

The Birth of Jesus

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Good morning friends and welcome to our Advent retreat for Pray More Novenas for Advent 2021. My name is Kenneth Howell, and we will be talking today about the specifics of Jesus' birth. If you had an opportunity before to listen to my first talk, you may remember that I talked about why God became man, and essentially, I gave two answers to that question. One was that really capsulized for us in John chapter three and verse 16. *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."*

It was God's love that's caused Jesus Christ to come into the world and to be born. But the second reason was that the purpose of that coming, the purpose of that love, was to reunite us with God. Our relationship with God that had been broken by sin is now restored in Jesus Christ. And so, the purpose of that coming was to bring us back to God. And he does that in many ways, but primarily through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

And so, you may remember that I talked about St. John Chrysostom saying that the purpose or the order of this table, the altar of the church, was the manager, or rather the order of the manger leads to the sacrament of the Eucharist. Because it's there that we receive Jesus Christ, body, blood, soul, and divinity.

Now in the second talk today, I'd like to spend a little time talking about the more specific things about Jesus' birth and the significance that they have for us. But before we do that, I wanted to ask you maybe to pause for a moment to go grab a Bible so that you can look at the text of the Scriptures with us. And as we do that, we want to begin with a prayer asking God for His grace and for His help.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. Gracious heavenly Father, we thank you for this day, for this opportunity to consider together the Scriptures as they tell us about the birth of Jesus. We are, stand in awe of your grace, that you would love us enough to send your son to be our savior to bring us back to you in heaven. Grant us peace today as we consider these truths, as we pray Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary mother of God, pray for us sinners now and the hour of our death, Amen. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Two Gospels

Well, if you've grabbed your Bible and we're ready to jump in. Today what I want to try to do is to talk about the birth of Jesus, specifically from the Scriptures. And by that, I mean that we're going to look at the way in which the birth of Jesus is portrayed to us in the Bible. You know, of the four Gospels, only two give us the details of Jesus' birth. Matthew and Luke. And in these two Gospels, in fact we have different accounts of the way in which Jesus was born. Not contradictory, but complimentary, in a way that gives us a better perspective, looking at this wonderful event from different angles.

So, for example, we find that in the Gospel of Matthew, the story revolves around Joseph, Jesus' foster father. And now God leads Joseph, and thereby leads Mary and Jesus, in and out of the difficulties and the troubles and the persecutions of the world. Luke, on the other hand, focuses upon Mary. And in Mary he finds the perfect woman, as it were. The new Eve, the one who is going to give birth to the Savior of the world. And it seems that he, these two foci, one on Joseph, the other on Mary, had a specific purpose or maybe audience.

You see, in Matthew's case, Matthew was very concerned to show that Jesus is a true son of Abraham, that is, he is the true Jewish savior of the world. And in Luke's case, we find that he places the birth in the context of universal history. In other words, Jesus is not just for the Jews. Jesus is for the world. So, as we dive into these different realities, these different scriptural descriptions, I want us to consider these truths about Jesus' birth from these two different standpoints.

Three Themes in the Gospel of Matthew

First of all, let's look together at the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Now, if you look at Matthew chapters one and two, you will see that there's a lot of detail in there that's worth considering, and most of that I'm not going to be able to talk about today. It would just take us too far afield. But I'd like us today to consider three themes that run through the narrative of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew.

The first is the Emmanuel theme. The Hebrew words, Immanuel, means God is with us. El is God, Immanu means with. And so this child that is going to be named is called Immanuel. God is with us. The second theme is how the coming of Jesus through the Jewish people really meant salvation for the world. And that's where we find the story of the magi in Matthew 2:1-12. And in that story we have, as it were, the three or the more magi, who were representatives of the nations, are coming to worship the infant king. I'll talk about that more in a moment.

But then the third theme is how the story in Matthew proceeds by God sending angels to communicate to Joseph, so that Joseph can be the protector of the son of God and of Mary, His mother. By the way, that's why Pope Leo XIII, at the end of the 19th century, declared Joseph the protector of the universal church, because that's the way he's portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew. So, let's go for first of all then and think about the birth of Jesus as the theme of God is with us. You know, perhaps you, like I, have very pleasant memories of my Christmas days.

Emmanuel

I remember when I was probably about nine or 10 years old, we had a long hall where the bedrooms of the house were. And then we had this, it opened onto our living room. And on this particular Christmas day, our parents had been telling us for several weeks that there was something very, very special that was going to be there for all of us on that Christmas day. And so actually we were very excited to, and so I'll never forget waking up early that morning and running down the long hall and there, as we opened the door to see what it was, there was a new bike for each and every one of us four children. Well, of course I naturally ran to my bike and wanted take it out immediately and started to ride it.

