

HOW CAN ONE BABY SAVE THE WORLD?
(Part 2)
Matthew 2:18-23

Last week, we began a two-part sermon entitled “How Can One Baby Save the World?” How the birth of the Bethlehem baby really does change everything!

Last week, we looked at the first two points.

I. He 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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:10-12).

Or in Matthew's account, 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. Remember what 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).

Coming to die in our place, the Bethlehem baby takes all of our sins upon His back and goes to the cross. Our greed, our selfishness, our anger, our lust, our gossip, and our gluttony – He takes it all upon Himself and dies in our place.

The second way we saw last week that this Bethlehem baby saves the world is that

II. He saves us from ourselves.

You and I are born focused on one person – ourself. We all try to live life, grabbing with greed for all that we can get for Number One. But Jesus came, and He gave Himself away. He became the last, the least, the servant. He gave His life for others to teach us that we can live our lives beyond ourselves. As the disciples were fighting over who was going to be the greatest in the Kingdom, who was going to sit in the chairs on the right and left-hand side of the throne, He was giving Himself for others – pouring the water in the basin and ready to wash their feet.

Jesus saves us from our self-centered nature.

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!”

Today, I want to look at three more ways today that Bethlehem baby saves us – ways that He really does change everything.

On that most holy of all nights – when that young Jewish girl, still pondering in her heart the words of the angel, gave birth to a little boy – everything changed forever. He saves us – saves us from our sins, saves us from ourselves.

III. He saves us from our enemies.

There are people we cannot bear to love. Rage springs up afresh within us when we think of those who spew racist hatred, or sexually exploit children, or commit acts of terrorist violence. The desire to hate also wells up within us toward people who have committed infuriating acts against people we love – betrayers, liars, bullies, critics.

We can easily justify that instinctive desire to hate. For we hate evil – and it’s just a small step from hating evil to hating the *bearers* of evil. (Kelli B. Trujillo, “The Secret to Loving Your Enemies,” www.todayschristianwoman.com, 2/17/2016).

The words of Jesus declared, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteousness and the unrighteousness. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Matthew 5:43-47).

Only Christians can love their enemies.

This Jesus, who told us to love our enemies as He was dying on the cross, declares, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Forgiving His murderers even as they murder?

When you follow a God who loves His enemies, you understand that He expects you not just to love those who love you in return, but to love those who despise you. This Jesus asks a hard thing when he says, “I want you to love those who hurt you. I want you to love those who have wronged you. I want you to love those who have ignored you. I want you to love those who do not love back.”

As forgiving people, we ought to be the most healthy people on earth because we don’t have to remain bitter. We don’t have to harbor hatred in our hearts. We don’t have to let those who have wronged us in the past haunt us.

He was beaten; He did not strike back.

He was spat upon; He did not spit back.

When everyone else was drawing their sword, He was commanding His disciples to put theirs away.

When His face was slapped, He turned the other cheek.

He would not, could not be controlled by those who hated Him and wanted to hurt Him.

Isn't that the Christmas message? While the Jews were expecting a word about the Messiah for themselves and themselves alone, didn't the angel say, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for ALL people" – your friends, your family, and even your enemies?

Letting an enemy off the hook by loving him, blessing him, and praying for him flies directly in the face of our aching human nature. But God, knowing that our humanity might get in the way of our calling, reminds us again and again to love Him and love others—even when loving "others" includes an enemy. But what if you were taught that your enemy was an entire people group? And what if that enemy killed your son? Could you still choose love? Would you even want to?

Robi, a strong Israeli woman with a heart for peacemaking, is faced with those decisions every single day. She lives in Israel, in the middle of one of the longest, most polarized, politically divisive, and theologically explosive conflicts in human history. The Jewish and Palestinian people, who are packed together tightly on land they both consider holy, both desperately want to protect what they feel is theirs. Israelis want a safe homeland and seek to protect the land promised from God. Palestinians call that same land home—where their forefathers farmed for centuries—and they too want civil rights and a sense of security.

