

“More things in heaven and earth.”

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[0 : 00] So we've all got our own curious Christmas traditions, don't we? If you've got a weird Christmas tradition that your family enjoys, I'd love to hear about it later on.

One interesting tradition that the Victorians introduced to Christmas was the Christmas ghost story. The most famous version is, of course, Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

Incidentally, our favorite Christmas tradition that we have is that we always watch the Muppets version of that particular story on Christmas Eve. But I'm not actually going to start with A Christmas Carol, not even with the Muppet version.

I want to begin with a line from a different ghost story from a much older writer. In William Shakespeare's Hamlet, and I'm going somewhere with this, Hamlet comes face to face with the ghost of his father.

And his friend, Horatio, is doubtful that the ghost is real. And Hamlet responds to him, There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio.

[1 : 02] So of what relevance is that to Christmas? Well, actually, I think everything. Because when we come to the story of that first Christmas, we encounter something really rather strange.

Something that doesn't fit with the philosophy of the world. Something that seems to transcend our narrow and restrictive worldviews.

We find a virgin who is pregnant. We find a baby who is simultaneously God and a human child. We find a promise that this baby is the hope of all the earth.

And so what I want to do this carol service is to ask you to momentarily allow yourself to have a broader philosophy. Because the first Christmas is a challenge to us all that there may in fact be more things in heaven and earth than we ever considered possible.

I want us to take away the stabilizers, put down the guardrails, and I want us to enter into the wonderful and strange story that we have here.

[2 : 14] I want us to embrace the possibility that the world is much stranger than we think. And I want us to encounter that strangeness of Christmas with an openness.

A willingness to embrace the impossible with a willingness to accept that it might just be true. Because I'm certain that there are far more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies.

I want us to note four things. Four things about this last passage that we read. Four things to think about this Christmas that help explain what the Christmas story is all about.

You can think about God conceived, the virgin conception, the God who saves, the name of Jesus, God with us, this title of Emmanuel that he gets given and that we've just heard sung about, and God's message.

What does it mean for us? What is the point of all this? So think about God conceived. What does it mean for God to be born?

[3 : 19] The virgin birth, or more accurately, the virgin conception, stands right at the heart of the Christmas story. And Matthew, the writer of this gospel, makes a big deal out of it.

Because it is a big deal. The story, or more appropriately, the history, goes like this. A girl called Mary is pledged to be married to a guy named Joseph.

This is normal life. This is pretty ordinary stuff. But then into this really normal situation comes a bombshell. And it's a bombshell that actually isn't that out of the ordinary to begin with.

But still a bombshell. It becomes clear that Mary is pregnant. It's the sort of thing that you can only hide for a while. And Joseph knows that he is not the dad.

So what does Joseph do? Well, he's a faithful Jew who obeys the law. So he resolves that he's going to divorce her. A pledge to be married in their culture was a bit like an engagement, but it was

more legally binding.

[4 : 25] So a divorce was necessary if that pledge was going to be broken. And Joseph sees no other way, especially as he wants to be faithful to God's law. But Joseph is also a kind man.

This is worth stressing. He knows he's not the father of Mary's baby, but he also doesn't want to publicly shame her. So he resolves to settle things quietly out of the way.

So he's resolved in this course of action. But it's then that the properly unexpected happens. An angel appears to him and speaks to him as he sleeps.

Now, I've had some pretty weird dreams in the past. I'm sure you have too. But I've never had an angel appear to me in any of them. But the angel appears to help Joseph understand just what's really going on.

So he says, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 30] Now, this is the real bombshell. It's shocking enough to think that your fiance is carrying someone else's baby, but it's completely out there to think about that baby being conceived by the Holy Spirit of God.

And for most of us, it just defies the parameters of our worldviews and our philosophies. It's too much. It's too weird. It's too out there.

So what's surprising then is, one, how matter-of-factly Matthew presents it in his gospel. He presents it straight. And two, how Joseph takes it and accepts it as truth, takes it as fact.

