

The Proclamations About Jesus Matthew 1 and 2; Luke 1 and 2

I'm not sure if it's because I'm getting older and waxing a bit nostalgic or if it's just really been on my mind more this year, but I've thinking a lot about why people celebrate Christmas who don't celebrate the Christ of Christmas. I mean, what's the point right? Why celebrate something you don't believe in?

I don't celebrate Hanukkah which is the celebration of the eight day Jewish festival of lights honoring the Maccabean revolt against Egypt.

I don't celebrate Mawlid el-Nabi, which is the day Muslims celebrate the birth of Mohammed.

I don't observe the Catholic celebration of Immaculate Conception, the day they honor Mary who was preserved from original sin forever.

I don't celebrate the Wiccan/Pagan Solstice which is the day the earth is turned away from the sun on the shortest daylight of the year and the day they then honor the winter-born king, symbolizing the rebirth of the sun.

There are lots of holidays I don't observe for obvious reasons, but I fail to really understand why those who have little or nothing to do with Christ 364 other days of the year will celebrate His birth. I'm at a loss to understand, but they have their reasons.

Several years ago Pew Research did a survey and found that 81% of non-Christians celebrate Christmas, many indicating that it is unavoidably entrenched in American society. They found that 76% of Asian-American Buddhists and 73% of Hindus celebrate Christmas. 32% of Jews have a Christmas tree in their home and some American Muslims celebrate both the religious and cultural aspects of Christmas.

They also found that 65% of Christians say Christmas is mostly a religious holiday while most

non-Christians see it as just a cultural event.

I read about one family who celebrates all the holidays regardless of the religion it is affiliated with. They celebrate the cultural diversity and admit if food is involved they join the party.

When Eric Holder was the Attorney General under the Obama administration he was quoted as saying "never let a good crisis go to waste".

It's my opinion that many folks and especially the retail market have capitalized on something similar – "never let a good holiday go to waste".

But Christmas wasn't always about a portly bearded man flying around the world aided by flying reindeer all in a single night to bring presents.

Back in the fourth century the church chose December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth in an effort to counter the pagan ritual of sun worship that happened at that time. Pagan rituals included feasts and big bonfires to the sun god in an effort to bring the sun back to life during the long winter days.

There is plenty of debate over whether or not elements of the ancient pagan rituals are part of the Christian Christmas celebration. Some suggest that the idea of giving gifts dates back to the Romans who marked the month of December as the Festival of Saturnalia honoring the planet. December was a time for giving gifts to one another.

Others consider that gift giving started with a benevolent Bishop named Nicholas who came to be known as St. Nicholas and the patron saint of children. Children in the Netherlands would put hay in their shoes to feed St. Nicholas's white horse as he delivered his presents.

To say that there is a lot of confusion about Christmas is an understatement. Even though the exact date of Jesus's birth is unknown, December 25th is considered the most holy date of the year by billions of people around the world. In an interview

with a person who claims to be a humanist she stated that their family celebrates Christmas as a way of showing respect for other faiths even going so far as to attend a service if asked. It helps them understand what others believe. She said they like the idea of Christmas because of its emphasis on kindness, love and compassion shown to others, especially at this time of the year.

Those seem like noble reasons to celebrate Christmas but they still fall far short of its true meaning. Nor does it really answer why folks who have nothing to do with Christ want to honor that day. Even showing respect for the day isn't a viable reason. It is the most wonderful time of the year but not because kids are jingle belling and telling everyone to be of good cheer or when friends are calling or host parties to toast marshmallows with hearts glowing around the mistletoe.

Christmas is a time when once again we proclaim as the angel did 2000 years ago that in the city of Bethlehem the Savior has been born. It is the sound of joy to the world because the Lord is come with the invitation to let earth receive her King, and every heart prepare Him room. But sadly many will miss Christmas. They will miss the proclamation of good news.

On one hand I like the thought of going all out in celebration if Christ is the focal point. Of all people we have reason to celebrate more than any other. Let's be the father who welcomed the prodigal son home with a massive feast. Let's be exuberant in our celebration. Jesus's coming was a big deal. It was the fulfillment of centuries of prophecies and the age old promise given to Adam and Eve in the garden. Jesus's coming should be celebrated, so make it big and all about Him. It's a way of proclaiming to others that we celebrate and honor Christ for His coming. But let's not celebrate His coming just one day a year. His coming should have a profound impact on how we live as Christ followers every day.

