

Receiving the Promise

Luke 2:21-28

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Joy to the World

Written over 300 years ago, “Joy to the World” is now the most published Christmas hymn in North America.

I love these words:

*Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room*

I pray by the time we're done today, every heart here will prepare Him room and receive the King of Christmas.

One of our family traditions is to drive around to see Christmas lights and yard displays. When we see one that's impressive we say something like, “ooooooh!” and when we come across one that looks lame, I lay on the horn. This always makes our daughters laugh. We went out last night and saw some good ones and others that got the gong. One yard we saw had only one decoration – an inflatable of the Grinch!

Since moving to Moline, our favorite every year is “Henry’s Christmas Yard.” This gets multiple “oooooh’s” from everyone. For nearly a decade, Scott Hildebrand has been putting up an elaborate Christmas display that thousands visit each year. His display was even featured in the Daily Mail newspaper in the UK. In the middle of the yard in the gazebo is an elaborate manger scene with the Christmas characters giving their attention to the Christ child.

Every year we hear reports of the baby Jesus being stolen from outdoor nativity scenes across the country. Because this happens so often some owners of outdoor manger scenes are embedding GPS devices and using surveillance cameras to catch the crèche criminals.

Instead of preparing Him room, I wonder if we've allowed the Savior to be stolen from our celebrations. Our society has sanitized the spiritual. For some of us the Savior has been swiped from Christmas and we haven't even noticed.

Are you aware there's only one verse in the Gospels that describes the actual details of the birth of Jesus? It's found in Luke 2:7: ***“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”*** During this time of the year we often turn to the opening two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke to be reminded of what happened at Christmas.

I counted the verses that recount the narrative surrounding the nativity and came up with 99. That means only about 1% of the Christmas account focuses on the actual birth of Jesus! The other verses deal with the various reactions and responses to His birth.

On top of this, while the birth of Jesus is incredibly important because it explains how Jesus is sovereign, sinless and substitute, are you aware the Bible never tells us to remember His birth? Surprising, isn't it? We *are told* to remember His death in passages like 1 Corinthians 11:26: ***“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the **Lord's death** until he comes.”***

Having said all that, the birth of Jesus Christ is absolutely essential! Without the incarnation, there would be no crucifixion, no resurrection, no ascension and no Second Coming! And without Christmas, there would be no forgiveness and no way to go to heaven when we die. We would be stuck in our sins with no hope of change.

So why do Matthew and Luke spend so much time giving the details of what happened *before* and *after* the birth of Jesus? Why do these gospel writers include so many people from different cultures, generations, genders and socio-economic backgrounds? Here's why. While the reality of the birth of Christ is essential, God puts all these individuals in the narrative to show that He is concerned about our response to the birth of Christ. As the video proclaimed, *“God thunders in the heavens and whispers in our hearts.”*

I hope you hear either the thunder or the whisper – and that *every heart here will prepare Him room and receive the King of Christmas.*

Let's briefly look at some of these responses. We'll begin in Matthew and then head over to Luke.

1. Herod hated. Matthew 2:16 tells us when King Herod *“saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.”* The word *“tricked”* can be translated as *“mocked, trifled with, and made a fool of.”* As a result, he becomes *“furious”* meaning he was, *“violently enraged and exceedingly indignant.”*

Herod then does something worthy of Hitler or Stalin and orders the cold-blooded murder of all males less than two years of age. Herod the Great became the Butcher of Bethlehem. He was perhaps the ultimate oxymoron in history. Rich in what most of us consider valuable, he was totally bankrupt as a human being. He was addicted to power, obsessed with possessions, focused on prestige, and filled with paranoia.

The themes of hostility and hatred can be traced all the way back to the third chapter of the Bible when a curse was unleashed upon the world because of sin.

The hatred of Herod lives on today. While nativity scenes are being taken down in many cities, the Satanic Temple of Chicago demanded a satanic display be placed alongside a Menorah and a Nativity scene in Springfield. The statue features a woman's hand holding an apple with a snake wrapped around her forearm. Underneath is a plaque that reads, *“Knowledge is Power.”* A spokesman said, *“We see Satan as a hero in that story.”*

Is your heart filled with hatred and hostility today? Are you angry with Immanuel?

