

# The Reason For It

Good to see you guys. If you have your bibles, turn with me to Luke 2. It is our last Gathering before Christmas (we're gonna take next week off) so I thought we'd spend some time looking at a very traditional Christmas passage: the story of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Luke. While you're turning there, just out of curiosity, who has their Christmas shopping entirely *finished*? You guys are the best of us, way to go. Next question, who has their Christmas tree up? Okay, *keep* your hand up if you had your Christmas tree up since *before* Thanksgiving? I love it. You know what—you do you. I know I hate on you over-eager Christmas fans sometimes, but you know what? There's a lot of awful stuff going on in the world right now. So if you want to put up your Christmas tree in November, or October, or late July—you just do what you need to do. Make it happen. The rest of us will get over it.

The point is that we are getting awfully close to Christmas. And so we're going to talk some about the very first Christmas. We've been in this series the past few weeks called *Give Like God*. And in it, we've been talking about how God's generosity towards us, leads to our own generosity towards others—how that's the way it was supposed to work. And so each week, we've spent the *bulk* of our time talking about how we as followers of Jesus should think about our money and our possessions, and then a *little* time talking about God's generosity towards us in sending Jesus. **We've spent most of our time each Sunday talking about *our* generosity, and then *some* time talking about *God's* generosity to us.** But this week, I want to flip things around. **I want us this morning to talk almost the entire time about God's generosity towards us through Jesus.**

And for *that*, we're going to look at a very classic Christmas passage. Now I want to make one request of you as we read this story today: **I want to ask you to not *assume* you already grasp the details of this story.** I know for me personally, it takes some intentional effort to not just skim the details of stories like this, simply because I've heard them and seen them depicted so much. But what I've found is that when I take the time to slow down and pay attention to the details, I feel like I catch something new each time I read it. So I want to ask you to try and do that with me this morning—can we attempt, as much as we can, to hear this thing with fresh ears?

Okay, let's take a look at Luke 2, starting in v. 1:

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that **all the world should be registered.** [2] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And all went to be registered, each to his own town. [4] **And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, [5] to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.***

So in some ways, much like we do today, there would periodically be a *census* (or, “registration”) taken. This was how the government make decisions, decide how to tax their people, and so forth. But back then, **you had to go back to your hometown in order to be registered for the census.** So Joseph, whose family line was from the city of Bethlehem, goes back to that town.

At the time, he was essentially engaged to a woman to a woman named Mary, who was currently pregnant. Although—*plot twist!*—the baby she was carrying was *not*, in fact, Joseph's. *That* must've been a

*festive* little discussion for them to have when Joseph found out about it. But as the story goes, it wasn't that Mary had been *unfaithful* to Joseph, but rather that she was with child "through the Holy Spirit." Which if you're Mary, is either a very *desperate lie* to tell, or it's the truth. In this case, it was the truth. So **at this point in the story, Joseph has decided *not* to break things off with Mary despite all of that, so she is traveling to Bethlehem with Joseph for the census.**

So here go Joseph and pregnant Mary, most likely with pregnant Mary riding on a donkey or some other type of animal, to Bethlehem. For the women in the room that have been pregnant before, when you were getting to that second and third trimester, weren't you just thinking, almost on a daily basis, *what I wouldn't give to be traveling through the desert aboard an animal about now?* That's every expecting mother's dream isn't it? So we're just a handful of verses into the story, and things are just pure chaos. **A couple finding out they were pregnant out of wedlock, in a hyper-conservative society, and then having to up and travel at least a full day's journey to a city where (we're about to find out) they had no real place to stay.** It's hard for me to imagine a more chaotic way to have a baby. Some of you are getting stressed out just *thinking* about it. I am too.

