

SAVED FROM OURSELVES

Isaiah 7:14

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Indeed, it is a strange way to save the world. How can one baby make so much difference?

Time to pay the tax. And somewhere on the outskirts of Bethlehem, that is itself on the outskirts of Jerusalem, a young Jewish girl gives birth to the most important baby ever to be born. Born in a barn because no other accommodations were available for this poor, expectant mother. The world didn't make room for the son of a poor Jewish carpenter.

While the kings of the earth go on waging their wars and the merchants peddle their wares, the Bethlehem baby goes unnoticed by the busy inhabitants of the world.

Yet, angels fill the sky and shout, "Fear not for, behold, I bring you good news of great joy which is for all people everywhere. For unto you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

If He's so important, why not Jerusalem? If He's so important, why a carpenter's family? If He's a king, why not a throne instead of a bed of straw and hay?

The most significant birth to ever occur and the world missed it. All but a few insignificant shepherds on the hillside missed the message of God on that night that is more holy than all other nights.

It reminds me of a cartoon that was in the *New York World* in 1925. It's something of a classic. Two Kentucky farmers are pictured, talking over a picket fence. One asks, "Anything new happen lately?" The other responds, "Nothing much. A new baby was born over at Tom Lincoln's place, but nothing much ever happens around here."

If we think Tom Lincoln's son, Abraham, went unnoticed and yet proved to be a man of courage and strength and healing, how much more so the Son of God? No comparison.

At the onset, we knew there was something different about this baby boy. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive...." When the angel makes the great proclamation to Mary that she is going to have a child, she protests. She knows it's more than unlikely, it's impossible. Mary said, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

With little fanfare and no acclaim, the little Jewish boy slips on to earth during the night. Unnoticed and unwelcomed. Unrecognized. And, at least by Herod and others, unwanted.

And on that single night, everything changed forever. This is the evening of our salvation.

Do we really understand the magnitude of the angelic message? Do we really comprehend what it means for Christ to dwell among men? Can we appreciate fully what God has done in sending His Son?

How can one baby save the world?

We're going to attempt to answer that question the next two Sundays. Today we begin with the first part of the sermon.

How can one baby save the world?

I. That baby saves us from our sins.

Isn't that what the angel said? "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10-12).

A Savior? How can one baby save the world?

He is our Savior, the one to take away the sins of the world. In fact, His cousin John the Baptist, six months older than Jesus, when he saw his cousin begin His ministry, declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Maybe the best description in all scripture of Jesus: The one who takes away the sins of the world.

Or in Matthew's account of the birth, when Joseph is told by the angel that it is okay to take Mary as his wife because that which is conceived within her is of the Holy Spirit. The angel said, "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21)

It's hard to understand how that baby will bear the burden of our sin.

There is a story about Bishop Monk Bryan that describes the inability of words to capture the message of the Bethlehem baby. On one Christmas Eve, the bishop's children were preparing to go to church for the candlelight service. On the way their son asked his father, "Dad, are you going to let us enjoy Christmas this year, or are you going to try to explain it again to everybody?"

Sometimes I feel like that. It's good news of great joy. He takes away our sins. But it's hard to comprehend, even harder to explain.

Why would God love us that much? Why would Jesus be obedient and accept the death of a crucified criminal? Ponder. How could God give His Son for us?

The prophet Zechariah foresaw this baby long ago when he spoke for God, saying, “And I will pour out upon the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over [the death of] a first-born” (Zechariah 12:10)

The cross is awful and appalling.

As Thomas Cahill wrote, “On Calvary, in the pause between the lancing of Christ and the arrival of Nicodemus with his hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, his lengths of linen, and his permission from Pilate to remove the body and place it in the new-hewn garden tomb – in the deepest silence of human grief, on that most terrible of the world’s many terrible hills – we recall the dry-throated prophecy of Zechariah rendered three hundred years earlier. (Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, p. 301)

We have pierced Him, and we mourn. And yet He was bruised for our transgressions.

This morning I ask you to wipe the sleep and slumber away from your eyes and greet the babe of Bethlehem and understand and confront the gospel anew.

The image of the crucified Christ haunts us. It haunts us because we know that it is our sin He bears on His back, because we know it is our place in which He dies. It haunts us because we know He’s done no wrong and yet received the wrath of the Almighty.

This message of the babe of Bethlehem, the angel said, is something new. It is good news. It is not “a good news.” It is “the good news” – the best news ever. It comes, breaking down in the original language, as “the good word.”

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). John, who wrote those words, said elsewhere in an epistle to the early church that God’s Son cleanses us from all sin: “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

How can a baby save the world? He saves us from our sin. He takes our place. He, who knew no sin, becomes sin for us.

And we don’t have to carry around the baggage and the burden of the sins of our past. We can take them all to Calvary, lay them at the foot of the Bethlehem baby and walk away.

He saves us because He saves us from our sins.

II. He saves us from ourselves.

By nature, we are such a selfish people. If you don't believe it, go around to our preschool department and watch the teacher hand out one cracker. There is not a baby in the buggy who will think, "Here, you take this one. I think I'm going to make sure you have a cracker before I take one." No, they grasp and they pinch. And I've watched them. A baby will even be eating his own cracker and reach over and steal the cracker of his Baptist brethren in the baby buggy. Shameful.

We are all, each one of us – every one of us – we are all about ourselves.

Ever have your son say to his sister, "Hey, you go ahead and take the big piece of cake this time. I got the big piece last time." It doesn't happen. Doesn't happen to adults. He saves us from ourselves.