On the other hand I think it's a time of quiet contemplation. Jesus came to earth on account of me. That He came is a sobering thought when we consider the why of His coming – to be my sacrifice for sin. He came for the purpose of seeking and saving the lost, to be God's gift through His sacrifice so we could have eternal life. So in your celebrating take time to contemplate why He had to come. It's because of my sin and your sin. Don't miss that about Christmas. That He is the Savior is part of the proclamation by the angels.

The past two weeks we talked about the promise about Jesus and the prophecies about Jesus, today I want us to consider the proclamations about Jesus.

As we look at some of the characters in the unfolding drama that we read about in the gospels I want you to ask yourself two questions. Who best characterizes you and what response best describes how you feel about Christ's arrival?

Let's consider first the reaction by Mary to the proclamation about Jesus.

I. THE REACTION BY MARY TO THE PROCLAMATION ABOUT JESUS – Luke 1:26-38

Imagine for a moment that you are Mary. She wasn't just an average, run of the mill girl from small town Israel. Even though she was a peasant she had royal blood running through her veins. But it wasn't the simplicity of her life that God had His eye on her to be the mother of Jesus. The angel said it best. It's not something he came up with on his own. This message came from God. The angel was just the messenger. They don't get to say whatever they want. They have to deliver the message as it was given to them and this message was quite an important message at that. It looks past the mundane simple nature that made up her life and gets to the heart of the matter. "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

It's the same type of description that we read about the likes of Noah and Enoch and Moses and David. Remember, God doesn't look on the outside, He looks at the nature of our heart and what He saw in Mary was a kind of godly character that would be able to bear the tremendous burden of enduring the biting tongues of town gossipers who would whisper as she walked by pregnant outside of marriage. She had the kind of integrity that trusted God above everything else even though she didn't fully understand it at the time. She had the kind of faith that would echo the words of Job who said "Blessed be the name of the Lord" even though things didn't make sense. She had the kind of character that would endure the sight of her son hanging lifeless on the cross. She was highly favored by God.

Mary asked a simple question: "how will this be?" It wasn't a question asked in unbelief or resistance. It was a legitimate question from a willing faith asking for information about how that could occur when she was a virgin. Hers was a different question than Zachariah asked who questioned the angel out of unbelief when he was told that Elizabeth would become pregnant with the forerunner of the Messiah. He might as well have said You've got to be kidding, right? Is this a joke?

The angel gave Mary three answers or reasons. Each answer was birthed in the power of the divine. The first answer was that God would do it. The Holy Spirit would be the means by which she would get pregnant and become the mother of the Most High, the one who would be given the throne of David to reign forever over the house of Jacob.

The second was also about what God could do. The angel told Mary that God had performed a miracle in the life of her cousin Elizabeth who had been barren. We read that according to Scripture she was old, too old to have a baby, but nevertheless God had made it happen, because He can.

The third explanation by the angel was about the

power of God. Nothing is impossible with Him. What He can do is supernatural.

That's a good lesson for all of us to learn. When God asks us to do something difficult, even if we don't understand the how or the why, nothing is too hard for Him. All He asks is that we trust Him and step out in faith.

William Plumer poses a question we should all ask ourselves: "Why are we so slow to trust an infinite God?"

If there is one word to describe Mary's reaction to the proclamation of the coming Christ by the angel it would be readiness. She was a willing and obedient servant to do whatever the Lord wanted her to do. She didn't hesitate or waver. She didn't offer any excuses like Moses did.

Are you ready to do the Lord's will? Is your response like that of Mary's: "I am the Lord's servant"?

Next we consider the reaction by Joseph.

II. THE REACTION BY JOSEPH TO THE PROCLAMATION ABOUT JESUS – Matthew 1:18-25

I like Joseph. He's a man with principle. He has integrity and high morals. He's honest and upright. He's described in verse 19 as a righteous man. He's the kind of guy you want on a project because you can count on him to do it and do it right. He won't cut corners to save a buck and pocket the savings. As a carpenter, if he was working on a job site he wouldn't leave extra nails in nail pouch to take home for a project he's working on in the backyard.