Now, this tells us something about the way God works, does it not? I think if we're not careful, we can start to get the impression that God works mainly in the neat and tidy, in the lives of people who are completely put together. That God can mainly be found in the midst of moral, respectable, squeaky clean types of situations. I mean, "God helps those who help themselves," right? Wrong. Very, very wrong. There's nothing wrong with being moral, there's nothing wrong with having some structure to your life. **But if you believe that God *only* works in those types of settings, the Bible is going to be a very *confusing* read for you.** Have you *read* the book of Genesis? I don't know if there's a single major character in that book who we would consider to be a moral example to follow. Because this is a book chock full of people who had serious issues, serious *chaos* in their life, and God used them in *incredible* ways. What you'll find in the Scriptures is that **God does some of his best work in the midst of *chaos*.** And so if your life is chaotic, if your life is messy, that doesn't disqualify you. In fact, judging by *most* of the bible, it might to *qualify* you.

And into *this* chaotic situation, God sends Jesus. Take a look with me in v. 6:

*[6] And while they were there, **the time came for her to give birth.** [~~In case things weren't chaotic enough already~~] [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and **laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.***

So Jesus, the king of the world is born, and is laid in a manger. In case you didn't know, "manger" is a much nicer way of saying "animal's feeding trough." Now, most likely Jesus *wasn't* born in a *barn*—I'm so sorry if I just ruined that visual for some of you. Most likely what this passage means is that no one's *guest house* was available because so many people were in town for the census. So Mary and Joseph had to stay in the main room of someone's *house*. But there *were animals* there—hence the manger. It's weird for us to think about today, but animals were often permitted to stay inside with the rest of the family. So even though it wasn't a barn the way we think of it, **you can rest assured that many of the sights and sounds were still very much barn-like.**

...as well as the *smells*. So, just to make sure you're imagining this correctly—I really want you guys to get the true Christmas experience—have you ever been to the *farm animal* section of a zoo? Have you ever

tried to *breathe oxygen* in the farm animal section of a zoo? It's not the *easiest* thing to do. Now, have you ever been in such a farm animal section of a zoo, with the types of substances those animals *generate*, and then thought to yourself, "this seems like an appropriate place for human childbirth."? So I know we like our cute decorative nativity scenes, but can we acknowledge for just a second how incredibly *uncute* this situation would have been? A crowded house, where there were likely *way* too many people, likely only *one room* for all of those people to share, dirt floors, and *animals*. This was not cute. This was *miserable*. This is a pregnant woman's nightmare.

And yet, this is precisely the setting that Jesus, the savior of the world, God in the flesh, is born into. **This is the way God sends Jesus. He enters the world in the midst of chaos, and dirt, and tight quarters, and discomfort, and unideal circumstances.**

Okay, in the next verse, the scene shifts a little. Continuing on in Luke 2, v. 8:

*[8] And in the same region there were **shepherds out in the field**, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

Shepherds, if you're wondering, were not people of *social status* in these days. They were generally loners, they lived off the land, and among the animals. And often, they had a reputation for being at least a little bit *shady*. So in a nativity production, it's *fine* to have *kids* play the shepherds. But it actually would be a role *better played* by the guy who sells watches out of his trench coat on the subway. So here we have the shepherds of questionable character out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks. And then *this* happens, v. 9:

*[9] And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. [10] And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you **good news of great joy that will be for all the people.** [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And **this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.**"*

Now, just so we're clear, that means the next thing that is going to happen in this story is that a group of shady shepherds—trench coats and all—are going to go and visit Mary and Joseph and the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem. What an *uncomfortable* scenario that must have been for Mary and Joseph. I still remember right after we had Whit, and were in the hospital for the next day or two, we were *so restrictive* about who we would let come visit us. You're just in this really vulnerable place where you're exhausted, and not getting much sleep, and you're now trying to keep an additional human alive—and so you just get really *exclusive* about who you want to be around in that state. Like some of our *best* friends who wanted to come see us in the hospital, we were like "ahhh, I don't know—how much do we *really* like them, after all?" Right after you have a baby, in *general*, the people you want to see are people closest to you, that you can completely let your guard down with: your mom, your immediate family, the people that can see you at your worst and it's no big deal. Those are the type of people you want to see. For *Mary and Joseph*, some somewhat *random*, somewhat *sketchy* shepherds work their way onto that guest list. Again, what a...*unique*...scene this all is.

