

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 24 & 25, 2016
John Crosby
The Wonder of Jesus | Luke 2:1-14**

I especially love earlier services because you get to see all generations involved. We need all generations to hear the story, partly because those of us who have grey hair—or no hair—we know what happens next. The surprise is gone out of the story for us, but the little ones need us to tell the story well. To tell them what does come next because their enthusiasm somehow meshes together the Grinch and Scrooge and Santa and Jesus all in one. So, we need one another because while we've got the story right in our heads, they still have something going on in their heart. There is something that is happening in their heart that gives them a sense of wonder. We badly need wonder. We're a culture that loves explanations, which is good, but we need wonder, and Christmas is one of the places where God offers that. One of the best parts of Christmas for me is the story, and I love the fact that in scripture, no story in the Bible ever starts out, "Once upon a time..." It's not supposed to be a fairy tale. It's not supposed to be a great story. It's supposed to be history. It's supposed to have the smell of reality. It's not "Once upon a time."

Hundreds of years before it happened, God is already saying, "Mark your calendars." He sends the prophets to talk about the Messiah who will come and turn things around. Nothing will be the same after the Messiah comes. Start to look for this. For hundreds of years, He says *put it on the calendar*, but the problem is the invitations don't go out. The invitations don't go out until right until the drama itself starts and then it does not say, "Once upon a time." As Rich said, it's grounded in history. It says,

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) [Luke 2:1-2]

Syria was in the headlines then; Syria is in the headlines today. And blood still flows, and hope is needed.

We learn about the story of Jesus' birth because of His biography. You know,

there are four biographies in the Bible—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—but the story of Jesus’ birth is only told in two of them. It’s told in the Gospel of Luke and in the Gospel of Matthew, and from very, very different perspectives. Luke is the author whose biography of Jesus keeps talking about how He sees the people that other people don’t. He looks for the women. He looks for the non-Jews. He looks for the sinners. He looks over and over outside the box, and He looks down the social ladder. So, Luke tells the story of Jesus’ birth from the perspective of the shepherds. Now the shepherds, if we were to think about it in the 21st century, the shepherds have a job that’s a lot like the nightshift at McDonalds. It’s the job you take when you can’t get any other job. There is no problem for the angels to convince the shepherds to leave the sheep and run into the city because something unbelievable is going to happen. That’s Luke’s story...the angels invite the shepherds. And then Matthew tells another story. Matthew’s goal is to have his Jewish audience believe that Jesus is the king. Not only the Messiah, but He is from the lineage of kings and He is destined to be the king, so Matthew tells the story from the perspective of royalty. He talks about how, in a country far away, the wise men, the magi, the three kings, saw something so unique that they came hundreds of miles across different countries, and when they arrived in Jerusalem, they couldn’t quite tell where they were supposed to go...the star wasn’t that direct. So, since there was no GPS and no directory, they went to their friends, they went to the other royalty; they went to the king. And they said, “King, where is the one that has been born? The new king?” Looking around the palace to see where the baby might be. And we know the story of Herod and how he tries to deceive, and yet, following the star, the wise men end up in front of the baby the same way, bringing their beautiful presents to honor the new king.

So, whether it goes out to the inner city shift-worker, or to the penthouse royalty, its an invitation that says *Come here! Big things are happening!* The shepherds arrive early, but the magi still get there on time. Christmas is an invitation to something different, and it says, “If you don’t want to miss it, you’d better leave home now.”

As they went home, and they both went home—the shepherds and the wise men—were changed. They felt like they wouldn’t ever quite be the same because the shepherds would say to their friends, until their friends couldn’t stand to hear anymore, “I wish you could have heard that music. I’ve never heard music like that before. It sounded like, well...it sounded like what it must sound like in heaven. It haunts me.” And the wonder of the music changed them. In the

same way, when they got back from their journey, the wise men must have talked to each other and to others around them and said, "I'm telling you the truth. The star was going like this and all of a sudden the star went the other way. Stars don't do that! It led us to this place."

This is one who has the wonder of the angel's songs and the power to move the stars. Wonder is what we have been talking about all month. Power to move the stars is what I want to talk about this Christmas Eve.