You know, the excitement of children over receiving gifts really should be very small compared to the excitement you and I feel over the birth of Jesus. A birth that seems so uneventful, so ordinary in his own time, really causes us, or should cause us, to be people who rejoice. And what are we rejoicing in? We're rejoicing in what was predicted by the Prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 7:14 the prophet tells of a time when there will come the birth of a child, and this child, it says, will be called Emmanuel. And Matthew in chapter one in verse 23, quotes this. ***"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel."*** Which then goes on, Matthew goes on to say, "Means God is with us." Now it's interesting to think about that for just a moment, because if you look throughout the Old Testament, you'll see that there's this wonderful theme of God's promise to come someday and to dwell with His people.

This is not just in the prophecy of Isaiah, it's throughout the whole Old Testament. But in that same prophecy, we find, for example, in chapter two, the promise that all the nations are going to come. We find the promise in the Book of Ezekiel, where God is going to come and dwell with us. The Hebrew word for this was "shakan", it simply meant to live, to reside in a particular place. But then it was used theologically to mean that God is going to come and reside and dwell. And it's that same root, shakan, that is in the word mishkan. The mishkan was the Tabernacle, that Tent of Meeting that was in the Old Testament. And in this Tent of Meeting, God came in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire at night to dwell with his people. These were all temporary indicators of God some day coming to dwell with His people completely and totally. In the birth of Jesus, we have not just the birth of a human baby, we have the birth of God with us, Emmanuel.

The Coming of Jesus through Jewish People

And that leads to the second theme. The theme that, who is this Emmanuel for? Why did he come? And who is he trying to reach? After the story of Jesus' birth and the flight into Egypt, we find that that Matthew tells us the story that is unique to his Gospel. And in fact, it's so important that he takes up 12 verses to tell us the story. He tells us about magi. These are astronomers, astrologers of the Eastern, perhaps in Babylonia somewhere. And they see the star of the newborn king in the sky, and it leads them to Jerusalem. And they ask and inquire of King Herod, "Where is to be born the king of the Jews?" Herod consults his scholars, his magi. And it says they quote from the Book of Micah, where it says that, I mean, excuse me, from the Book of Micah, where it says that Bethlehem, land of Judah, you are not least among the, you are least among the clans of Judah, but from you will come forth a ruler. And so we find that Bethlehem is the place of Jesus' birth.

I don't think this is an accident, because in Hebrew, the words Bet Lehem, Bethlehem, Bet Lehem means the house of bread. In other words, it's through this birth, in this place, that Jesus, that God, is going to feed his people. No wonder then the savior of the world said, "I am the bread of life. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." But then the magi leave Herod and they go to Bethlehem to worship. And they provide us a model of at least two things. One, they are representatives of all the nations of the world, such that they represent what all the peoples of the world should be and should do.

You know, most of us listening to this are not Jewish. We come from pagan backgrounds. And for one, I am extremely grateful that God has come into the world, even for Celtic people. A few years ago, I was getting interested in what my ancestry was. And frankly, I knew very little about it. As I was investigating what this background was, I discovered something to my amazement. I knew that my last name, Howell, was a Welsh name. And that my grandfather, or maybe his father, had been born in Wales. And so I started doing some searching.

And so I knew I was at least partly Welsh, but I thought maybe the other part was English, because Wales is a part of Great Britain. But then I remembered that my maternal grandmother's name was Carney, and you couldn't get a much more Irish name than Carney. And I knew that I was Irish on my paternal grandmother's side.

So, I had two parts of me that were completely Celtic. And then, but then one day I thought, well, you know, my mother's maiden name was Hill, and Hill is probably an English name, right? And then one day I happened to be in the Bahamas and I was talking to a man from Scotland and I was telling him about my ancestors. And about my mother's maiden name is Hill. That's probably the English. And he said, "No, Hill is a very common Scottish name." And I was

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surprised to find that I was thoroughly Scottish, Irish, and Welsh. I was thoroughly Celtic. Maybe that explains why I had such a bad temper when I was a little boy, but God gives us grace to overcome those things.

You see, I found out my true ancestry and I did a little bit more research. The Celtic peoples, who are their gods, who do they worship? Well, you know what I found out, they worshiped idols. They worshiped trees. They worshiped the forest. In other words, Celtic's would just thorough pagans, before St. Patrick and other missionaries went and established the Christian and Catholic faith in those Celtic lands.

