

“God’s Favorites”

Luke 2:1-20

December 21, 2008

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A word on an important term. I will use on several occasions in the following sermon the noun “incarnation” and the adjective “incarnate.” These are English words formed from a Latin original. “Incarnation” is formed from the Latin preposition *in* and the noun *caro* meaning “flesh” with the addition of a suffix that turns the prepositional phrase “in the flesh” into a noun. So incarnation means “infleshment.” “Flesh” in this usage does not mean “meat” or even “body” but, as often in New Testament Greek, from which this usage comes, the human nature. So, to speak of *the incarnation* is to speak of God the Son, the eternal second person of the Triune God, taking to himself a human nature so that in a moment in time, at the moment of his conception in the womb of his virgin mother, he became both God *and* man, two distinct natures in one person. This is, of course, the central mystery of the Christian faith and the fundamental assertion of the Christmas narrative in both Matthew and Luke: in Jesus Christ, God became also man for man’s salvation. The *incarnate* Christ is thus the Messiah who is both God and man.

Text Comment

v.3 It is a point of the greatest conceivable importance that the narrative of the birth of Jesus is as unashamedly rooted in history as it is: during the reign of Augustus and while Quirinius was governor. This will continue throughout the Gospels and, indeed, to the end of the New Testament. These wonderful things happened *in those days, under those governments*. If Jesus was born when Augustus was emperor, he died during the reign of Tiberius, during the governorship of Pontius Pilate, while Caiaphas was high priest, all figures known from other historical sources. Whatever others may sometimes think or say, this story, this history, this account, this narrative of the Lord Jesus Christ’s birth is not mythology in any accepted sense of the word. The authors of the Gospels were writing what everyone understands to be *history* a narration of things that happened in the world. People will make their own judgments about whether these reports faithfully reproduce what happened, but there can be no mistaking the fact that the Gospel writers themselves intended their readers to understand that these events occurred in precisely the same way that Augustus’ reign or Quirinius’ governorship occurred. Christ’s birth was a real event in the real world in the same way that *taxes* are real! And we all know how real taxes are! Into the everyday world of that time, into its population, its politics, and into its social currents, came suddenly and unexpectedly from heaven this mighty and wonderful and *utterly* unprecedented interruption.

The significance of this claim that the supernatural birth of Christ is an event of history is openly admitted even by unbelievers. Take, for example, one of the champions of religious relativism and pluralism in our generation, John Hick, the English religious philosopher. In his book, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, Hick admits that he is happy to believe in the incarnation as a religious “idea,” a metaphor for God’s nearness to man. But he will have nothing to do with it *as history*, as an event in the real world, as something that actually happened. He wants nothing to do with the Christmas history as it is related

in the Bible, God the Son being born a human child to a virgin mother in the days of Augustus and Quirinius. We cannot believe that God actually became a man in Jesus Christ, Hick argues, because if we did that, *we would have to accept that Christianity is alone the truth about God and salvation*; we would have to accept Christianity's exclusive claim, and we can't do that, we can't believe that. Hick rejects the incarnation as history not because he has some proof that it didn't happen, but because he sees so clearly that to accept it as history would require him to believe things he does not want to believe, chief among them that Christianity alone shows mankind the way of salvation.

- v.5 What a world of meaning in that delightful way of putting the situation.
- v.8 The fields today identified as “Shepherds’ Fields” are some two miles from Bethlehem, toward the Dead Sea, and below the snow line. It is wonderful to imagine David as a young man, centuries before, walking over these same fields, tending to his father’s flocks, fighting off the lion and the bear. Once again, the text does not say that Jesus was born at night; that thought is taken over from the time of the appearance of the angels to the shepherds, which could have been hours or even a few days after the Lord’s birth.
- v. 15 “The Lord.” The shepherds instinctively realized the significance of a word spoken or sung by angels. *God* had spoken to them.

For many years, as you all are well aware, the effort has been made in western culture and particularly in American popular culture to diminish the controversial aspect of Christmas. The Christmas message was in many ways made sentimental, harmless, and altogether less distinctively Christian. And interestingly that effort was unintentionally aided by the translation of Luke 2:14 in the never enough praised *King James Bible*. In that English translation for generations Christians had read that the angels, in announcing the birth of the Messiah, said to the shepherds,

“Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth, goodwill to men.”

It was that translation that Handel took up into his *Messiah* and it was that translation that was repeated in countless Christmas carols. Well there is nothing very controversial about saying or singing “Peace on earth, goodwill to men.” Anyone and everyone can say that. You don’t have to be a Christian or even religious to say that. Even if it were taken, as it sometimes was, following the translation in the Vulgate, the Latin Bible, to mean “peace on earth to men of good will,” there was, again, nothing distinctively Christian in such a message. Everyone naturally thinks that men of good will should be and will be blessed with a greater measure of peace. Who more than George Bailey should be happy at Christmas time!