I actually, in a second, knew that I wanted to talk about power the first week of December, at our staff prayer time. We have a new staff person in our kids' department. He's a young man named Stanton Peterson. Stanton comes from Capetown, South Africa. He is not new to the states, but he is newly married. He's a lot like Trevor Noah, you know, the new host of The Daily Show...mixed race, which is a tough, tough thing to be in South Africa. He was giving the devotion that day and he said, "I remember one day, living in Capetown, and the TV was on in the background. All of a sudden all of the adults were rushing into the room. Everybody packed in, watching the TV. They clustered around the TV to watch millions of people fill the streets." It looked like this (picture shown). Millions of people filled the streets of Capetown because coming out of the bay of the harbor of Capetown, across from the dock of Capetown was this African named Nelson Mandela. There was a sense that history was being made, and Mandela was greeted with millions of people all shouting, "Amandla, amandla, amandla awayto. Amandla awayto." It sounds like Mandela, but it's amandla awayto. Can we say that together? Amandla awayto. Now you speak Shona. Amandla awayto; it means power given to us—power to us, or power to the people. It was a celebration of the release of their hero from prison. It was the promise of a new life for a new South Africa where the powerful had gone down to the bottom and those on the bottom had gone to the top. Power had been reversed. And Stanton says, "I'll never forget that day." He thought of what real power was and who was really weak. And I thought, listening to him, that the power displayed at the birth of Jesus, who moves the stars and has angels singing His praise, was real power, but power that was put in a manger.

At Christmas, God wants to show us that real power starts here. The power that made the universe says real power, God's power, starts tiny. It starts small. It starts like a mustard seed, or like a little boy, taking on a giant. Or like a baby, the real power of the universe starts small and as it grows it teaches something very different. It's different than the power of the world. This power, the power of God,

is the power to change hearts instead of conquering them. God's power is about serving rather than winning. This new power says when you are hurt, rather than getting vengeance, forgive. It's a different kind of power than our world rewards. As a matter of fact, it's the kind of power that our world is very uncomfortable with.

And for millennia, people have resisted the real story of the Christmas manger. God wanted us to know the nature of the kingdom of heaven. He wanted us to know that, right from the start, the manger is a symbol of what the new king is bringing. That the ruler of the universe intends to win back God's lost children, not by overwhelming us with the power of the world, but by winning us with love. And at first this message sounded so strange, people just didn't buy it. We've grown up with it for 1000 years; it has shaped our world, but when it first came out people just didn't understand it. Paul said to his audience,

“I'm not ashamed of this story of good news, for it is the power of God to save.” [Romans 1:16 paraphrased]

And Paul said,

“Jews demand signs—prove it to me. And Greeks want to appear wise—that makes no sense. But we who know Jesus, we preach Christ crucified. And the Jews stumble over him, and to the wise its foolishness. But to all the people that God calls—Jews and Greeks and anybody else—Christ is the power of God. And the wisdom of God, for the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of human beings, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

[1 Corinthians 1:22-25 paraphrased]

For God, it can't be about power. If God wants to, He has the power of the angels. He could flip the world upside down. He could make all the stars line up in a straight line. He could make you bend down as a fearful subject. He has that kind of power. But God wants not to rule us, He wants to save us, and He wants to save us through a different kind of power—the power that loves and never gives up. That's the true miracle of Christmas. The true miracle of Christmas is that when I see the stars going in a different direction, when I hear songs from heaven, I might know that God is wonderful and powerful, but I don't know what God thinks of me. When I come on Christmas morning and I look in the manger, I realize that we'd never know where we stood with God, if God had not come and

stood with us—that the power of God is revealed in love. God has come and God wants to stand with you. Not with us...with you. So the invitation for Christmas has gone out again to the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. It goes to brown people and red people and white people and straight people and gay people and rich people...and it comes to you, and it says, “Are you ready to leave home?” Christmas is an invitation, and wherever you’re coming from, now is the time to go.

Lord Jesus, I thank you that the invitation gets renewed every year, because I get so religious, I miss it. You don’t want me to appear religious; You want me to get up and follow You, to learn the power of love that will not let go, of forgiveness that will renew, service instead of being served, and joy, great joy. For You come with the power of heaven and You bring it to earth, and we know where we stand with You, because You stand next to us. In the name of the Father, in the name of the Son, in the name of the Holy Spirit, Happy Birthday.

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