But he had a dilemma. The girl of his dreams, the one he was engaged to, the one to whom he had pledged the rest of his life, was pregnant and not by him. What should he do? What would we do in such a situation? I think he gave this a lot of thought. After all, he had godly character and that

led him to want to do the right thing not for him – for her. Verse 19 shows us how really selfless he was. Most men would just dump someone like that faster than a speeding bullet. But his thoughts were about action that would bring the least amount of scandal and shame – not for him, but for Mary. In the middle of his contemplation he was visited by the angel Gabriel with a solution and why the solution made sense. I'm not sure this solution even crossed his mind. He was to take her as his wife because the baby she is carrying was the doing of the Holy Spirit. It was done miraculously. This child is Immanuel – God with us, the promised Messiah who would save His people from their sins.

That news was a game changer for Joseph. We read that he got up and took Mary as his wife. The word I would use to describe the reaction of Joseph to the proclamation that the Savior was about to be born to of all women, his fiancé, was one of readjustment. What he intended on doing wasn't what he ended up doing. He had to readjust his thinking and his actions in order to obey what God wanted.

When you are thinking about doing something and God leads you to do something else are you will to readjust your actions and obey Him?

Our third character is found back in Luke 2. It is here that we take a look at the shepherds reactions.

III. THE REACTION BY THE SHEPHERDS TO THE PROCLAMATION ABOUT JESUS – Luke 2:8-20

We find ourselves out in the surrounding fields away from the hustle and bustle of the census. We are removed from the noise of people to the remote fields of bleating sheep, crackling fires and low whispers. The shepherds tending their flocks were uneducated. Their position brought them no power or influence or money. One author describes shepherds as dirty and ragged and though they performed a vital service tending sheep for sacrifices they were very low on the social ladder.

While Scripture uses them for poetic symbolism their very occupation made them insignificant. But God has a different view of them than how society viewed them. Paul explains it this way:

I Corinthians 1:26-28 “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are.”

These men were of no consequence yet God chose them to represent mankind as being the recipients of the greatest news ever told in history. An angel proclaimed to them the news of the Savior's birth. God was showing us that He is no respecter of persons. No matter what your social status, anyone can come to Him. He wants everyone to hear the good news of the Savior.

They show us the heart of those who are most receptive to such news. They show us that to be receptive a person must understand their need. They were already searching in their heart for a Savior and on this night He was revealed to them. Aside from Mary and Joseph, they were the first witnesses to the news of the Saviors birth.

Now I want you to notice a little phrase that sort of just blends in with the rest of the narrative. It's found at the end of verse 10. Look at verses 10-11 for context. This is the angel speaking to the shepherds proclaiming to them the news that in the city of David, Bethlehem if there is any doubt as to where, the Savior is born. “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.”

There it is. The fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that through him all the world would be blessed was wrapped in swaddling clothes. He is

not just to be the Savior for the Jews, but Savior for anyone who comes to Him. He was born for you and me. The hope of the promised redeemer from Genesis 3:15 was born that day not just to fulfill a Scriptural promise but to be our Savior.

So what was the response of the shepherds to the proclamation of the Savior's birth? We could say they were receptive. Even though their initial response was fear at the sight of the angel, they hurried into town at the news and bidding of the angel in order to find the baby just as the angel said.

Maybe a better word than receptive to describe their response is the word rejoicing. We see it in verse 20. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen."

No matter how long you have been saved, do you find yourself receptive and still rejoicing at the birth of Jesus, born to be our Savior?

Our next character is back in Matthew. Here we will see the reaction of the Magi to the proclamation about the birth of Jesus.

IV. THE REACTION BY THE MAGI TO THE PROCLAMATION ABOUT JESUS – Matthew 2:1-2, 9-12

No one really knows how long they travelled, how many magi there were or even when they arrived. They made the same assumption that since He was a king he should be born in the palace. So they went to Jerusalem. Their hearts were in the right place seeking the newborn King, but they were sincerely mistaken. They had come to worship the King of the Jews. They had followed His star from the east. No one knows for sure what they really saw that was used as a compass to lead them to seek the newborn king. Whatever it was it was a divinely orchestrated means of guiding these men with sincere hearts who came to worship. Keep in mind these men were not Jews, they were Gentiles

coming from a distant land to pay homage to the rightful king.