Malcolm Muggeridge, who is described as a supremely secular British curmudgeon, visited an Indian leprosarium run by the Missionaries of Charity, the sisters founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta. He had always imagined secular humanism as the ideal worldview, but realized, while strolling through this facility, built with love for those whom no one wanted, that no merely humanist vision can take account of lepers, let alone take care of them. To offer humane treatment to humanity's outcasts, to overcome their lifetime experience of petty human cruelties, requires more than mere humanity. Humanists, he realized with the force of sudden insight, do not run leprosariums. (Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, p. 305)

By nature, we take care of ourselves and not others.

We hear the echo of the voice of Amos who indicted the Israelites for trampling on the poor while the wealthy built stone mansions. The people of his day deprived the poor of justice in the courts. They sold the needy for a pair of sandals and denied justice to the oppressed. Jesus also cared for the needs of people. He introduced His ministry as a fulfillment of Isaiah's promise that the Messiah would preach good news to the poor.

Scripture itself is a record of thousands of years of selfishness. In the case of the Old Testament, it's Lot choosing the greener ground over his uncle Abraham. Or Ahab murdering his poor neighbor, Naboth, to seize his vineyard. Or even King David stealing Uriah's wife. Or Achan hiding the stolen goods under his tent.

In the New Testament, it's the disciples arguing over who is going to be greatest, who is going to sit at the right and left hand of Christ when He sits on the throne? Or a prodigal son running away with the wealth of the family. Or even the older brother pouting at home because some of his future fortune has been squandered.

Yes, from David in the Old Testament to the disciples in the New, we are all plagued with self.

In the birth narrative, in the Matthean account, we read about the awful ideas of Herod the horrible. (I've never thought "Herod the Great" suited him.)

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise and take the Child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." And Joseph arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt" (Matthew 2:13-14).

Herod could not accept the fact that someone else might take his place, someone else might have his power, someone else might receive his praise. So, in the center of selfish humanity, he searches for the baby to kill him and destroys the babies of Bethlehem to stop the new king.

We're all that wicked Herod by our human nature. But there is something about the Bethlehem baby that saves us, even from our self-centeredness.

As He gives Himself for us, we can, likewise, give ourselves to others.

A monk found a precious stone, a precious jewel. A short time later, the monk met a traveler, who said he was hungry and asked the monk if he would share some of his provisions. When the monk opened his bag, the traveler saw the precious stone and, on an impulse, asked the monk if he could have it. Amazingly, the monk gave the traveler the stone. The traveler departed quickly, overjoyed with his new prized possession.

However, a few days later he came back, searching for the monk. He returned the stone to the monk and made a request: "Please give me something more valuable, more precious than this stone. Please impart to me that which enabled you to give me this precious stone!"

As He saves us from our own selfish ambitions, we find purpose in something beyond who we are and what we have. Do you understand how important that is? Without the gospel, our life amounts to trying to amass a wealth to satisfy our own selfish desires, to please ourselves with pleasure? Do you understand what you are reduced to without the story of Jesus? Can't you see how one baby saves the world? That without Him, all we have is individuals fighting for the biggest pile of chips. Without Him, all we have is nations rising against nations, trying to expand their boundary lines across the border of their neighbor.

By nature, we do not share. By nature, we hoard. By nature, we do not serve others. By nature, we serve ourselves.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a missionary sent to preach the gospel in India near the end of World War II. After many months, the time came for a furlough back home. His church wired him the money to book passage on a steamer, but when he got to the port city he discovered a boatload of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily. These were the days when European Jews were sailing all over the world literally looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were now staying in attics and warehouses and basements all over that port city.

It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning the missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, "Merry Christmas." The people looked at him as if he were crazy and responded, "We're Jews."

"I know that," said the missionary, "but what would you like for Christmas."

In utter amazement, the Jews responded, "Why, we'd like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany."

So the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port.

Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States. Not surprisingly, his superiors wired back, asking what happened to the money they had already sent. He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews.

His superiors wired back, "Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus."

He wired back, "Yes, but I do." (www.homileticsonline.com)

The point is clear. The Bethlehem baby saves us from our selfish ambitions to where we can think beyond ourselves to those around us.

Michael Yaconelli told a story about a deacon in his church who wasn't doing a very good job ministering to those in the church family. He just didn't do what a deacon was supposed to do. You might call him a dead-beat deacon.

One day he said to the deacon, "I've got a group of young people who go to the old folks home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the old folks home and at least do that?"

"Okay," the deacon agreed. He could at least drive the young people so they could minister.

The first Sunday the deacon was at the old folks home, he was in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and there was an old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man's hand, and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month that was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon.

The next month, the next month, and the next month. Hand in hand.

Then the old man wasn't there. The deacon inquired and was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray over his body, that's all right."

The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings.

As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. The movement in the man's hand brought moisture to the deacon's eyes. He stumbled out of the room, and, as he did so, he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time."

The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean."

She said, "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'" (story from Tony Campolo, www.homileticsonline.com)

Christmas works when we let Jesus take us into unfamiliar territory – the nursing home, a neighbor's home, an immigrant's home, or a mission field.

Who confuses your hands with the hands of Jesus? Who confuses your feet with the feet of Jesus? Who takes your words of encouragement as the words of Jesus?

The Savior comes and saves us from ourselves.

How can the birth of one baby change everything? How can this single, solitary life make all the difference in the world? How can He save the world?

First of all, He saves us from our sins. And secondly, He saves us from ourselves.

The birth of that baby really does change everything.

"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son...."