Now take a look at the *last two verses* with me and we'll camp out here—v. 13-14:

[13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, [14] “Glory to God in the highest, and **on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!**”

So there’s a lot there in those two verses, but for our purposes I just want us to focus in on that last phrase the angels deliver in v. 14: “...*on earth **peace** among those with whom he is pleased.*” *Peace*. All of this—the Christmas story, the Christmas message, God sending Jesus to us—is about *peace*.

But as a fair warning, that word might not mean what you *think* it means. **I think generally, when people hear that the Christmas message is one of *peace*, they think it just means this general, aura of pleasantness about life because of the Christmas season.** So, I actually ran a Google search on this passage, and here’s a few of the images that came up [show photos]. Now those are great pictures. But just so we’re clear, they are in no way accurate depictions of what the first Christmas was like. But I think that’s a good snapshot of what most people imagine when they think of the word “peace.” You’re gonna see and hear those types of things a lot over the next week or so.

For the next little bit leading up to Christmas, there is going to be this *onslaught* of carefully crafted, beautifully marketed messages like that that are going to come at you. They’ll come at you through movies, and songs, and ad campaigns, and a dozen other sources. And **the message will go something like this: “because it’s Christmas, there’s *peace*. Because it’s the *holiday season*, we’re all going to be a little *nicer* to each other, a little more *generous*, a little more *compassionate*, and a little more *pleasant* towards each other.** We’re all just gonna get along because it’s *Christmas*, you guys! And that’s what you *do* on Christmas—you get along With people that you hate the rest of the year! Get along with your family because *Christmas*! Get along with your in-laws because *Christmas*! Get along with your neighbors because *Christmas*!” That’s the message we’ll all hear. If you don’t believe that that’s the message we’ll hear, watch every single Hallmark movie on TV and see if that isn’t the way the movie *ends*. **People are going to believe that there should be *peace*—and that all of that is going to happen simply because we have reached mid-to-late December on the calendar.** People genuinely believe that *the Christmas season itself* brings *peace*. But what people *mean* by *peace* is fairly ambiguous. It means some version of “pleasantness.” “Niceness.” “Calm.” “The complete absence of conflict, negativity, and chaos.”

**Now, let me ask you a very important question: do you think that is the type of peace that Luke 2 is describing?** Is it referring to just a general, feel-good, pleasantness about life? Is that the type of peace that Jesus comes into the world to bring? Do you think that when these angels proclaim “peace,” that they are referring to a general *pleasantness* about life? Do you think it’s referring to a general *calm*, a general *absence of conflict, or chaos*? Do you think *that’s* what it’s saying Jesus came into the world to offer?

Well, it sure wouldn’t *seem* that way, would it? If *that’s* what Jesus came into the world to bring, he’s off to a fairly rocky start. Because Jesus’ entrance into the world is anything *but pleasant*. Mary and Joseph’s life is anything *but* pleasant. They’re pregnant out of wedlock, they’re traveling hours from their home, and their giving birth to Jesus in somebody’s overcrowded living room, and are then surrounded by some sketchy shepherds they don’t know. That doesn’t make for a very good Hallmark movie about general Christmas *peace*. That doesn’t seem like *peace* at all. Or at least, not peace the way we often like to *think* about it.

But let me also ask *this*: **what if what Jesus came to bring was something altogether different than that type of peace?** What if the word “peace” in this passage means something totally and completely different than all that? And what if it was something not only altogether *different*, but altogether *better*? Because let’s just be real: **it doesn’t take much at all to ruin that general Christmas season type of peace.** I mean all it takes is somebody in the family not making it home for the annual Christmas get-together. All it takes is somebody saying the wrong thing to the wrong family member once they’re there. All it takes is somebody getting the *wrong* present, or a present they already *had*, or a surprise present that you thought they’d love and turns out they didn’t love much at all. All it takes is Uncle Whoever having just a *little* too much eggnog and getting belligerent and obnoxious. It doesn’t take much *at all* to ruin *general, Christmas season, peace.* *That* kind of peace is about as *fragile* as can be.

