

INTRODUCTION

The title of the message today is, “What Child IS This?” taken from that hymn, you’ve probably heard it before: What child is this / Who laid to rest. The tune is called “Greensleeves” and was written in England about the time of the sixteenth century. But it was not until 1865 while America was at Civil War that an English poet (actually he was a poet insurance salesman) wrote a poem called, “Manger’s Throne.” And those are the words used for this hymn, but we don’t use all the words in our hymn. Here is the original poem from William Chatterton Dix written in 1865.

What child is this
Who laid to rest
On Mary’s lap
Is sleeping.

Whom angels greet
With anthems sweet
While shepherds watch
Are keeping.

This, this is
Christ the King
Whom shepherds guard
And angels sing.

Haste, haste
To bring him laud
The babe
The son of Mary.

Why lies he
In such mean estate
Where ox and ass
Are feeding

Good Christians fear
For sinners here
The silent word
Is fleeting.

The next part of the poem is not in the hymn. Maybe the hymn editor thought that it was not festive enough, but it speaks of the truth of the cross.

Male spear
Shall pierce him through
The cross be borne

For me, for you

Hail, hail
The word made flesh
The babe
The son of Mary.

So, bring him incense
Gold and myrrh
Come peasant, king
To own him

The King of Kings
Salvation brings
Let loving hearts
Enthroned him.

Raise, raise
The song on high
The virgin
Sings her lullaby

Joy, joy
For Christ is born
The babe,
The son of Mary.

When Dix wrote this poem, he tried to imagine what it would be like for people passing by, looking at Jesus in the manger, trying to answer the question, “Who is this? What child is this?” And that’s the debate of the ages, because everybody on this planet must at some time face the question, “Who is this baby?” “Who is Jesus?” And everybody has an answer. Our Muslim friends recognize Jesus. In fact he is Eesa Ibn Mary; they even believe he was born of a virgin, but they do not believe he was God in the flesh. And of course they don’t even believe he was crucified or resurrected. Our Jewish friends, of course, recognize Jesus as a great prophet, a great teacher and a religious reformer. But they do not recognize him as God in the flesh, or the Messiah. Even the Hindus recognize Jesus and acknowledge him as one of Krishni, who has reached perfect god consciousness. The Buddhists call Jesus *bodhisattva*, which means someone who has attained the highest level of enlightenment. But everybody must answer that question, “Who is this child?”

I think the best way to go to answer that question is to look in the word of God. And the interesting thing about the Bible that makes it unique from any other scriptures of world religion is only the Bible contains prophecy. Parts of the Bible were written hundreds of years before those very things were prophesied and fulfilled. For instance, we’re going to look at the words of the prophet, Isaiah, written seven hundred years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The Bible explained Christmas 700 years before anybody even experienced it. I want us to see how the

Bible answers that question, “What child is this?”

Isaiah 9:2. “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” ...“For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government shall be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

On this Christmas Eve morning I want to have a family atmosphere as I share with you a little bit about what the Bible says. I’d like to present to you six pictures that answer the question, “Who is this child?”

1. HE BRINGS LIGHT INTO DARKNESS

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.” (vs. 2) All throughout the Bible there is interplay between darkness, which represents sin or unrighteousness, and light, which represents righteousness or holiness. And the world was in darkness and Jesus came into a dark world to be the light. In fact he said, “I am the light of the world.” And that’s part of what we celebrate at Christmas; that Jesus is the light of the world.

A little girl who was practicing to participate in her Christmas pageant. She only had one line. She would walk out holding a candle, smile and say, “I am the light of the world.” And she was so excited about it, she stood in front of the mirror and practiced her line over and over again. She put emphasis on each word; I am the light of the world. I AM the light of the world; I am THE light of the world; I am the LIGHT of the world; Practice, practice, practice. But wouldn’t you know it. The time came for the Christmas pageant; she stepped out in front of the spotlight in front of all the family members and she froze; she got stage fright and just stood there. Her mother happened to be one of the directors and she was offstage, so she began to whisper, “I am the light of the world.” “I am the light of the world: and she got a little louder each time; “I am the light of the world.” And finally the little girl got it and she smiled real big and she said, “My mother is the light of the world.” Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” He came into this dark world.

You’ve probably all heard about something called “seasonably affected depression,” SAD. Some people are more depressed during this season of the year when the days are shorter. I don’t know about you; but I don’t like these short days as much as I do summertime. I like those LONG days in when you can get 18 holes of golf in after you get off work. I like the long days; not these short, dark days.