But no modern translation of the Bible into English renders the angelic announcement that way any longer. “Peace on earth, goodwill to men” is not what the angels said to the shepherds. What they said was, as our *New International Version* has it,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men *on whom his favor rests.*”

That is, the message of peace the angels were announcing, the peace that was being brought from heaven by the Messiah the incarnate Son of God, was for people upon whom God's favor rests. The *Revised Standard Version* and the *English Standard Version* based upon it, perhaps the two most authoritative modern translations of the English Bible, read

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those *with whom he is pleased.*”

That is, the good news is for people with whom God is pleased. There is no dispute as to the proper translation of the text. I won't bore you with Greek grammar and don't need to: that is what the words mean and everyone admits it.

But if God's favor rests upon certain people – the implication is clear that it does not rest on everyone – upon whom does that favor rest? No doubt the shepherds wondered that very thing as they pondered what they had been told. *Who are God's favorites, in other words?* With whom is God pleased? Well the Xmas history is full of such people. The Christmas history itself identifies the class of people upon whom God's favor rests. In the narratives of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke we are given a cross-section, a representative sampling of God's favorites. We have great men and small, rich and poor, men and women, younger people and older people. It is the presence of these people – God's favorites – who lend such simplicity, charm, beauty, and humanity to what would otherwise be the narrative of a divine visitation so overwhelming, so other-worldly as likely to leave us silent rather than singing at Christmas time. But add Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, the wise men, Simeon and Anna – all of whom are some of the most attractive minor characters in the Bible, and you have a history that is so appealing to human beings that the celebration of them and their lives and the birth of Jesus Christ in which they had some part has become the lodestone of the world's calendar. No wonder that in most churches the one pageant or play performed each year is the story of Christ's birth. And these same people are the *dramatis personae* of the play: Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, the wise men, Anna and Simeon. *These* are God's favorites; these are those with whom he is well-pleased.

And what of these men and women? What can we say about them? Some of them very clearly had been believing people long before the events of Christmas suddenly broke upon them and before they were taken up into the history of the greatest thing that ever happened. Anna, whom Joseph and Mary met in the temple, as we read later in this same chapter, was a faithful old widow who had loved and served the Lord God for years. The same was true of Simeon and Zachariah and Elizabeth. And, it certainly appears to have been the case that Joseph and Mary themselves were devout young people when the angel Gabriel first appeared to them.

But we have no way of knowing that and perhaps would not suppose it very likely that the shepherds were long before that fateful night men who loved and feared the Lord. Shepherds, as a result of their occupation, were, as we might say, rarely in church. Jewish evidence from an admittedly somewhat later period suggests that they were not, as a class, held in great esteem by the public. As one put it, they weren't the sort of people carefully to distinguish between “mine and yours.” [Strack-Billerbeck, ii, 113] Perhaps a modern analogy to a particular class of individuals would be to the car mechanic who is suspected of charging for repairs that you didn't need or even that he didn't make. There is certainly nothing in the narrative to suggest that the

angels appeared to them *because* they were the sort of people who were looking for the Messiah, the sort of praying men who might deservedly have received such a visitation. Quite the contrary. They are the prototype of all of those little people and often sinful people with whom the Lord Jesus would spend so much of his time during his ministry: the tax collectors, the prostitutes, and the other so-called “sinners.”

And we might say the same thing, necessary changes being made, about the magi who visited the baby shortly after his birth as we read in Matthew 2. There is nothing to suggest that they would have had faith in Israel’s God before the appearance of the star. They, like the shepherds, appear to have been drawn into true and living faith and the love of God by the events of the Christmas history itself.

How different these people: a priest and his wife, a Galilean tradesman and his fiancé, political advisors of some great eastern state, an elderly widow, some sheep grazers, and an old man of whose occupation we know nothing. A perfect cross-section of human life. To be honest, not a one of them would be known to history, even the great magi from the east, had they not found themselves by the providence of God in the midst of events that were to transform the world and the human race for ever.

But there can be no doubt that magnificent as is the figure of the child, the long-promised king, whose coming was heralded by an angelic host, it is the other actors in this drama that have made the story even more compelling; and, in the same way, have explained the history and its meaning. How like God to give to mere human beings such a large place in *his* story! The two sides of salvation always go together in the Bible: the divine work *for* us and the divine work *in* us. In the Bible we are always being shown what God has done *for us* in Jesus Christ and, as a result, what God does *in us* by his Holy Spirit. We see salvation in the birth of Jesus, his death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, but we see it just as surely in *the effect of this divine grace upon the people who inhabit the gospel story*. And we see *that second part of salvation*, salvation in flesh and blood, as beautifully in these folk who grace the history of the birth of Christ as we see it anywhere else in the Bible. They become in this narrative representative Christians. We see in them what we ought to see in ourselves, whether we have been Christians for all our lives, have just become Christians. or on the cusp of becoming Christians ourselves. We see in them what God’s grace makes a person to be. We discover in them sinners transformed into saints, saved by grace in Jesus Christ.