So what if Jesus actually came to bring something better than “Christmas season peace”? What if what’s on offer from Jesus is nowhere near as fragile, nowhere near as precarious as all that? That’d be an awful lot better, would it not? Wouldn’t it be *so much better* if Jesus came to offer something much more lasting, much more durable, much more solid than just a general feel-good *pleasantness* about life?

You know, *peace*, according to the bible is actually *wholeness*. It’s *completeness*. It carries the connotation of when two essential parts are joined together as they should be. So **peace is when two parts that always belonged together, are joined back together.** Now we could articulate what those two parts are a lot of different ways. But based on the *core* of what Christmas is, **I think one good way of putting it is that it’s the rejoining of God and humanity.** For so much of the story of the bible, there is this *separation* that humans caused between them and God. That **because of our sin, because of us chasing after things other than God, God and humanity are separated. God and humanity now can’t function fully together like they were meant to.**

But **Christmas is the celebration of the fact that God has decided to do something about that. That he decided to do something specific about that.** That in sending Jesus, he has made a way for those two disconnected parts to be joined back together again. That through this baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, God would make a way for everything to be joined back together between God and humanity. **Because of what we did, we could no longer dwell with God. So God came to dwell with us.** As Tim Keller puts it, “every other religion says ‘here is how you find God.’ Christianity is about God coming to find man.” ***That’s what Christmas is about: God coming to find, and save, and be joined together with, humanity.***

So in light of that, the *actual* peace on offer, according to the passage, is peace *towards those “with whom God is pleased.”* Now, be sure that you don’t read that wrong. That is not some invitation by God to work our hardest to appease him, make him happy with us through our performance. That’s not the point at all. In fact, precisely the opposite. God sending Jesus into the world was him providing us with *the means by which* God could be pleased with us. This baby born to Mary and Joseph would be how all of mankind could be made right with God, not based on what *they* can do, but based on what *he would do*. That by trusting in what Jesus would one day accomplish through the cross, through *that*, we could experience God’s unconditional acceptance of us. That’s where *real, lasting peace* comes from. Through Jesus.

So listen, practically, over the next week and a half, there's a decent chance that there will be some type of *chaos* in your life. There will likely be conflict. There will likely be disappointment. There will likely be difficulty of some sort. It is *highly likely* that someone in your family will make your Christmas experience *less than* stellar. That's just the reality of the world we live in. **But here's what I'm saying: if you're a follower of Jesus, none of those things happening mean you can't have peace. You don't need Christmas, or life in general, to perfectly fall into place to have peace.** Peace—*real, actual peace*—is completely independent of any of that. If you are a follower of Jesus, you're one of those on "with whom God is pleased" through Jesus. Which means you've got something better than *Christmas season* peace. You've got the peace of Jesus.

Here's the way the bible puts it in one of the most popular verses of all time. I'm gonna read it in a slightly different translation than you may have heard—it reads:

*For **this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.***

This is how God loved the world: *he gave us Jesus*. God's love for the world was embodied in him *giving*. *Loving* and *giving*, in many ways, are synonymous. Loving means *giving*. God's love for us looked like him *giving* Jesus. And **therefore, the point that the bible will make over and over again is that our love for others should look like us giving**. So this Christmas, this is how *we* love the world: *we give*. We give of our time. We give of our resources. We give of our money. We give sacrificially. Because God gave us Jesus. That's the message of Christmas: God loved, so God gave. And because *we* love, *we* give too.

So this Christmas and always, may our loving always look like giving. Let's pray together.