It’s even worse if you live in Alaska. A pastor friend of mine lives there and during this time of year the sun doesn’t even come up until 9:00 a.m. and it sets around 3:00 p.m. and the sun never comes fully up; it kind of goes across the southern horizon. It’s pretty amazing. The darkest city in the world is not somewhere above the Arctic Circle, it’s Rattenberg, Austria. This little village has been losing population for decades. It is located in the shadow of Mount Rat. And because it’s situated in the shadow of this mountain, Rattenberg doesn’t see any sun from November through February. Can you imagine living in a place where there is no sun for that many months

of the year?

A couple of years ago some scientists came up with a way to remedy that situation. They spent 2.4 million dollars and installed 60 heliostatic mirrors on top of Mount Rat to reflect the light of the sun into the city. And last year for the first time (I suppose ever) during the winter months there has been light in Rattenberg. And the reports are that the attitude of the people in the city has been transformed and people are moving into the village that had been losing population. Why? Because with the coming of light, there is the coming of hope. And that's what Jesus did. He came into a world that was darkened by sin and death and he brought light.

2. HE RULES THE WORLD

“And the government will be upon his shoulders.” (vs. 6) That means he's in charge! If you want to think about it, everything's on his shoulders because he bears everything in the universe, but also the government. It means he's a king. It's kind of interesting that at the beginning of his earthly life, that's the question the wise men asked. “Where is he born King of the Jews?” And even at the day he was crucified that's the same question Pilate was asking him; “Are you a king?” And the sign they put above his head when they crucified him said, “Jesus of Nazareth. King of the Jews.” And you know how Jesus answered Pilate? He said, “Yes, I am a king. But my kingdom is not of this world.” Jesus is Lord and King over a spiritual kingdom and when you receive Christ in your heart and you enthrone him as king of your life, you're in the kingdom of God. But there will be a time in the future when he will rule and reign on this earth. It's not happened yet. Think about the lyrics to that song, “Joy to the World.” “He rules the world/With truth and grace/And makes the nations prove/The glories of his righteousness/And wonders of his love.

Is that happening right now? When the United States Congress faces a tough decision do they say to each other, “You know our government is on the shoulders of Jesus; let's get on our knees right now and ask Jesus what he wants us to do.”? That doesn't happen. Think about the British Parliament. When they're facing an important vote, do they say, “The government's on the shoulders of Jesus; let's get on our knees and ask Jesus what he wants us to do”? No, that doesn't happen. But the Bible teaches that one day indeed that will be the case. When Jesus returns, the Bible teaches he will set up an earthly kingdom on this planet and then all the governments will look to him. So, he rules. With God there is no past, present and future. It's all right now. If God says something's going to happen, it's as good as if it's happening right now. So, he's the light of the world; he rules the world.

3. HE MEDIATES BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

“He will be called Wonderful Counselor.” (vs. 6) If you've ever been to a psychotherapist, you may think of a counselor as somebody who advises or somebody you share your problems with. Jesus is that kind of a counselor. The Bible says, “You can cast your cares upon Him because he cares for you.” But the real word, counselor, here carries more of the idea that we would use of someone who is an advocate, like an attorney who is an advocate for your counselor. If you've ever had any kind of problem with somebody, and there was an issue to be settled and maybe you needed to hire a counselor, a lawyer, a mediator to arbitrate and mediate between you and

the other party. That's what Jesus is. He's our advocate and he's the only advocate available for us to relate to God, he qualifies because he's all God and he's all man. People get mixed up on this sometimes. Jesus wasn't half God, half man—50% God, 50% man. He's 100% God, 100% man. And because of that he's the only one who could reach into heaven and take the hand of God; the only one who could reach down and take the hand of sinful humanity and bring us together. He's the only mediator. "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5) So if you want to relate to God and you want to solve and settle this sin issue you have with God, there's only one mediator; only one counselor and Jesus is his name.

4. HE IS GOD IN THE FLESH

"He will be called Mighty God." (vs. 6) In the Bible there are several times in the Old Testament where God is referred to as God Almighty. El Shaddai. The Bible says that's who Jesus is. He is God in the flesh. If you will remember when we were preaching through Colossians earlier this year when we came to Colossians, chapter 1, this is what we discovered about Jesus. The Bible says, "In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." God put on flesh in the form of Jesus Christ when he was born in Bethlehem.

I had no idea what "incarnation" meant the first time I heard it. Believe it or not, I just remember my mother used to have something in her kitchen called Carnation Condensed Milk, and I thought, "Well, maybe incarnation has something to do with evaporated milk or something." I didn't know. It took me a long time to realize incarnation didn't have anything to do with a can of milk. Incarnation; carnation; carnal. *Carne* is flesh. The incarnation of God was when God took on flesh at Bethlehem. God has always been. Jesus, the Son has always been—but in Bethlehem he put on flesh.