And all of this is the more clearly depicted because of the contrast between these good men and women and the other people who are found in this history. The Christmas history is populated by knaves as well as by saints. These knaves are *not* God’s favorites. They are not those with whom God is pleased. They form the backdrop against which God’s favorites are the more clearly and beautifully presented. The indifferent, distracted, worldly politicians concerned about *everything else* but God their Maker and his will for their lives; the aggressively hostile local ruler, King Herod who is losing his mind to hatred and paranoia; the indifferent religious community in Jerusalem who, even when the magi appear and announce that they have followed the Messiah’s star from the east, can’t be bothered to walk the few miles to Bethlehem to see for themselves if this is so; the simple Bethlehemites among whom could not be found one to offer a warm place in their house for a needy couple from the north.

And the indifference and the outright hostility and refusal to welcome the incarnate Son of God among the people of this world has been a constant theme of human history ever since. A 19th century theologian wrote a book in defense of Christianity entitled: *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. And a book of that title could have been written at any point in the history of the Christian church and certainly can be and is being written by good men today. The cultured despisers of our faith, the Jerusalem theologians, Herod the King, the Roman politicians, the comfortable well-to-do in Judea, exist in still larger numbers today. And there are plenty of common people who equally despise the true Christmas message and its implications. In fact it would be a great surprise were we to find large numbers of people, the majority of any society suddenly as full of joy over the coming of the incarnate Son of God as Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna had been. It has never been so. History has continued to unfold as it unfolded in those days in Jerusalem, Judea, and Bethlehem. Most folk showed no interest or open hostility; but some were drawn up into the salvation of God.

And what do we see in these people who are God's favorites because they believe that Jesus is the Christ and they welcome him? We see Mary and Zechariah writing hymns of praise to God, great hymns that are still sung today: *Magnificat* and *Benedictus* from Luke chapter 1. We see the shepherds first cheerfully obeying their instructions to the letter and then spreading the news of what they had seen to everyone they met. We see Simeon lifting his heart to God in thanksgiving. We see the magi making a great journey to lay their offerings at the feet of the newborn king. We see Joseph and Mary bowing in submission to the will of God that turned their lives upside down. What do you see in these people that you shouldn't see in yourself?

We have in Luke and Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus great stress laid on salvation in its objectivity, its divine accomplishment. We read of the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies of the coming king. We read of his coming to save his people from their sins. We read of his being Immanuel: God with us. And so much more reminds us that salvation is the work and the gift and the achievement of God accomplished in the history of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ.

But alongside this revelation of salvation in its objectivity is one of the most beautiful revelations of salvation in its subjectivity that we have in the Bible. We have here in flesh and blood and among all sorts of people the transformation of life, the making beautiful of human life, the re-creation of fallen human life that happens through the embrace of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Perhaps especially in the case of the shepherds and the wise men, lives are transformed that were beforehand untouched by the grace and salvation of God. *Far off magi and nearby shepherds become saints through their believing contact with the incarnate Son of God*. We must never forget this: God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ is intended to change people; to make them good.

You have, indeed, an echo of this in the secular, sentimental version of Christmas. There are many Christmas stories told in book and film of misers who become generous, workaholics who finally realize the importance of family, or industrialists who come to understand that people are more important than commerce. These are fictional echoes of the transformations of life and of the righteous character of the people who inhabit the Christmas history. But what these modern accounts leave out is what is most important: both the cause of a saintly life, viz. faith in Jesus

Christ, *and* the nature of that life, viz. love for God and a desire to serve him. Scrooge is Christmas without the incarnation. We had an example of this last Friday night at the presentation of Handel's *Messiah* by the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. In introducing the work the conductor attempted to represent it as a musical work especially suitable for our troubled political and economic times. It is, he said, a work that proceeds from darkness to light, from despair to hope. But he made no mention in his introduction of its actual subject, the birth, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. In Handel's *Messiah* there is no hope apart from that history; apart from that divine intervention on man's behalf by a merciful God who sent his Son for the world's salvation.

You can't transform Scrooge into a shepherd or Simeon or one of the magi; *you cannot make Scrooge God's favorite, even by sending him three angels*, if the result is not faith in the incarnate God; if the result is not love for Christ; and if submission to God has not yet become the reason for Scrooge's new found generosity and love of people. Those upon whom *God's favor* rests, those with whom *God* is pleased, such as these people of the Christmas history, were or became *Jesus people!* They did what they did and became what they became because of their encounter with him even as an infant. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, the magi, Simeon and Anna: they are part of the history of the *gospel* itself, the work of God in the life of sinful man. The Scrooge stories are fables without the gospel, and, as a result, must remain fantasies and myths.