You and I should rejoice that God has not limited His grace and His salvation to the Jewish people. They were the chosen people of the old covenant, but they were to bring that message, that Gospel, that good news to all the world. Which is why the church is called Catholic, because Catholic means universal. You see, that second theme in the Gospel of Matthew is to tell us that even though the Jews were the instruments of the Messiah coming to the world, the purpose for the Messiah was to reach all the peoples of the world.

The Angel and Joseph

The third thing that we find in the Gospel of Matthew is very clear in the way that the angel comes to speak, to warn Joseph of the impending threat from Herod, and then comes again to tell him, go back to Egypt and then settle in Nazareth. In other words, what do we find in the Gospel of Matthew in the case of Joseph? We find the story of God's providential guidance in the birth of the savior. Protecting His only begotten son from the onslaughts of the enemy and bringing us the fullness of salvation.

You see my friend, our God is not some distant God who made a plan of salvation and didn't, and then left us our own to figure out how to do it. No, He's a God that came to be with us. He's a God that came to all the peoples of the Earth. And He came as a God who's intimately involved with our lives. One of the primordial temptations of human beings is to think of God as being this distant God who has to be kept at arm's distance, who has to be appeased in order for our lives to be okay. And that's why in ancient religion they mostly thought of their gods as gods of wrath, who are going to crush them if they didn't do what the god wanted them to do.

The message of the Christian faith, the message of the Catholic Church, is completely different. It's that the God of heaven and Earth is a God of love who sent His son into the world that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. This is the theme of what we find in the Gospel of Matthew.

Luke's Gospel

Luke, on the other hand, has complimentary themes, as he focuses on Mary, the mother of Jesus. In Luke's account, we find the longest story, or narrative of Jesus' birth, which includes a number of different characters, preeminently John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin through Mary's cousin Elizabeth. And what we find in those stories is how God is preparing his people, just as we're preparing in Advent, for the birth of Jesus.

So, God is preparing His people through the ministry of John the Baptist. And you remember what John the Baptist famously said as recorded in the Gospel of John, when he saw Jesus, the lamb of God coming toward him, and he was going to baptize him? He said, "***He must increase. And I must decrease.***" Boy, there's words that every Christian should take upon his lips. He must increase. I must decrease.

We find so many things about Jesus in the Gospel of Luke that we don't find in other places. The story of Jesus in the Temple at 12 years old, which we often pray in the joyful mysteries. Well, this story is only in the Gospel of Luke.

The Focus on Mary

But interestingly, what we find in the Gospel of Luke is the focus upon Mary as the mother of God. And in that unique, but powerful story, of Mary and the Annunciation, we find the secret to salvation. In that story in Matthew, I mean, in Luke chapter one, we find that Mary is listening to the angel in rapt attention, so that when she hears the angel say that she will be the bearer of the Messiah, she is in astonishment at what the angel is telling her.

Can you imagine what it would be like for an angel to come and tell you that you are going to be the instrument of God's bringing salvation to the world? Mary must've just been awed, overawed by this message. Well, there are several themes in the Gospel of Luke. There's actually three, again, that I want to share with you.

Glory of God

First of all, how the theme of the glory of God is pervasive in this story. Do you remember that in Luke chapter two, we find that when the shepherds are told of Jesus' birth, they're told to go to Bethlehem and to worship the infant king. And when they get there, suddenly it says that there was with the angel, a multitude of heavenly host, praising God and singing glory to God in the highest and on Earth, peace among those whom he favors. This theme of the glory of God being shown or manifested through the birth of the Savior is one of the most important themes in the entire New Testament. But stop and think about that for just a moment.

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In this far off place, this back water village called Bethlehem, there was born, in an insignificant stable, a baby that to all human eyes looked perfectly human and normal. And yet Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds were given a glimpse when heaven opened and the glory of God was revealed about this baby. Why, what does this mean? It means that salvation is about returning to the glory of heaven. The glory that is shared by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean for us today? It means that receiving Jesus into our lives is entering into that glory that exists in the eternal trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The glory of God is the goal of our life, but we could never reach that glory unless that glory first came down to us. That's what we find celebrated in the great hymn, which Mary gives us in chapter one of Luke, the story of the Magnificat.

You remember that when Mary, immediately after hearing the message of the angel, went to visit her elderly cousin named Elizabeth. Because the angel had told her that Elizabeth too was pregnant. even at a very advanced age, and that she was going to give birth to a very important person, John the Baptist. And so when Mary came to Elizabeth, Mary, I mean, Elizabeth said of Mary, "Blessed, are you among women. And blessed is the fruit of your womb." And Mary broke out into this hymn of praise to God. Now this hymn, she says, "Matches my soul, magnifies the Lord." Now think about what it means for something to be magnified for just a moment.