A Sunday School teacher decided to let her class write, plan and star in their own Christmas drama. One little girl said, "I'll be Mary." A boy said, "Well, I'll be Joseph." A couple of boys said, "I'll be a shepherd." Some of the boys and girls said, "We'll be the wise men." And there was one little boy over to the side with no part, so his teacher asked, "Billy, what are you going to be?" He thought about it and said, "I think I'll be the doctor who delivers the baby Jesus." And because she didn't want to tell them how to do it, she said, "Well, that's great. You can be the doctor that delivers Jesus." So they got all dressed up in their costumes, and the little girl came in with a pillow under her shirt and they had some bales of hay for the stable and at just the moment Jesus was to be born, the kids went behind the bales of hay and the little boy who was playing the doctor went behind there with them and the next thing you know he brought out a baby doll. He didn't know exactly what to say to start with and then he finally said, "Congratulations, Mary. It's a God." And he was right! Because that's who Jesus is: He is God in the flesh.

5. HE WELCOMES US INTO HIS FAMILY

"He will be called Everlasting Father." (vs. 6) The word "father" is a family name. And throughout the Bible we are taught God can be like a father to us. By the way, that's another thing that makes our faith distinctive and unique from all other faiths. The Bible is the only place

in all of religious literature that says you can relate to God “like a child relates to his father.” I grew up with a great dad and I grew up hearing about God the Father. I have a pretty good frame of reference. But I learned later on not everybody had a dad and not everybody has a *good* dad. I’ll never forget when I was a youth minister, we had this cute little girl in our youth group who when I first started talking about, “Just think how much your dad loves you and God loves you that much and more.” She got this angry look on her face and she almost spit out these words. “Not me! I hate my dad! He left me and my brothers and sisters and left my mom. He’s a bum!” And for the first time it sunk in with me you know what? There are some people who have a hard time relating a positive image of God with the word “father.” So if you didn’t have a dad, or didn’t have a good dad, you have to try to overcome that and imagine the most perfect image of a father you could ever imagine and then multiply it by a million and that’s how much God loves you and how much he cares for you.

I went to college for four years and seminary for seven years; but I learned more about God in five minutes of being a daddy than in all of my school training. When I first became a father and I looked at that little girl and loved her; at that moment I would have done anything for her! And then she grew up and she caused me pain; she kept me up at night and cost me money and did things I didn’t like. But that’s what God does too, isn’t it? I still love my girls; still love them and still do. And then that’s how God loves you. And that’s why the Bible says God is like a father. And one of the most powerful meanings of Christmastime is a family. God says, “Even if you don’t have a great family, come on in. This is your family; the family of God.” And family is so important at Christmastime.

Let me tell you a story from my past that taught me for the first time how important family is. Every family has pretty much has skeletons in the closet. If you don’t, you’re blessed. When I was in the sixth or seventh grade and living in South Alabama, our telephone rang one night (that’s always a bad time). My dad answered the phone and I remember him saying something like, “Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Okay. All right. I’ll come get him.” Come to find out that his uncle (my great uncle, my dad’s dad’s brother) Uncle John Henry Dykes was in jail in Laredo, Texas. He was in his seventies. I had never met him before. I had just heard stories about John Henry Dykes and what a bad guy he was. And his own family had disowned him.

He was in jail or getting out of jail and he didn’t know anybody else to call except my dad. So my dad got in his pickup truck and drove all the way from South Alabama straight to Laredo, Texas and then turned around and drove back with Uncle John Henry, who moved in with us.

I was not happy! My brother and I shared a bedroom and guess who got our bedroom? Uncle John Henry. And we had to sleep in the attic. We’re not talking about a finished attic here, folks; we’re just talking about eaves and everything. That’s where we slept. I was angry from the start, because all he ever did was sit around and watch TV and smoke cigarettes. I had a great animosity in my heart because that guy had come in and messed up my family. That was during the fall of the year.

Christmastime rolled around and my mother said, “You’ve got to buy Uncle John Henry a present.” I said, “I’m not going to!” “You’ve got to.” And sometimes when your mothers tell you that, you give in and so I did. I bought him a pair of socks. Men’s socks; one size fits all. But I’ll

tell you. I didn't like Uncle John Henry. I can't tell you how mad I was at him. We sat at our table to eat and my dad was at the head of the table; I'm down at the foot of the table with my mother, my sister, my younger brother; and then there was Uncle John Henry next to me. And our family always had the custom of holding hands to say a prayer before the meal. I never once held his hand. He'd hold out that hand with those old dirty yellow fingernails and I wasn't going to going to hold that hand. I didn't like him. He came and took my bedroom!

