

Lighthouse: Advent: Christmas Cliché

Luke 2:8-20

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Can you believe it's the weekend before Christmas again! Amazing! Christmas is an amazing time of the year where we celebrate the historical fact that changed human history. The God of the universe put on skin to move into our neighbourhood. The one who called the galaxies into existence and then breathed life into mankind gave up His throne in heaven to become a peasant confined to the shell of a baby.

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I recently finished reading through the Chronicles of Narnia with my kids – we've since started again – but there is a scene in *The Last Battle*, the final book in the series, where Lucy says: "In our world... a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world." That's Christmas. It's amazing.

But Christmas is a bit of a difficult time for a preacher. And that's because the season is so cliché in Canada. Christmas is shrouded with nostalgia and emotion that turns the most miraculous event in history into something that Hallmark makes a killing over.

And when something becomes a cultural norm it is very easy for it to stop having any real spiritual significance. What I'm saying is tradition is powerful. Just think, what would it take for you to miss Christmas dinner with your family?

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Now, of course spending time with family and friends is a good thing, but the trick is that the true meaning of Christmas can become the vehicle for good things. It's like if you got invited to a friends birthday party at Boston Pizza, but when you arrived you found out the main point of the event was to sample new menu items for a promotional – still good, but not the same.

Another thing that makes Christmas difficult is that everyone shows up at church knowing in advance what I'm going to talk about. Nobody thinks it's Easter. Nobody is expecting some letter of Paul. It's going to be the Christmas story. And that can make this all feel a bit cliché which isn't really good for our souls.

And that's because if God really has put on flesh to become one of us; if Emanuel is true. If Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, was born of a virgin in a stable and grew up living the life that none of us are able to live in order to die the death every one of us deserves. And if He really defeated death once for all and promises eternal life to those who follow Him. If all that's true then Christmas shouldn't be cliché, it should be powerful. But for most of us Christmas has become more warm and fuzzy than powerful.

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Alright, go ahead and grab your Bible, we are in Luke chapter 2 starting in verse 8 today.

Last week we looked at Mary and her incredible response to God bringing stuff into her life that was completely outside her plans for her future. Today we are looking at the incredibly strange people God chose to receive the first news that He was moving into the neighbourhood.¹

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Now as I read this I encourage you to fight the cliché familiarity and put yourself on the hillside as eternity touches the temporal in a completely unprecedented way. Would you stand with me as we read Luke 2 starting in verse 8:

[Read Luke 2:8-20]

You may be seated. Now there is a lot here, but I just want to unpack three things that were anything but cliché in the first century and are still powerfully relevant today. The first is the role fear plays in this encounter.

Did you notice that as heaven gets torn asunder and the divine touches humanity our response is fear – did you get that?

So these shepherds are sitting in a field a little outside Bethlehem and all of a sudden an angel of the Lord shows up and God's glory fills the sky. And here we struggle. You see few of us, I would wager, have seen an angel other than in "It's a Wonderful Life" or on a Precious Moments mug. And as a result when we read about these angels we think of the last kid we saw dressed up at a nativity and think "Ahhh, isn't that nice."

But that's not what we get in this text, instead in this story, and in fact in every other text in scripture where the supernatural rubs shoulders with the natural, the response is terror.

When I was studying for this talk I came across a question posted on a Richard Dawkins atheist forum. And it asked: "If God is real and showed Himself to you, what evidence could He give that would convince you?"²

Now most of the responses on the thread amounted to people saying "There is nothing God could do to prove to me that he exists" – which I found quite interesting. But those who did tackle the question came up with responses like "I'd ask God why He allows bad things to happen to good people." Or "I'd ask Him, "can you create a rock so big you couldn't lift it?"

But what I found most interesting is that these kinds of responses are never what happens when people actually encounter the divine in scripture. Instead the text says "They were greatly afraid." And it's not anxiety. It's not "I'm really nervous about how this might turn out." It is clothes tearing, heart pounding, face to the dirt terror.