I think we're often very, very boring people. We like explanations. We like everything to be quite clear and prosaic. We want everything to fit in quite neat little boxes that we can easily comprehend and feel in control of.

And yet, at the same time, we all know that life isn't really like that. Life isn't neat and tidy. Life is messy and extraordinary and surprising. Admittedly, it's often not this surprising.

[6 : 43] But there are more things in heaven and earth than we can make sense of. And if there is a God, surely we should expect the extraordinary from him.

The conception of God in the womb of Mary is miraculous. But the Bible treats it as history. Joseph accepted it as fact.

Matthew writes it as fact. And these weren't stupid people. They knew that virgins don't conceive. And yet they believed it.

And so I think this means that this is a challenge for us. For us who read the Christmas story today. It challenges us to consider that perhaps there is more to life and this world than perhaps we once thought.

But here's the important question. If Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin, why? Why did that need to happen?

[7 : 49] Well, that's explained by the two names that the baby is given. Jesus and Emmanuel. So the name Jesus, it wasn't a particularly uncommon one at the time.

We meet other characters called Jesus in the Bible story. So he wasn't the only one. And it is actually a version of the name Joshua. And it means God saves or God is our salvation.

Names are significant, aren't they? As we're awaiting the birth of our first child, we're in that process of thinking through all the possible different names we could name our baby.

And personally, I find it really interesting just looking at the different meanings of names and the history of them and the histories behind them. Mary and Joseph, they had the advantage in some ways.

They didn't have to buy the Collins book of baby names. They got told by an angel. But the name was chosen by God. The name wasn't accidental. It was chosen because of what it meant and what it symbolized.

[8 : 52] The angel says so himself. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. Because he will save his people from their sins.

Sin, it's not the most Christmassy word. It's not a particularly nice word. And sometimes it can even feel like quite an outdated or even puritanical word. But actually, it stands at the heart of what Christmas is all about.

Let me try to explain. The world, as we look out at it, as we watch the news, as we go through it day by day, the world isn't the way it should be.

We all know this. I think it's something we can agree. It's something we can observe. The world is an absolute mess. And whilst we might think that it's particularly messy at this point in time, it's hardly a new thing, is it?

If we look at world history, world history is a litany of cruelty and suffering and war. The pages of world history are blotted with blood and with tears.

[9 : 59] Our world is broken and we keep staggering on. But lasting solutions to all the problems are always, they're just constantly out of our reach.

The Bible gives us a reason for this. And it gives us a word. That word is sin. Sin is the way in which we keep messing up.

The way in which we keep not living up to the standards that we ourselves know that really we ought to be living up to. Sin is the fact that though we often do good things, we can never stop doing bad things.

And sin is ultimately a failure to live up to God's standard. And it's the reason that our whole world is the absolute mess that it is today and that it always has been.

It's because we can't stop being cruel or selfish or greedy. We can't stop ourselves being lustful or angry or lazy or arrogant or bitter, conceited or deceitful or jealous.

[11 : 13] All these things. We'd all love to stop being these things. But we can't. If we could stop, we would. And if we could stop, the world would be a much better place, wouldn't it?

But we can't. At the end of the day, when we look at things clearly, and this is what the Bible tells us, what's wrong with the world is in fact us.

We are what is wrong with the world. Our sin is what has broken everything. And that is why Jesus had to be born and why he was given that particular name.

He was born to save his people from their sins. But someone with that same sin problem couldn't be the Savior.

It had to be someone who was more than a mere human, someone who wasn't tainted by sin. It had to be someone born in such a way that they would be free from sin.

[12 : 13] Hence, the Holy Spirit conceives a child in Mary. The virgin birth is not just a random detail. It actually lies at the very heart of who Jesus is and why he was born.

Because he had to be human in order to pay the penalty that sin incurs. Because every wrong incurs a penalty and God is just and fair. But he had to be more than a human so that he himself was not tainted by that sin.

