

FOCUS: The Good News is we are made righteous through the saving acts of God (Fourth in a series)

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Bethlehem. It's a name we know so well, not just from its historic place as the birthplace of the Messiah, but also in the contemporary news as a place often under siege and occupation. Located just about five miles from Jerusalem, Bethlehem is one of the few villages over which there hasn't been a great dispute over its actual location. This ancestral home of David and Joseph was about seventy miles from Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary lived. It was quite a trip then, and given the current political geography of the region, not an easy journey today, either.

The prophet Micah offers us one of the several prophecies regarding the coming of a messiah, an anointed one, as ruler of Israel. Here, the prophet declares the coming of a ruler from the town of Bethlehem, and that ruler will be sent by the Lord God himself. This is a town of special significance to the Hebrew people. First, it was the place where Jacob's wife, Rachel, died while giving birth to their son, Benjamin, whom Rachel named "Ben-oni," or child of sorrow. As the great nineteenth century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, noted in a sermon on the fourth Sunday in Advent, 1855, how Mary might have named her child Ben-oni as well, had she not been instructed otherwise, after Simeon's song of praise and thanksgiving in the temple, when Simeon declares to her that the child, destined for greatness, would also die at the hands of human beings, and in the process, reveal that which is in the hearts of many.<sup>1</sup>

Bethlehem was called one of the "little clans of Judah," and that's a proper term for it. Bethlehem was indeed a small town, and how fitting it is that Jesus would be born there. After all, as Spurgeon notes as well, during his ministry, Jesus was regularly found in the presence and company of the little ones—children, yes, but also those who were not the "big people" of the country, but those on the margins and sidelines. Oh, how this fits so logically into God's plan for salvation, and how clear the prophets seem to us who look back over the millennia with the benefit of hindsight.

Bethlehem is the birthplace of David, the shepherd king, and the prophets knew that the messiah, the promised one who would lead the people to a new level of prominence would be a shepherd King as well. But the people were expecting a powerful warrior king, not unlike the warrior-lover whom we heard described last Sunday. The psalmist talks of the coming of the shepherd as well, pleading for the Lord to return into their midst so that the people might be restored and in being

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, C. H., "The Incarnation and Birth of Christ" (Number 57), Dec 23, 1855. [www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0057.htm](http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0057.htm)

restored by the presence of their God, be saved. This is all part of God's plan of salvation.

And then comes Mary, the mother of our Lord. The teenager from Nazareth, engaged, but not married to Joseph, is visited by the angel Gabriel, who says, "Most favored one! The Lord your God has a great gift for you! You, dear woman, shall become pregnant and give birth to a son who will be the Savior of all people!" Mary, young, innocent, and scared to death, replies "Who, me? Why me?" Remember, in first century, unlike the twenty-first century, if an unmarried woman was found to be pregnant, the penalty for her was death. But, Mary, we are told, quickly came to understand the significance of what was happening to her.

After her visit from Gabriel, Mary heads off to the countryside, to the home of her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary is scared for her life, and so she goes to a place she knows is safe. She also knows that Elizabeth is pregnant, too. Elizabeth and the yet-to-be-born John are *both* excited about being in the presence of the Theotokos, the God-bearer, as our Orthodox friends often call Mary. God's plan of salvation is moving forward. God has taken the greatest step forward, offered the greatest sign of his love for his people, by taking upon himself human form.

In his 1940 work, "Ethics as Formation Power," Lutheran theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhöffer writes about God's incarnation in the plan of salvation:

"The figure of the reconciler, of the diving human Jesus Christ, steps into the middle between God and world, into the center of all that happens. Through this figure, the mystery of the world is disclosed, just as in the same figure the mystery of God is revealed. No abyss of evil can hide from him through whom the world is reconciled with God. But the abyss of God's love encompasses even the most abysmal godlessness of the world. In an incomprehensible reversal of all righteous and pious thinking, God declares *God's* guilt toward the world and in doing so *extinguishes the guilt of the world*....God wills to be guilty of our sin, and takes over the punishment and suffering sin has brought upon us."<sup>2</sup>

This is part of the scandal of God's plan of salvation. God comes and takes human form. God doesn't seek out the perfect human being in the world and simply use that human as his tool. No, God comes and *becomes* human himself. As we try to be less and less "human" and more like God, God comes and takes on the *human* form and acts like us. As Bonhöffer notes, God does this to show us that he *wants* us to be real, honest, and authentic human beings, and he'll take us just like we are.

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<sup>2</sup> Bonhöffer, Dietrich. "Ecce Homo" in *Meditations on the Cross* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 47. Emphasis added.

God doesn't expect us to be like him. God expects us to be like ourselves—warts and sins and all. God loves us so much that for centuries, he promised to send the people a Messiah. When he does, it turns out to be something the people never expected.

One of my favorite storytellers is Ralph Milton. He wrote a wonderful piece on the unexpected nature of God becoming incarnate. In closing, I'd like to share his story with you, and encourage you to ponder it until we gather again on Wednesday to celebrate our Lord's nativity.

“It's a marvelous, wonderful, wise, loving, practical joke.

Christmas! The nativity.

There's God, down through the centuries, listening to the prophesies about the Messiah.

Some of them were wonderful and beautiful and spoke the mind of God.

Others thundered away about the Conqueror, the one who'd come in on a white horse, with sword and shield, a leader that would be better and tougher than King David.

So God gave them a gift they badly needed. But not the gift they expected.

It was King David II they wanted. It was a tiny baby they got.

What a hoot!

They wanted power. So God gave them the power of weakness. They wanted a conqueror. So God gave them love that conquers all.

That must have been good for a heavenly belly laugh, if a belly laugh is possible for a God who is spirit.

It was not the laughter of derision. It was the laughter of a loving, gentle parent waking up long before the kids on Christmas morning, waking up in anticipation of the face of the child when that special gift is opened, the child who receives so much more than it ever dared ask for in a letter to Santa.

And the laughter of God is the laughter of a pleased-as-punch parent who receives the Christmas thank-you hug of a delighted child.

The joke comes back every year.”<sup>3</sup>

The joke is on us. God's plan of salvation, however, is no joke. Come back on Wednesday and enjoy the punch line. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>3</sup> Milton, Ralph, “Christmas,” in *Sermon Seasonings* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books), 28.