¹ Outline adapted from Matt Chandler <https://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/sermons/christmas-light-flower-mound> (Accessed December 20, 2019)

² <https://www.richarddawkins.net/2013/03/what-evidence-would-be-enough/> (Accessed December 21, 2019)

Now why? Why are people so afraid when the divine shows up? It's not just because it is bigger than us – we bump into stuff that's bigger and more powerful than us all the time. But I would argue we're afraid of the divine because we know us.

Here's what I mean. When Isaiah is in the temple and sees a vision of God this is how he responds:

Then I said, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven's Armies." (Isaiah 6:5)

Now Isaiah's a prophet and a pretty righteous dude. If you were putting the people in Israel in a line from greatest sinners to least you wouldn't start with Isaiah. And yet this is his response. And that's because He knows what he's like when no one is around. He knows how easy it is for dishonesty to slip out of his lips. And so the first thing he thinks when he encounters God is "I'm broken, and so if God's showing up to me then I'm done. He's here to kill me." Fear.

But there is something more to fear than just that. Fear is one of those things, like pride, that sits at the very center of what sin is about. So think for a second about those questions that haunt people. Questions like "Am I good enough? If people really knew me would they still love me? Am I a fraud?"

These questions are all rooted in fear – not of the unknown, but because we know us. We know that people would judge if they knew how our outward appearance doesn't match our inner reality. And that's haunting.

But here's what happens when the divine does show up. Instead of exposing what is true about us we get the words "Do not be afraid." The divine brings news that casts out fear – they bring glad tidings.

And this is the second thing I want to draw out here. Now 'glad tidings' existed before Hallmark and refer to something people are going to talk about. You see people are always talking about stuff that is awesome.

So on Friday night I saw Star Wars. And if you saw it and didn't go into the theater expecting the void in your heart to be filled with joy and meaning then you probably enjoyed the movie – it was well done. No spoilers but there are lazars and stuff blows up, and then bigger stuff blows up, and then all sorts of stuff blows up. It was great. And I'm telling you this because people have been designed to worship. We are designed to champion things we like. And that's what a 'glad tidings' is – it's news that has to be passed on.

And so the angel shows up and says "Hey, I know you think I'm here to kill you because you know you, and you know God knows you. But guess what? That's not going to happen today. God has other plans and I've got good news. In fact the news is so good it's going to be the thing everyone's talking about forever.

God has come to drive out fear. He comes to replace the questions we have about not being worthy or good enough. And the way He is going to do this is by changing our frame of reference so that we start focusing on what God wants to do for us rather than what we can do for ourselves. He's reordering our worship to save us from worshipping pathetic gods.

So imagine you were there for a moment. This isn't in the Bible, just let your imagination run for a bit. The angel shows up and says "I know you're not worthy, but I haven't come to kill you so you can stop being afraid. In fact I've come with glad tidings."

And then, just as you are processing that, boom! The sky is full of angels. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them. And they are singing. In this moment you stop texting your 14 best friends about your new iPhone because the angles are reordering worship.

When the divine shows up all the things that you've gotten excited about get put in perspective. Star Wars is great, but not that great. Glory to God in the highest.

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Do you find that in the cliché of Christmas it's difficult to see that?

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Christmas is just a few days away and it's an exciting time of year for children. I've got lots of those so there are packages under the tree with finger holes poked in them. And there is excitement at a level only paralleled by birthdays.

But for those of us who are older than about 12 you have probably started to realize that there is a lot of unrealized eschatology wrapped up in Christmas. What I mean is at this stage my kids really believe that come Christmas morning they are going to be genuinely happy. The holes of longing in their litter hearts are going to be filled.

But I've seen enough Christmases to know that come about noon the disappointment is going to start setting in. You see even though we have everything we want there is still an ache in our hearts for something more.

And so kids are going to start fighting just like any other day. And auntie Jill is probably going to get angry and throw ham across the table – anybody ever experience family drama at Christmas? And turkey is great, but turkey sandwiches for a week gets old.