If it had been written 2000 years ago this chorus would have resonated from their heart.

We worship and adore You,
Bowling down before You,
Songs of praises singing,
Hallelujahs ringing.
Hallelujah,
Hallelujah,
Hallelujah!
Amen.

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There's was a desire to offer genuine worship as this passage shows us that He will be worshipped by all nations and peoples of the world. He is a King for the whole world, a King to be worshipped by all. In their worship they gave Him gifts. They were precious and priceless gift. They gave the best they had to offer for they were showing reverence to the King. He deserves the best we have in our worship. The best word then to describe these Gentile worshippers is reverence.

Is that your response to the Savior? Do you come in reverence and give Him your best?

In the same passage we see another reaction to the coming Savior. We see the reaction of Herod.

V. THE REACTION BY HEROD TO THE PROCLAMATION ABOUT JESUS – Matthew 2:3-8, 16-18

Every story seems to have a villain. The birth of the Savior is no different. Herod was king, appointed by Rome. He had been in power for some time. From what we know about him, he was ruthless and cunning, this in spite of having rebuilt the Temple for the Jews more out of hope to gain their favor than because he was religious. He was not at all happy with the news of another king who was born, someone who in time might vie for the throne. He

was jealous and felt threatened. He asked the religious leaders if they had any idea where he was born since he knew it hadn't taken place in the capital city of Jerusalem. After he found out the location he deceived the Magi into believing he too wanted to worship and asked them to return with the news of His identity. We can only guess why he didn't go himself armed with troops since his intention was to eliminate this threat. Perhaps it was to avoid raising suspicion as to his real motive.

What happened next is beyond despicable.

Realizing that he had been tricked at his own game, he ordered soldiers to march on Bethlehem and kill all baby boys under the age of two.

I have three words to describe the response of Herod regarding the Messiah. One is rejection, the second is retaliation and the third is reprehensible.

Only in the sovereign mind of God does it make any sense that He would allow such a tragedy to occur. This would fulfill the words of the prophet Jeremiah (31:15) who spoke about the mourning of Rachel and the words of Hosea who prophesied that "out of Egypt I have called My son" (Hosea 11:1). The original context of this prophecy was about Moses returning to Egypt to deliver Israel, but Matthew applied it to Jesus since they left Bethlehem as instructed by the angel to go to Egypt.

Unfortunately there are those today just like Herod in their response to the news about the Savior. They vehemently reject Him.

Others are like the inn keeper or the people the shepherds told. They are reluctant to believe. They're reluctant for various reasons but the response ultimately is the same as Herod. They reject Him.

I want to consider just one more reaction in this narrative about the birth of Jesus. Once more we need to flip back to Luke.

VI. THE REACTION BY ANNA TO THE PROCLAMATION ABOUT JESUS – Luke 2:36-38

Anna was an old woman. She was widowed at an early age yet stayed at the Temple to worship and to wait. This passage tells us what she was waiting for. She was waiting for the promise of God to send the Messiah and in the middle of Simeon's declaration she joined the little party and gave testimony to those who would listen that redemption had arrived.

The word I choose to describe Anna as she waited is redemptive.

Here was her hope. He is our hope.

Here was her expectation. He is our expectation.

Here was her faith. That must be our faith.

Here was her confidence. That is our confidence.

Jesus is the long awaited Redeemer, the one whose purpose in coming was to seek and to save the lost, to save us from our sins. It could be done no other way than for God to become man.

What is your response about Jesus today? Like Anna do you see Him as your Redeemer?

No matter what people think about Jesus or how they respond one thing is very clear. The birth of Jesus in such a humble way to two insignificant parents has dominated history and impacted the world for two thousand years.

After thinking about all the different responses to the birth of the Savior, what is your response?

Readiness?

Readjustment?

Rejoicing?

Reverence?

Rejection?

Redemption?

How will you celebrate Jesus this year?