Robi's dedication to peace left her searching for a solution. Robi's son, David, shared her interest in peace. When he was drafted as a military officer in the Israeli Defense Force, he and Robi determined the best strategy he had for pursuing peace was to accept his role and show those he was leading a better way. He would help them learn to look at the men and women on the other side as human beings, just like them. But, tragically, David was killed by a bullet from a Palestinian sniper. His mother Robi was devastated. This conflict had now taken what she treasured most in this world—her son, her fellow peacemaker—and she was forced to decide how she would respond. Was she still a peacemaker, or would she turn to anger and seek revenge?

Bassam, a Palestinian man who spent his youth hating and antagonizing the Israeli military that he saw as occupying his hometown, ended up in jail. His anger was wrapped up in revenge. But his time in prison brought an unexpected shift. Bassam made friends with an Israeli prison guard, and they gradually shared their stories. As the friendship progressed, for the first time, Bassam considered the other side of the Israel/Palestine narrative. By the time Bassam got out of jail, he was a changed man. He no longer wanted to fight Israel. He let go of his need to make others pay. He realized peace wasn't going to come through force. Instead, peace was only going to be possible through changed human hearts.

Based on his own story, he thought the most effective tool to fight for freedom might just be friendship. Bassam, once a man filled with rage and hungry to get even, was now a father doing the hard work of peace. And then, just a few years after his decision to become a peacemaker, Bassam's 10-year-old daughter, Abir, was shot by an Israeli soldier as she waited in line at school. Bassam, despite his shock and immense grief, decided to lean into his commitment to peace. Instead of trying to retaliate, he would let himself mourn. Bassam joined a support group, The Parents Circle, made up of hundreds of parents, Israeli and Palestinian both, who have lost children or close family members to the fighting.

At The Parents Circle, he met Robi. An Israeli mother and a Palestinian father, both changed forever by loss. That's the miracle of The Parents Circle. People don't come as Israelis or Palestinians—they come together as parents grieving unthinkable loss. Because of their shared pain, empathy and understanding are possible. The common ground of grief has paved the way toward reconciliation and provided a glimpse of hope in a seemingly hopeless place. ("Love Your Enemies," www.willowcreek.org/enblogs, 4-17-2017)

Who do you need to see as a friend? And did they take something more precious than your child? I think not.

IV. He saves us through our suffering.

One night a king was aroused from sleep by a fearful stomping on the roof above his bed. Alarmed, he shouted: "Who's there?" "A friend," came the reply from the roof. "I've lost my camel." Perturbed by such stupidity, the king screamed, "You fool! Are you looking for a camel on the roof?"

"You fool," the voice from the roof answered. "Are you looking for God in silk clothing and lying on a golden bed?"

The words filled the king with terror, and he realized God was not always in the gold.

Where are you looking for God?

So many, even today, look for God in a health/wealth prosperity gospel. If you have enough faith, you'll always be well. You'll always be wealthy. You'll always prosper.

When we look at the text, we see something altogether different. That's not the word of God. He molds us and makes us by the trials and tribulations in our lives. We follow a Messiah who suffered, and we're going to suffer, too.

But that's the point. He saves us *through* our suffering, not *from* our suffering – for He has come to suffer with us. He's come to be hurt, even as we're hurt. He's come as the God of sorrows.

We think about His very birth foretold by the prophets. As the prophets said, He was to be despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. All said about Him before He was ever born. He was to be "without form or comeliness," a "root out of dry ground."

It is only fitting that a man whose life ends by dying naked on a cross would be born in a common stable – not robed in purple at His birth. No. This is a redeemer who ends up, at the end of the story, buried in a borrowed tomb. As He ends in humility, He begins in humility – born in the humblest shed.

The manger and the cross stand as bookends at the earthly beginning and end of our Lord's life. And all between, He wears a peasant's garb. He associates with fishermen, women of the night, tax gatherers. The cold of the mountain was often His only bed. Was it not Jesus who said, "The foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20).

He saves us through our suffering.

There is a way in which the manger itself declares Him to be the king of the poor. The poor, no doubt, were able to recognize His relationship to them from the position in which they found Him. No room for Him. Outcast. The son of a poor Jewish carpenter.