He had to be God as well. And so God became man through the virgin conception of Jesus. And so this is why the angel said to Joseph, all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. And we saw this in our very first reading, the reading from Isaiah.

It's a slightly cryptic line, isn't it? The prophet being referred to is that prophet Isaiah. He's the one who said this originally. And when he said it, that was 400 years before Jesus was even born.

[13 : 24] And Isaiah, he was one of God's messengers in the Old Testament part of the Bible. And the context of this prophecy was this. There was a war in Israel. History may pass, but ultimately things never really change, do they?

The king of Judah, which was the southern part of Israel, he was being pressed in on all sides. But God sent Isaiah to encourage him to keep holding out with a promise that God was going to be with him.

And God told this king to ask for a sign so that he could have faith that God would follow through on his promises. But the king, in an attempt to be overly pious, said, I don't need a sign.

But whenever God offers you a sign, you take the sign. The king's response was really proof that he didn't believe or that he just didn't really care.

But God, after rebuking him for trying his patience, says that he's going to send a sign anyway. And this is the sign. Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign.

[14 : 30] The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel. Now, that king would never see this sign. He had forfeited that right.

But the sign signified something much bigger than that war, something of global significance. God himself was going to be born to save his people from their sins and bring an end to all wars, all evil, all tears.

Now, the first part of that has happened. Jesus has saved his people from their sins. What we're still waiting for is the deliverance from this present evil age that we currently live in.

The reason we know that one day all tears will be wiped away is because one day, 2,000 years ago, a baby was conceived in the womb of a virgin.

And shortly after, that baby was born. And that baby grew into a man. He became a great teacher who taught all about God and how we could come to know him.

[15 : 39] He had such wisdom and knowledge and authority because he was God with us, Emmanuel. And because he was God with us, he was so much more than just a teacher.

One day, he was arrested by the religious establishment and handed over to the Roman occupiers. They flogged him, they mocked him, and finally they hanged him on a cross.

The Christmas story is the prologue to that bigger story, that history of the man called Jesus. And it was his death on that cross that enabled him to save his people from their sins.

Because we do all sin. And because we and our ancestors have broken this world, God holds us guilty. He is just and he is fair.

Jesus saves his people from their sins because he takes the punishment on our behalf. The innocent for the guilty, God instead of man.

[16 : 51] God himself takes his own punishment, his own judgment upon himself. And that is why he was conceived in this miraculous way.

And this is why Christians celebrate Christmas. Christmas is often a fun time. It's a time when we get together with family.

It's a time when we eat good food, we shelter from the cold, we watch festive movies and TV specials and give one another gifts. These things are good things. But every Christmas ends, of course, the January blues always come round again and the grind and the rat race set in.

The tree and the tinsel get boxed up once again and they're stuck up in the attic for another year.

And then we come round again, we get to October, and then we're yearning for Christmas again, for that Christmas spirit of hope and comfort and warmth.

What I want to suggest as we finish up is that our celebrations at Christmastime are really a yearning for something deeper, a yearning for lasting hope and lasting comfort, a yearning ultimately for lasting peace.

[18 : 14] A yearning for the one who Christians celebrate every Christmas, Jesus Christ himself. God's message that very first Christmas and indeed every Christmas is that Jesus has come in the flesh to save the world from the mess that we have made of it.

And he came to save you. He came to save you from your sins. That Christmas yearning we all have, and not just a Christmas yearning, a year-long yearning for something more, something better, something beyond ourselves, that's satisfied in Jesus.

He really did come to fix things. He really did come to save us. There are more things in heaven and earth than we tend to imagine.

And this Christmas, God once again shares the good news that Jesus has come for you. And he is the greatest gift that anyone can ever receive.

He is God with us, Emmanuel, if you haven't received him. Maybe this Christmas is the time to do it. and then maybe he is the best mixture of the past.

[19 : 38] Amen. Be saved from time to time to time and a time to time to time for a short Christmas will be fine. Let's go to realize■■■