But the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds, the magi and the others is being repeated today everywhere *as it has been through the history of the world since the birth of Jesus*. There are fictional echoes of their lives true enough. But much more important there are also vast multitudes of people whose life history repeats that of these wonderful people whom we encounter in Matthew and Luke and their narrative of the birth of Jesus Christ. They may or may not be priests or shepherds or political advisors to some eastern potentate but their encounter with the incarnate Son of God was as life-changing for them and produced as much goodness in their lives as it did in those lives long ago.

Many of you have read of Henry Martyn, one of the greatest heroes of the world-wide gospel enterprise when it began again in the early years of the 19th century. Martyn was perhaps the brightest light in that galaxy of spiritual young men who sat at the feet of Charles Simeon in Cambridge when they were students at the University, absorbing not only the full-blooded gospel from the great preacher, but missionary zeal as well. Indeed, Martyn, upon his graduation and ordination, served as Simeon's assistant for two years before he left for India. He served in India only some five years, though his erudition in languages was so great that, although he knew nothing of the language when he arrived, within those five years he produced a valuable translation of the NT into Hindi. He planned to return to England for a recruiting visit, in hopes of reunion and perhaps marriage with the woman he loved and had left behind, and to recover his own health which had begun to fail during his time in India, and so began a trip back to Europe by land through Persia. There he paused, worked on a Persian translation of the Bible and engaged in apologetics and evangelism among the Muslim doctors of theology. Finally, still in poor health and making his way onward toward home, he collapsed and died in what is now Turkey, some seventy miles south of the Black Sea.

While still in India, working in the town of Cawnpore (Kanpur), where our own Frank and Esther Fiol worked for forty years in the middle of the twentieth century, Henry Martyn would often gather a crowd of people, many of them beggars, around his bungalow door and would preach to them of Jesus Christ who had come and was coming again. But one day, as it happened, an Indian court official was present. Another wise man, eastern court official, if you will. Perhaps he had simply been walking by. In any case, he stopped to listen.

Wholly unbeknownst to Henry Martyn, the words he heard that day about Jesus Christ, the Savior of those who trust in him – about his birth in Bethlehem and his thirty years of living a sinless life, his death on the cross, undergoing in our place the punishment for our sins, his resurrection from the dead – those words took root and brought this Indian official in time to the Savior himself. Sometime after Martyn had left India, the man presented himself for baptism, a daring thing in itself for a Hindu, still more for a substantial Hindu man to do in those days as today, and then gave up his large income and position of prestige for a catechist's pay of sixty rupees per month. In due time he received ordination as an Anglican priest. He was Henry Martyn's only Indian convert, so far as we know, and Martyn himself never knew about him.

But Bishop Reginald Heber, the Anglican missionary statesman of India in those early days and the author of the hymn "The Son of God Goes Forth to War", tells in his *Indian Journal* of meeting this man, who had taken a new name at his baptism: Abdul Messeeh, "The Servant of the Messiah." Heber spoke of how greatly impressed he was by the man's noble Christian character. Just like the magi, just like the shepherds, he had been a man who had no real interest in living for God, no real love for God; but he heard news of the Messiah, the incarnate Son of God, and he responded in faith and in grateful submission to the King who had been born in Bethlehem. And the grace of God made something supremely beautiful out of his life.

The Christmas history in one respect is unrepeatable. There will never again be an incarnation of God. There will never again be the life of the Son of God *incognito* in the world. There will never again be a man born of a woman who is born under the law to redeem those under the law. All of that can happen, need happen but once. Salvation has been accomplished forever!

But in another respect the Christmas history is being repeated every day as men and women of every stripe, class, nation, and language hear news of Jesus Christ and encounter him, the incarnate Son of God, and welcome him, love him, and entrust themselves to him.

Do you wish to know whether God's favor rests *upon you*? Do you want to know if, when the angels sang their "Gloria" to the shepherds they were bringing good news *to you*? Do you want to know if God is pleased *with you*? There is a way to know this. A sure and certain way.

Welcome the King born in Bethlehem as the shepherds and the wise men did before you. Ponder these things in your heart as Mary did before you. Sing praise to God for his great gift as Mary and Zachariah did before you. Give thanks to God for the gift of his son as Simeon and Anna did before you. Spread the news to others as the shepherds did so gratefully and gladly before you. Open your heart to praise God for what you have seen and heard. Lay your life at his feet as your gold, frankincense and myrrh. Follow him. The baby who was once laid in the manger is now in heaven, but he makes his favor known still today to willing hearts by the Holy Spirit.