2. The religious rejected. When Herod heard the wise men were searching for the one *“born king of the Jews,”* he called in the religious experts and asked where the Christ was to be born. Matthew 2:5 reveals they knew the right answer as they quickly quoted the Old Testament prophesy from Micah 5:2: *“In Bethlehem of Judea.”* They knew the answer yet refused to make the 5-mile journey to Bethlehem to investigate for themselves. They were just going through the religious motions and were unwilling to mobilize their faith.

I wonder if there are any religious people here like that? You know the right answers but they don't impact your life. Maybe you can quote an Awana verse but for some reason you don't "wanna" follow Christ. You know the answers but they don't move you.

It might be difficult to admit, but your actions may reveal that in fact, you've rejected Christ.

3. The wise men worshipped. While Herod hated and the religious rejected, some wise guys dropped to their knees in worship. Matthew 2:11: ***“And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”***

To worship literally means *“to kiss toward and to intensely adore.”* They somehow knew that this child would one day rule the world and were not ashamed to fall on their faces before Him.

Think of the contrasts. The wise men were Gentiles, not Jews. They followed the stars instead of the Scriptures. While the religious rejected, these secular scholars made a trip across the desert to find the newborn King.

What about you? Are you ready to go after Him and then give Him all that He deserves? Jeremiah 31:13-14: ***“You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you.”*** Will you stop worshipping yourself or someone else and worship Him alone?

4. Joseph journeyed. With his fiancée pregnant and knowing he was not the father, Joseph was willing to go on a faith journey. We see this in Matthew 1:24-25: ***“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”*** Joseph's commitment to journey with Christ came at great personal cost to him.

After marrying Mary, he journeyed with her to Bethlehem where she gave birth to Jesus. Eight days later, Joseph led the young family on a journey to Jerusalem where they dedicated their son to the Lord. After this, they immigrated to Egypt where they lived as refugees. After hateful Herod died, Joseph led them on a journey to Nazareth, where they finally made their home.

Are you willing to begin a journey with God, and then do what He says, no matter the cost? Will you do anything and go anywhere He sends you?

We've seen four responses from Matthew's account. Let's look now at the Gospel of Luke.

5. Mary magnified. Mary's mission is summed up in the opening lyric of her song found in Luke 1:46-47: ***"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."*** To ***"magnify"*** means to *"make bigger."* While Mary magnified God, she saw herself as miniscule. This is most clearly demonstrated by her declaration of faith in Luke 1:38: ***"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*** She demonstrated submissive servanthood and unconditional obedience. In essence she was saying, *"I am yours and I will do whatever you want."*

We then read that Mary took the time to reflect on all that was happening. She deliberately took everything in. I saw something similar on our daughter Emily's face a week ago when we met her and her husband Matt at a restaurant to say goodbye before they move to Virginia. As I watched her I noticed she was taking long looks at everyone around the table, almost like she was taking a picture in her mind so she wouldn't forget us. Notice the different words that are used in chapter two about Mary:

- **Treasured** (Luke 2:19a). ***"But Mary treasured up all these things..."*** To treasure means "to preserve, to keep safe or to keep close" and to "turn over."
- **Pondered** (Luke 2:19b). ***"...pondering them in her heart."*** This is a compound word that suggests she brought all these things 'together' in her mind.
- **Marveled** (Luke 2:33). ***"The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him."*** The word ***"marvel"*** means to admire and wonder.

Do you think life is all about you or are you seeking to make God bigger? Are you magnifying by treasuring, pondering and marveling? Are you ready to say, *"I am yours and I will do whatever you want?"*

6. Shepherds shared. If you want to learn more about the shepherds you can watch the sermon from this past weekend on our app. In Luke 2:17 we read the shepherds ***“made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.”*** The first thing they did was bounce to Bethlehem so they could see the baby with their own eyes.

After the shepherds saw the Savior in the straw, they shared with everyone they saw. The phrase, ***“made known”*** means to ***“make known in such a way that people can understand.”*** They went and witnessed and then they went as witnesses to others. They didn’t hang around the manger because they knew they were now managers of the message.

Has it been awhile since you’ve shared what the Savior has done in your life?

7. Simeon was saved. Simeon was waiting in the Temple and at just the right time, he saw the Savior when Mary and Joseph brought Him to be dedicated. Luke 2:29-30: ***“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.”*** To see Jesus is to see God’s salvation. When Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms, he said, ***“Lord, I’m ready to go home now. I can die in peace.”*** You’re not ready to die until you have received Jesus and trusted Him as your Savior.