And while not many of us will voice it there is going to be a nagging question rising in our hearts – "this can't be everything. There must be more."

And the reason we ask that is because Christmas, as good as it is, is only an echo of eternity. We live in an already but not yet reality where we get to taste and see in part, but not in full. And this means that this side of eternity your deepest longings are never going to be satisfied – not even by the genuinely great things in life.

So my wife is an awesome gift of God. I married up, which every guy should aim to do. But here's the thing. Nikki makes a terrible god. I've seen Jerry Maguire, but Nikki doesn't complete me. She's an awesome partner in the gospel. She's a talented woman and a wonderful friend. But she's a terrible god.

All good things make terrible gods. But because our culture has denied the ultimate but still finds itself created to worship we are in the business of making all sorts of good things gods. But kids and grandkids weren't designed to bring ultimate meaning to our lives. Donating your time and money to charity brings a sense of greater purpose, but it wains. Work is awesome. It is amazing to create something and produce something that benefits other people. But as soon as you turn secondary things into ultimate things they show themselves to be bankrupt.

And this is why our world is in such a bad place. God has been taken out of the picture but we still have to worship something. And so we've filled our lives with alternatives that keep coming up short.

Friends, every time your significant other lets you down; every time you don't get the promotion you are striving for; every time the market crashes or your children embarrass you, if these things have become your gods then it is your god that is letting you down. And when your god lets you get let down hard.

But that's why what the angels say here is such good news. They are reordering worship. They are pointing us to the ultimate, the only One who will never disappoint. "Glory to God in the highest."

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The last thing I want to bring out of the text for us today is how, when the divine encounters the natural, anger and shame get replaced by love and joy.

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Now I don't know about you, but I don't know many shepherds. I know some of you have farms, but being a farmer isn't the same as being a shepherd, at least not in the first century.

So shepherds were despised. Let me read you a quote from some first century literature that isn't in the Bible. This is the Mishnah, which is a Jewish commentary on the law. And here's just a couple lines out of it that reflect the prejudice people had towards shepherds. It reads: "Shepherds are incompetent. No one should feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who has fallen in a pit."³

Now if that sounds a little angry it's because shepherds had an incredibly poor reputation. Another guy, Jeremias tells people "To buy wool, milk, or a kid [baby goat] from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property."⁴

³ <https://www.epm.org/resources/2008/Mar/11/shepherds-status/> (Accessed December 20, 2019)

⁴ <https://www.epm.org/resources/2008/Mar/11/shepherds-status/> (Accessed December 20, 2019)

Once I was walking over to McDonalds to pick myself up some health food and a guy rolled down the window of his pick up truck as I walked past and asked me if I was interested in getting a really good deal on the home theater he just happened to have in the back. That guy was a shepherd.

Shepherds weren't even allowed to be admitted in court as witnesses. They were dirty, incompetent thieves. Now I'm not going to ask if there are any dirty, incompetent thieves here today, but if the gospel makes sense to you then the comparison shouldn't be far off. As soon as we stop comparing ourselves with the mess beside us and start comparing ourselves to Christ we all look broken. But look what happens when the good news of God shows up. God rolls it out to the broken and unworthy.

Here's the thing with God's economy, when He shows up the world gets flipped around. In our world it is the rich, the famous and the powerful who get the good seats, they get to bud to the front of the line. But in God's economy it doesn't work that way. It is the people who know they are broken who get the good news He has to offer.

And it's the same today as it was 2000 years ago. It isn't the put together who get God, it is the needy. And what that means is that everything we consider blessings and curses have been turned on their heads. It is the ones who need the Saviour God sent into the world that ultimately come out on top.

Friends, God is with us, Emanuel, driving out our fear with His good news, driving out the questions of whether we are worthy or good enough. And changing our affections so that we join the angelic in doing the thing we were created to do – bringing glory to God in the highest. It is Christmas and God is pulling from the least of these and making us into sons and daughters.