I like to call Mary a theoscope. That is a scope that managed, that choose God. Think about it, for example, for just a moment. What is a telescope? Well, a telescope is an instrument that brings things that are very distant, like stars, close to us. Or a microscope that makes things that are very small, makes them bigger so that we can see them. Who is Mary? What is Mary's soul? It is a instrument by which God comes into clearer view for us. And what is that God? That is a God of love who has sent His son so that we may share in the very glory of God.

Mary's Response Must be Our Response

The second thing that we find is an example of what our response should be. Mary, who is awestruck by the message of the angel, asked the question, "How can these things be since I do not know a man?" In other words, Mary was puzzled, but at the same time drawn into this wonderful message that was there.

This Christmas, you and I need to have that same sense of wonder. We need to be awestruck, too, at the gift that God gives us. Because God gives in every celebration of the mass, the same body that was given to and through Mary in the incarnation of our Lord. And Mary's response needs to be our response as well. Because we're told in the story that after Mary realizes what she had received from God, it says that she treasured these things within her heart. She, in other

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words, kept them and guarded them because they were so very special. That's all we find that we need to have in our lives, too.

How many of us take the time every day, every week, every month, to stop, to calm our souls, and to receive that which God has given to us? You see, God wants us to learn to treasure, to guard, to keep the great gifts that He's given us.

But then the second response we find about Mary is already in the story of Jesus when he's 12 years old at the Temple. You remember the story that Joseph and Mary went back to the Temple and they found Jesus teaching the scribes and the Pharisees. And in that story, Mary says to Jesus, perhaps with a bit of exasperation, "Why have you done this to your father and to me? We've been looking for you everywhere." Jesus came in with those mysterious words that are so beautiful. ***"Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house? Did you not know that I must be about my father's business?"***

You see Mary heard those words, and then it says that she turned them over. She mulled them over in her mind. She contemplated their meaning. Often the case with God is that we don't often understand what God first says us until we mull it over in our minds.

This season of Advent is a season for us to step aside, to contemplate, and to think about the eternal significance of what we're encountering in the savior, Jesus Christ. Most of us find that in our lives, our lives consist of doing things. We pay the bills, we fix this, we talk to that person. We go from here to here, doing place to place. And especially if you're involved in business affairs, that's kind of the way life is.

But we have to remember that those specific things that we do are things that we accomplish, but they're not the meaning of life. The meaning of life is in the contemplation of God's mercy and God's love and God's goodness. And I would say that in order to accomplish all those specific things in our lives, we also need to be people of contemplation. Because the more that we consider the things that God has done for us, and the way that He invites us into is very heart to see that glory of God, in these things, our heart becomes like Mary's heart, a heart of submission to the will of God.

Going back to that story of the Annunciation. You remember what Mary said to the angel in chapter one, in verse 38. She said finally, after she heard that all things were possible with God, she said, "Here I am, the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word." There is the perfect heart of obedience to God. God, whatever pleases you is what I want in my life. I want to submit my will to your will. To be able to do that.

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I have been a professing Christian for many years, and yet I must confess, it's only recently that I think I've come to the point where I can honestly say to God, I want your will in my life above everything else that I do, please help me to want your will. This I think is what Mary meant when she said, ***"Here I am, the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your will."***

And maybe Mary was able to say that because she too finally understood the truth that we find in that last Gospel, the Gospel of John. Because it's in that Gospel in chapters one and verses 1-18 that we find the summary of all of what the birth of Jesus was about. Because it's there that John tells us, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God. And the word was God." And then in chapter one in verse 14, he says that ***"This word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we saw his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the father."***

Receiving Jesus in Our Lives

You see my friend as we get closer to Christmas, we begin to realize that in this birth of Jesus, the glory of heaven is now resident among and with us. We don't have to wait till we die to begin to experience that glory. No, that glory is being placed in our souls through the presence of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit brings it as we read scripture, as we meditate in prayer. But most of all, as we partake of the body and blood of Jesus. For it's there that we receive Jesus most fully into our lives.

So, remember the words of Saint John Chrysostom, that this table fulfill the order of the manger. That manger was given to arrange on Earth the salvation of Jesus Christ. And it's in the Eucharist that we receive the same body that was lying in that manger on that first Christmas night. This Advent affords us a wonderful opportunity to be able to receive Jesus into our lives in a new and a fresh way. God bless you, and let's pray for one another in this Advent season, as we get closer to the birth of our savior. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.