Are you following a self-salvation project or are you following the Savior-salvation plan? You’re only ready to die if you’ve been made alive by Christ.

8. Anna abandoned all. The other Christmas character waiting with anticipation in the Temple was Anna. After her husband died, she dedicated herself to fasting and praying. Luke 2:37-38: ***“She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”***

When Anna saw Jesus, she gave thanks to God and spoke of Him to all who were waiting to be released from in bondage. Here, at last, was the One who would be the bondage breaker.

Do you need freedom from your hurts, habits and hang-ups? Do you need be released from an addiction? Anna was all-in. Are you ready to abandon all like she did?

Let's summarize the various responses to Christmas. As I walk through the list, is there a response you're ready to make?

1. Herod hated
2. Religious rejected
3. Wise worshipped
4. Joseph journeyed
5. Mary magnified
6. Shepherds shared
7. Simeon saw salvation
8. Anna gave all

Christmas is all about God giving the greatest gift ever. But a gift demands a response. We've looked at how 8 different responses, but if you think about it, there are really only two responses—to reject the gift or to receive the gift. How will you respond to God's gift?

Think about this. If you don't receive it, you've actually rejected it.

[Hold up gift] One of the things that make a gift special is the realization that the person who gave the gift spent some time thinking about what to give you. It involved thought and action. And there's often a cost involved.

If you push it away or if you walk away, you have rejected the greatest gift ever and you will spend eternity in a place called Hell.

Let me be clear. You don't have to do something really bad to go to Hell. All you have to do is nothing and that's where you'll end up.

The good news is you don't have to go there and you don't have to do any work because it's all been done for you. But you must believe that Jesus died in your place and rose again on the third day. And then you must receive Him into your life. John 1:12 says: ***“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*** Steven Lawson put it like this: *“Salvation is not a reward for the righteous, but a gift for the guilty.”*

Believe. Receive. Become.

There's something about Christmas that demands a response, isn't there?

104 years ago today something happened that put the reality of Christmas on display better than any yard decorations ever could. On a cold Christmas Eve night, German soldiers were hunkered down in their muddy trench while British and French soldiers were hiding in their own underground trough. Between them, in what was known as "no-mans land," hundreds of dead bodies littered the frozen landscape.

World War I had begun only months before, and the fighting on the Western Front was very fierce. Hope for a quick war had evaporated. Both armies knew they would be bitter enemies for years.

But something happened on Christmas Eve. German soldiers began singing "Silent Night" in German, and men on the other side of the great divide joined along in English. Soldiers who had been killing one another were now singing together about the wonder of Christ's birth.

As the singing continued, the soldiers emerged out of their trenches to join one another in "No Man's Land," where they exchanged gifts, shared in burial services, and played soccer together.

An estimated 100,000 soldiers experienced a spontaneous silent night that year. The truce continued through Christmas Day. Even if for a brief moment, there was peace on earth and good will toward men.

One of the great beauties of the gospel is the way that it welcomes all believers—regardless of race, nationality, language, social status, or background—into one Christian family.

Is there anyone you need to be at peace with this Christmas? Are you in trench warfare with a friend or family member?

But there's an even greater war going on right now. It's a war that's taking place in hearts and minds. The Bible says we are enemies of God and our sins have caused a great divide between Him and us. The good news of Christmas is that God sent the Prince of Peace to be the bridge that allows entrenched enemies to not just have a short-lived truce, but to be at peace with God forever.

It's time to be saved on this Silent Night! Anyone ready to believe and receive so you can become a child of God right now? *Will you prepare Him room and receive the King of Christmas?*

[Hold up present]. Imagine that this present has your name on it. Someone who loves you and knows exactly what you need wrapped it up just for you. So here's a question. What do you have to do to make it yours? Will you try to earn it? Will you reject it? Or will you receive it? You see, until you receive it and open it, it's not really yours, is it? Will you take what God is giving you right now?

If you're ready to do so, please pray this prayer with me.

"Lord Jesus, I admit I've not responded to you as I should. I confess I am a sinner and I repent by turning from the way I've been living. Please save me from my sins and from myself. Thank You for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so I can be born again. I now receive the gift of salvation and forgiveness by asking You to come into my life. I desire to live under Your lordship for the rest of my life. I want to give my all to you because you've given your all for me. Make me into the person You want me to be by enabling me to bring glory to You and good to others. In the name of Immanuel, Jesus Christ the Lord, I ask this. Amen."

Closing Song: Silent Night