shed at His birth and the water and blood that flowed from Him on the cross. The message of the angels and the message of coinciding events are confirmed by the message of the water and the blood. We are reminded by all of these things of the simple and extraordinary truth that Jesus came to die. The statement in John 3:16 reaches in both directions: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" to be born into the world, and "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" to die on the cross.

What I am pointing out to you this morning is that there is no division between the one event and the other. We can't just love the baby Jesus without also wrapping our arms around the bruised, battered, and crucified Savior. The baby Jesus without the crucified Jesus has no meaning. **If He were only born for us, without dying for us, we have no Savior. Without His death, we are still in our sins and totally without hope.**

The apostles knew how important it was that Christians should keep these events intimately connected. That's why we have so many things in the gospels' accounts of Jesus' birth that connect to Jesus' death. The Symmetry is intentional and part of the message. This is also the reason the church fathers from long ago thought it crucial to speak of the birth and death of Jesus in the same sentence.

The very word "Christmas," tells the story. It's made up of two words: "Christ" and "Mass." "Christ" means messiah, and/or savior; and "Mass" refers to the Eucharist, the liturgical celebration of His death, which is Holy Communion. Interestingly, there is nothing in the word "Christmas" that even remotely refers to Jesus' birth; rather, all the words in "Christmas" point us toward His sacrificial death.

Now why am I telling you all of this and going on about this? I'm telling you this and going on about this because **this is the gift of Christmas**, and until we have received Jesus as the Christ who died as the penalty for our sins, we have not received this most important of all gifts. O, we may have had some warm

and fuzzy feelings, shed some sentimental tears, and even found an extra spurt of generosity during this season, but unless and until we have accepted His body and blood given as the sacrifice to save us, we've not gotten near to the heart of Christmas. It's not enough to make room for the baby, we also need to make room for the man dying on the cross. It would be the greatest of tragedies if we should open all our Christmas gifts this year and leave the one that really matters, God's gift, unopened. **Without Him the rest of it has no meaning.**

The question I have for us this morning is this: Have you received God's gift? Have you invited the Christ who died for you to come into all your life and be Lord of all? Have you confessed to Him your sins and believed in Him for His forgiveness? Have you asked Him fill you with the Holy Spirit to empower you to live a life pleasing to Him? Have you committed to live as His disciple?

No one can truly celebrate "Christmas" until he or she has personally received the sacrifice and Lordship of Jesus Christ. Are you ready to celebrate Christmas? The one born to Bethlehem's manger is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Have you received Him?

## The Fourth Street Church of God

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Sermon for December 23, 2007

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**Luke 2:15-35**

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