

A Stop by Quiet Waters
By
Dr. Richard A. Germaine

The Two Sides of Christmas

I remember as a young pastor my real concern was what I would preach at Easter and Christmas year after year if I stayed in the same church. I thought there was only so much that could be said about these wondrous events, and once I had covered it all, what would I do? Would I have to repeat the same messages over, or would I “borrow” the sermons of others in order to give the people a fresh perspective? Neither option appealed to me.

Now as I look back I see that I had nothing to be concerned about, for I never cease to be amazed at the Bible. No matter how many times I come to a given text I receive new insights. I preached over one hundred Christmas messages in Hopkinton, no two alike, and still the well is so deep and the water so refreshing. I want to share with you a set of insights I received this morning as I was pondering the Christmas story in Matthew one and Luke three. There are for each of us two different sides to Christmas, a joy-bringing side and a burden-bearing side.

First, there is Mary’s joy-bringing side.

Consider Mary’s joy. She was a godly young woman in terms of the practice of Judaism in her day. She believed in God, worshipped Him through sacrifices and offerings, and sought His mercy and blessings through involvement in the Jewish holy days. Her willingness to believe the angel implies these things. But God was distant and accessible only through the mediating work of the priests. She, along with so many others, was looking for the Messiah to come.

Suddenly, the presence and message of the angel, the coming of the Holy Spirit on her, and the overshadowing power of God filled her with a wonder and joy that was incomprehensible and impossible to contain within her spirit. She had never encountered God in such a powerful and overwhelming way, and she was forever changed. “*Oh, how I praise the Lord...*” she sang.

Second, there is Mary’s burden-bearing side.

Consider Mary’s burden. This kind of thing just does not happen to people. There was no precedent for her to fall back on as an explanation. Pregnancy is pregnancy, and no one gets that way as a virgin. She would have to live with the reactions of people, endure their words, and suffer their ridicule. There would be no use trying to explain it to them, they would just laugh at her. Who was going to believe her? What would her family think? What would Joseph think? What would he do? Her only comfort was her elderly relative Elizabeth, who was also pregnant, decades after the possibility of such a thing had passed. What a burden to put on the shoulders of a young girl! Can you hear God speaking in this: “*Your ways are not my ways...*”?

She was probably the one who told Joseph. How awkward that must have been. How painful it must have been for her to watch and hear Joseph’s reaction to the news. In her heart she had the wonderful comfort of God and His words to her, but in her world she had a mighty burden to bear.

There is Joseph’s joy-bringing side.

Joseph was a godly man and surely delighted in the prospects of such a godly and beautiful young woman as Mary becoming his wife. But “that cock and bull” story she gave him about an angel and all the rest was straight out of fantasyland. Just when his spirit had been plunged to the deepest depths of brokenness and despair, probably even burning anger at “that guy!,” an angel came to him in his fretful sleep and told him what was really going on with Mary. Not only

could he accept this, he was elated with the news. “Yes!” he would marry her, and “Yes!” he would provide her the shelter of his acceptance and the affirmation of his conviction that her child was indeed the promised Redeemer! God was speaking again to His people!

Now imagine Mary’s new joy at knowing she was not alone in this situation, that Joseph believed in her and loved and accepted her. “*God is so good. He is my Shepherd, I shall not want!*”

There is Joseph’s burden-bearing side.

We have already reflected on some of it. But there was a burden he lived with for the rest of his life. Who would believe his story about Mary? Sure, Mary’s family was grateful to him for giving her his protection, but what did his parents think, and say? “Joseph, why don’t you wake up? Who are you kidding? She has been fooling around with some other guy. We’ll get you a nice Jewish girl and you can leave all this mess behind.” Or possibly, “Joseph, how could you do this? You have brought shame on our whole family by your conduct. We can’t hold our heads up in the community any longer. What are we supposed to tell others? What do you have to say for yourself?”

I wonder how many people thought that he might himself have been the father of Mary’s child. After all they were engaged to be married. How many of them must have laughed in his face and said, “Come on, Joseph, who are you kidding? You are not such a godly guy after all. You are just like the rest of us. You and Mary just couldn’t wait.” Joseph had to live with the stories, the snickers, and the jokes for the rest of his life.

There is our joy-bringing side.

The Christmas story is not a fantasy, a fairy tale or folk lore, it is true! It really happened! We know because we have met the Savior, we have the same Holy Spirit living in us as came upon Mary. When we believed in Christ our sins were forgiven, we were cleansed, given the righteousness of the perfect Son of God, and adopted into the family of the Almighty One. He who created all things, the heavens and their limitless light years of distance and countless number of galaxies and stars, the earth and its breath taking beauty, its complexity and the staggering intricacy of cellular and sub cellular creation, is our heavenly Father. He loves us, stays with us, hears and answers our prayers, provides for us, reveals himself to us, and opens our eyes so that we see spiritual realities hidden from those around us who do not believe. All of this and the “...*everything else...*” of Romans 8:32 brings us great joy!

But there is our burden-bearing side.

We live in an age when many consider God and un-necessary carryover from a time when the world did not understand the many things we now can explain so readily. To them God is no longer necessary. We who still believe in him are uneducated, anti-intellectual, foolish people who believe in a book known by supposed scholars to be full of myths, errors, inaccuracies, bias and prejudice. They consider us just to be religious, to be opposed and resisted because we want to “push” our Christianity on everyone else. It is all right to talk about God in general terms, but do not bring the name of Jesus into the conversation. That is not accepted.

We are considered narrow-minded, bigoted, right-wing fanatics who are more of a threat to our culture than just about anything else. The media says very little good about us. We are not seen as a laughing stock in our communities as was Mary and Joseph, we are seen as a threat to the happiness and freedom of expression of others. This is the burden we must bear, and bear it we will, **with joy!**

Our eyes, like Mary’s and Joseph’s, have been opened to the spiritual realities of our universe, we are aware of the warfare raging all around and within us, and we know that the best is yet to

come. He who was born of a virgin, suffered and died under Pontius Pilate, was raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God on high, will come again in the same manner He left, piercing the skies with His glory and splendor, silencing the din with His shout of victory, and overwhelming us with oceans of joy beyond anything we experience now. Hallelujah!

My brothers and sisters, servant-leaders in the kingdom of God, you have the great privilege of preaching this age-old, eternally true, life changing message of the passionate love of God in Christ at this Christmas season. Go for it! And, if you want to draw from these thoughts, draw to your heart's content! We can never exhaust the truths of the Christmas story.

Dick Germaine

Scripture Resources

Matthew 1

Luke 3

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” Luke 1:46 NIV

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.” Isaiah 55:8 NIV

“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Luke 2:19 NIV

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” Romans 8:32 NIV

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33 NIV