Can you imagine the shepherds' comments – they, themselves, the outcasts, the untouchables of their society. They were the first called to see the good news of God. One shepherd, perhaps, says to another as they walk away, "Oh, He will not be like Herod. He will not be like the one in royal robes. He will remember this manger and He will feel for the poor when He comes to His throne."

Even as He begins His ministry – you remember in that programmatic message in Luke's gospel – Luke 4. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me," He reads from the prophet Isaiah, "because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18). Who is He coming to? To preach the gospel to the poor. To proclaim freedom to the prisoner. To set free those who are downtrodden. "Today," He said, "I have fulfilled the scripture of the prophet Isaiah."

He saves us through our suffering because He, Himself, knows what it's like to be hungry, to be tired, to be weary, to be tempted. He went forty days without food. When the writer of Hebrews ponders a Savior who lowered Himself to this broken world and a broken body, he remembered, "Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:17-18). He knows, the author of Hebrews says, what it is like to be mistreated. He knows what it's like to be wronged. He knows what it's like to be shortchanged. Here is the king of glory coming in the form of humanity, and He knows – He knows our brokenness and our weariness, He knows our temptations, our sorrows, and our suffering. He has come to suffer with us, that He could lead us through the suffering to the kingdom of God. "If they persecute Me," He said, "they will, likewise, persecute you."

He knew, He knew always that His people would go through hardships. In fact, when Paul thinks back on the ministry of our Lord, he says, “If we suffer with Him, we might also be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:17).

He saves us through our suffering. Not from it, but through it.

A Hasidic rabbi, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev in the Ukraine, used to say that he had discovered the meaning of love from a drunken peasant. The rabbi was visiting the owner of a tavern in the Polish countryside. As he walked in, he saw two peasants at a table. Both were gloriously in their cups. Arms around each other, they were declaring how much each loved the other. Suddenly Ivan said to Peter, “Peter, tell me, what hurts me?” Bleary-eyed, Peter looked at Ivan. “How do I know what hurts you?” Ivan’s answer was swift, “If you don’t know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?” (Walter Brughart, *Still Proclaiming Your Wonders*, p. 111)

Jesus can say He loves us because, humbling Himself to death on a cross, He knows. He was despised, rejected. He was betrayed. He was made lonely as the disciples fled and left Him. He knows. He knows physical pain. He knows emotional sorrow. He knows.

He can say He loves you because He does know what hurts you.

There is a final thing He saves us from.

V. He saves us from the fear of death.

I honestly do not know – if you’re here this morning or watching by way of television – if you don’t have the hope of following a resurrected Jesus, I don’t know how you face death. I don’t know how you put your mother or your father into the ground, knowing they are forever and always gone. I don’t know how you walk away from the cemetery. I don’t know how you wake up the morning after the funeral with any meaning, any hope, or any desire to take the first breath of the morning.

The people who follow Jesus can do that because He has saved us from the fear of death.

Again, we turn to the author of Hebrews who seemed to capture so much who Jesus was when He writes (I really like this passage), “Since then the children [meaning us] share in flesh and blood, He Himself [meaning Jesus] likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Of all the fears we have as humans, the fear of death is the most powerful fear, the most disabling fear. This king of terror – the fear of death – has been disarmed, because even death itself cannot separate us from the love of God which comes to us in Christ Jesus. This is the Jesus of the empty tomb. This is the Lord who gives back the dead boy to his mother as He interrupts a funeral procession. This is the Lord of the resurrection who calls Lazarus forth from the tomb. This is the Jesus who commands the young girl to arise and tells her parents not to tell anyone that the

power of the resurrection is in His fingertips. Because of Him, we no longer have to be afraid of death.

Because of the babe of Bethlehem, you can have confidence in eternal life, because in Him begins the age of the resurrection. In His resurrection, those who believe in Him are assured of eternal life already – no fear.

So he saves us

- from our sins
- from ourselves
- from our enemies
- through our suffering, and
- from fear of death.