

Christmas Eve 2014

“A Perfect Christmas”

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at the 2:00pm/4:00pm worship gatherings

Merry Christmas and welcome to Trinity on this holy day! It is great to see so many gathered to sing timeless music and hear again the story of Christ's birth. To those who are here at Trinity for the first time, thank you for adding your presence to this community of faith. I invite you to worship here again and to check out our website to see how your faith can be nurtured through some of the many ministries of this congregation.

The time has come for Christmas and I love Christmas. I love all the details of the season: the lights, the music, the decorations. I also love Christmas because of the Christmas story because it's perfect. It's suspiciously perfect; almost too perfect to be true.

The Christmas story doesn't begin with the angel appearing to Mary. The Christmas story begins with an angel appearing to a couple who are too old to have children in order to tell them they were going to finally have a child. This is perfect because in those days people thought that if you were not able to have children-God was mad at you because of something bad you had done in this life or a former life.

So this angel appears to Zechariah saying “you're wife, Elizabeth, is going to have a son. You're going to name him John and he's going to announce the coming of the Messiah that the Jews have waited for forever.” It's a perfect message because it is foreshadowed by the fact that Jesus' life and ministry was to people who thought they were out of favor with God for something they had done. So, it's perfect.

The angel appears to Mary, she's about 14 years old at the time, and says, “Mary, you have found favor with God.” Mary likely thought, “What? How could I have found favor with God? I haven't lived long enough to find favor with God.” The angel responds, “It doesn't matter because God has chosen you. He has shown favor on you.” This again is perfect because throughout Jesus' ministry he would go around showing favor to people who had done nothing to earn God's favor. Again, a neat foreshadowing effect. It's perfect.

The best part of all is that the first group of people to find out about Jesus being born are the shepherds. Today, this has little effect on us but back then, shepherds were outsiders. They were the outcasts of the religious system because they touched dead animals which was not permitted in the system.

It would have been easy to be a cynical shepherd and yet in this perfect story the angel appears to the shepherds, the outsiders saying, “We want you to be the first to know that God is doing something incredible. God wants to be a part of your life even though you have never been invited to anything religious.” It's perfect because Jesus would grow up and be a man who would spend time going to people who were outside a religious system and outside a relationship with God. It's perfect.

So, this whole story is suspiciously perfect because life isn't perfect. Not everything works out. When we're children, it's easy to accept it as true. But, as we grow older, we can easily place this story into the category of myth or fable or fairy tale. It's cute but couldn't really happen.

Everywhere we look we see this scene and it's almost like a scene out of Disney, a cartoon or fairytale. Everybody is perfect. They have perfect skin, they have perfect smiles, they have perfect hair, I mean Jesus is blonde. And you know how many Middle Eastern children are born blonde. The animals are perfect. And every woman in this room who has ever had a baby know that if you had a baby in this building without an epidural-you would not

look like that and you would not be happy! We like that wonderful song but it would not have been a 'silent night' would it?

And so, what do we do? We take this story that's so perfect, so magical, we create this image-who can believe it? So, no wonder as we get older we take the Christmas story that meant so much to us in childhood and shove it in the category of myth and fairytale because it has little to no relevance or meaning for our adult lives. But, one guy won't settle for that, his name is Luke. What he does with the Christmas story will change your life for the better.

Luke wrote the gospel of Luke. He wasn't one of Jesus' disciples; he was a doctor. He knew Peter-Jesus' closest disciple. He knew John-disciple who wrote the gospel of John. He knew James-Jesus' brother. At the time of Jesus' birth, Luke realizes that there are so many stories telling how it happened and there are conflicting details. He decides that he wants to get it right.

He begins the story of the birth of Jesus as follows: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us." (Luke 1:1 NIV). This wasn't 10, 100, or 200 years later, this is during soon after the events actually happened. He goes on, "Just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word." (Luke 1:2) There were so many accounts going around from people who were actually there.

He then says this, "With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I, too decided, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught." Theophilus, I want you to know that this isn't a fairytale, this isn't an oral story passed down from generation to generation that began to be exaggerated and embellished.

Then Luke does something extraordinary, something that doesn't happen in any myth or fairytale. He anchors the birth of Jesus to a very specific period in time. He writes in chapter 2 these familiar words, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." (Luke 2:1-2) We know from historical documents that Syria actually had a governor named Quirinius and that two censuses were taken while he was governor.

With these words every historian would be able to track down and pinpoint the time in history when this actually happened. He then said a man named Joseph was visited by an angel, Mary was visited by an angel, he took her to be his wife, they went to Bethlehem to register because that was Joseph's hometown. While he was there, she gave birth to a son and they named him Jesus. It turns out that he would become the Savior of the entire world.

So, my question for you is, what if it's true? What if these events actually took place in history? If it's true than what the angel said is so significant: "Do not be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for ALL the people."

For people like Elizabeth and Zechariah who thought "I must be out of favor with God because look at what's happened in my life. Things never go right for me. God never answers my prayers. If there is a God, God must not love me." The angel is saying, "No, this is a message for you. God knows you, God loves you. God chose someone just like you to be a part of the story."

For people like Mary who feel that simply because they are young that God is not paying attention to them. The angel is saying, "No, this is a message for you. God knows your feelings, your age does not affect how God regards you. God chose a young person like you to be a part of the story."

For people like the shepherds who say to themselves, “I’m not even a religious person. I’m an outsider. I don’t like religious people. I go with my family to church on Christmas and Easter. I’m not in the church-going crowd.” The angel is saying, “This is for ALL people because God loves you and God wants to be in a relationship with you.”

What makes this story so perfect is that God didn’t send you a second chance or another list of things to do. God sent you exactly what you needed and exactly what I needed, a Savior. All of us are sinners, we’re not perfect...so God sent us the perfect gift which makes this the perfect story.

On this Christmas Eve, we hear from Luke “A Savior has been born to you, he is Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:11). So, it’s perfect-but it’s better than perfect, it’s true. It actually happened. It’s perfect because it’s not a standalone story we hear only once a year. It’s a story that encompasses your story because you are a part of that ALL.

You are a part of that ‘you’ Christ came for-you, and you, and you, and you and every ‘you’ that you will meet in your life. It’s better than perfect. It’s true. And he did it for me. And he did it for you.

Let’s pray...

Heavenly Father, thank you for preserving this story for 2,000 years. Thank you that it isn’t a fairytale and it is a story that is true. I pray for those who are trying to win your favor, for those who feel like an outsider in regards to you and the church, for those who grew up hearing this story...that this story would come alive in new and meaningful ways as we celebrate the birth of not only a baby, but the birth of a Savior. Thank you that it’s perfect. Thank you that it’s true. Thank you that it’s for ALL of us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.