Well, Christmas morning rolled around and Santa Claus came and we opened all our presents and he opened up those men's socks and a belt and some underwear. He got five presents. And then we sat down for Christmas breakfast like we always do. And as we sat there before the prayer he said, "I've got something I need to say." And he hadn't said a whole lot since he had been there. But he began to cry and I'll just never forget those tears going down those old weathered, rough cheeks of his. And he said, "This is the greatest Christmas of my life because I've never been with people who loved me and accept me." Of course I felt like a heel. And God did a work on a little sixth or seventh grade boy's heart and when he held out his hand for the blessing that morning, I took it. I took it every morning after that until he went off to a facility and soon died. And every Christmas it seems like I just remember Uncle John Henry and how at least for one time in his life he got to experience a very valuable part of Christmas. Not presents; not decorations; but family.

So that's what God says. You know who is this child is? He wants to be your father and you can be his child.

6. HE BRINGS PEACE TO TROUBLED HEARTS

"He will be called Prince of Peace." (vs. 6) What does that mean, Prince of Peace? What's the meaning of the message of the angels that night when they went to the shepherds and said, "Peace on earth; good will toward men." Does that mean they were all going to live in peace? Have world peace and there's not going to be any fighting or wars? Not really. Because Jesus said, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars." (Matthew 24:6)

Let's cross the Atlantic to America and allow me to introduce you to another poet; same year, 1865, but embroiled in the Civil War. His name was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. That year Longfellow's wife, Frances, died from an accident in their home in which she was using a candle and her clothing caught on fire and she was killed. Longfellow's son had been critically wounded in battle during the Civil War. So you can imagine when Longfellow sat down and began to write this poem that you might recognize the words to, he said,

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth
Good will toward men.

And you can also understand his bitterness when he wrote these words.

And in despair I bowed my head
There is no peace on earth I said
For hate is strong
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth
Good will toward men.

Isn't that the way some people feel right now? "Where is this peace on earth? There's no peace!"
But then somehow God brought him through that terrible time until he could write this final stanza.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep
God is not dead; nor does He sleep.
The wrong shall fail
The right prevail
And peace on earth
Good will toward men.

This peace on earth; good will toward men; God wasn't necessarily talking about peace between two people or two nations. He was talking about peace with *Him*. God says, "I want to have peace with you. I want to show my good will; my favor; my Grace toward you." And, the most important peace is the inner peace you have when you come to know Jesus as your Lord and Savior. That's what Christmas is all about! It's not just a baby in a manger—it's a Savior.

CONCLUSION

I finish with this little story that I hope you'll like. I doubt it's a true story, but it's a great parable. Once there was a man whose wife died giving birth to their only son and he never remarried. He was a very wealthy man and as his son grew up they had a hobby they enjoyed working on together. The man was very wealthy and they traveled the world buying priceless pieces of art. Renoir, Monet, Van Gogh; until they had one of the finest, most expensive private art collections anywhere in the world.

When the young man was old enough to enlist, the nation was at war, so he became a soldier. One day his father's heart was broken as he received a telegram that his son had been killed in battle rescuing another soldier. Not long afterward on Christmas morning, there was a knock on his door. When he opened the door, he saw a soldier carrying a bulky package wrapped in Christmas paper. The man at the door said, "You don't know me, but I'm the soldier your son died taking to the medic station. And I'm not much of an artist. But I'm so grateful for his sacrifice, that I painted a portrait of your son and I want to give it to you.

It was barely a good likeness and the art critics never would have said it was a great work of art, but the father accepted it with gratefulness and it became very important to him. Years later when the man died, art lovers from around the world came to an auction at his estate hoping to buy some of the masterpieces. As the auction began, the auctioneer said, "The first painting to be

auctioned is this portrait of the man's son. What is my bid for this portrait?" There was mumbling in the crowd as the art lovers said, "We don't want to bid on that. That's junk! Who cares about his son? Let's get to the real masterpieces." The auctioneer said, "There were precise instructions from the man that this piece has to be auctioned first before any of the others. So who wants to make a bid for this?" A man in the back, who happened to be a gardener of their estate for years said, "I liked the old man and loved the son. I'll give you a hundred dollars for that picture." The auctioneer said, "A hundred dollars once!" "A hundred dollars twice!" "Sold for a hundred dollars!" And then everyone was anticipating the sale of all of his other masterpieces. But the man's attorney stepped to the microphone and said, "Ladies and gentlemen. This concludes the auction today!" Everyone was in an uproar. "What about these other pieces of art? We've come to buy these pieces of art!" And the attorney said, "According to the will, the owner he left strict instructions that whoever purchased the portrait of his son also receives all the other artwork as well. To quote his words, "Whoever chooses my son gets it all!"

And that's what Christmas is. God says to you, "Whomever chooses my son gets it all!" The Bible says, "He who has the Son has life." (1 John 5:12) And if you want to experience life; if you want to know what Christmas is all about, choose Jesus Christ. What child IS this? He's the one who can forgive your sins and change your life.

OUTLINE

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2. HE RULES THE WORLD

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes