

Sermon for Sunday, December 16, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"STOP THE SHEPHERDS---I'M STILL NOT READY"

St. Matthew 1:18-25

Text: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." St. Matthew 1:21

Christmas tells us a good deal about God. It tells us what he thinks of sin. There is a story told about President Calvin Coolidge that he attended church one day. When he returned home, his wife asked him what the preacher talked about. "Silent Cal", who never wasted words, replied that he had talked about sin. "Well", said his wife, "what did he say about it?" The President replied, "He said he was against it." Christmas tells us that God was more than just against sin.

Today you and I take a "soft" attitude toward sin. For example, in our courts we have seen an emphasis on the rights of offenders rather than an emphasis on the wrongs they have committed. We have seen our highest court take a new attitude toward the death penalty. We ourselves have taken a soft--though often cynical--attitude toward sin in government and in the lives of our highest officials. We have seen the nation bend and give way before abuses of certain unions who set out to intimidate the country and to make the nation do its will. In relationship to our young people, we have often failed to require of them the sort of discipline and responsibility that in our hearts we know is best for them.

But Christmas tells us that God did not take sin lightly. In the past the Hebrews had already discovered that God was a holy God, a righteous God, a just God, a God who could not and would not abide sin. Out there in the wilderness when they had been led out of Egypt, the Bible tells us that Moses went up on the Mount to receive the Commandments from God. And the Bible said that he tarried and the Hebrews waiting below became impatient and they went to Moses' brother Aaron and they said, "As to this Moses, we don't know what's happened to him. Make us a golden calf so that we can have something to worship." God did not take that sin lightly. Many of them died that day for their idolatry and none of them were to live to enter the promised land. In centuries to follow, when they rebelled and sinned against God, His wrath was to fall upon them as they tasted the edge of the sword of their enemies, as they were carried into captivity, as their cities were destroyed, as their land was ravaged and raped. No, they knew that God did not take sin lightly and the prophet was right when he said to them, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

So, because God was holy and righteous and would not and could not abide sin, the Hebrews developed a reverent awe for God. His name was so holy that they did not even dare pronounce it. As a matter of fact, for some centuries because His name was so holy, the pronounciation was lost. If you have a King James Bible in the Old Testament God is called Jehovah. There is no such Hebrew word. It's a made-up word. The real word we now know was probably Yahweh but the name of God was so holy that they would not pronounce it. Its pronounciation was lost. There in the temple at Jerusalem was the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place of the Hebrews, so sacred that no man dare enter it except the High Priest and that but once a year. A sense of awe and reverence before God.

So, Christmas tells us how seriously God takes sin in our lives. He takes it so seriously that it demands the best and highest God has to deal with it--it requires the sending of his own Son. You know, it's easy for the church to get its priorities out of order. This babe that God sent was to be a man of compassion for the needs of men--he was to feed them when they were hungry, heal them when they were

sick. He was to be concerned about their material welfare and speak of our duty to minister to the needs of one another. So, the church in our day often gets its priorities wrong. It gets focused in our meeting the physical and material needs of man to the extent that it overlooks its first task of the church which is to proclaim Jesus Christ as God's answer to man's sins. That is not to say that these things are not important--they are. We Christians ought not to excuse ourselves from our social responsibility. We have social responsibility. God help us if we fail to be responsible for the needs of fellow human beings. We ought not have any illusions that is not our priority number one. Our first priority is to share with men Jesus Christ. It is to tell them how seriously God takes their sins. The other evening I had occasion to talk to a young lady who is working on a Master's degree in social work and counseling. She was complaining that the church had failed her people. She said that the church had failed to care about the needs of the people in the ghetto or to do anything about their desperate condition in the inner city. And her claim was true. In many ways the church has failed. But, the failure of the church is more serious than that. Not only has it failed to minister to their needs, it has also failed to tell them of the holiness or a righteous God and how He responds to their sin. We can go into the inner city or anywhere else and minister to the needs of man and if that is all we do we have failed them because we have failed to tell them of the righteousness of our holy God and how seriously He takes their sins. If you want to know how seriously God takes your sins, you go look at Bethlehem. For us, Christmas has gotten to be sticky sentimentality. But when you remember who was born at Christmas and that he became a man because of the sin in your life and mine, then you know that God's heart must have been breaking and it demands a sober reappraisal of our own attitude toward Christmas.

Now, the second thing that Christmas tells us is not only what God thinks of sin, it also tells us what he thinks of the sinner. Do you want to know what God thinks of you? Go to Bethlehem and look in the manger. There you will see the Son of God himself. Across that manger scene falls the shadow of a cross. That God-child has come to suffer, to know rejection, humiliation, degradation and finally death. All of that for you. That's what God thinks of you. God loves you that much.

So Christmas is for sinners. Christmas is for people who are spiritually lost and who know it. In that sense, Christmas may not be for you this morning. Some of us do not understand our nature, our condition. Some of us think rather highly of ourselves and the lives we lead. Our evangelism teams that go out each week run into this quite frequently. They began to talk to people about Jesus and their need for him because they are sinners. Then some of the people respond, "Well, wait just a minute. You are not talking to me. I am not a sinner. I am a pretty good person."

But the Bible says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (I John 1:8) The Bible says, "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." (I John 1:10) The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Do you remember the incident when a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery was brought to Jesus? The Jews were ready to stone her to death for her sin. But Jesus said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone." The Bible says, "and they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last." Jesus knew that all of them would know in their hearts that they fell short of God's glory. And I've always thought it interesting that the Bible says that they went out, convicted by their own conscience, beginning with the eldest. The older we get, the more we recognize our own sin, our own failings, and the nature of sin in our own lives. Young people are great. They are idealistic. They look at the failures of society and have no responsibility for those failures and they project that on to everybody else. When we get older, we begin to realize our responsibility for the kind of a world we live in. They went out beginning with the oldest.

One of the things in the church today that has broken my own heart has been the failure of the so-called liberal to be aware of his own need for spiritual needs. It's so often the case that those who are crying out to us to be concerned about the material needs of our brother. He is ignoring his own spiritual needs. It so happens that one of the leading persons in the liberal movement in our church was once my best friend. We went through seminary together, we studied together. We were inseparable. But after we graduated our paths went in different directions and in recent years, although we are still good friends, we have found ourselves on opposite sides of the fence. Then, the other week word came that he had resigned his pulpit to go into secular work and that he and his wife were separated. I sat down and wrote them both a letter to tell them that I loved them and was praying for them. But I know what went wrong in their lives--I had watched it happen over the recent years. They had gotten so focused in on social action and the ministry of the church to the world that they had forgotten their own sin, their own spiritual needs, their own inner condition. I think that you and I need to recognize whatever we do for others we must still recognize that sin is a real part of our lives. We, too, are in desperate need. As someone has said, the greatest of sins is to be conscious of none. You see, until a man is profoundly conscious of his own sin and of the real condition of his own heart, Christmas isn't going to mean very much.

So Christmas tells us what God thinks of sin and it tells us what he thinks of the sinner--that He loves us. Jesus came because God still loves us and he wants to do something about our condition. This brings me to the final thing I want to say this morning. Our text says, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The name "Jesus" means "to save--Saviour". His very name tells us why he came--he came to save his people from their sins.

The real question that faces us this morning is not whether God takes sin seriously. All we have to do is look at Bethlehem and we know just how seriously he takes our sin. The real question is not whether we are sinners. When we look at our lives--the things that are wrong about them, the things we do and say, the thoughts and feelings we have--then we know we are indeed men who have fallen short of the glory of God. Like St. Paul we must confess, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." No, the real question that faces us at Christmas is this, "Do I really want a Saviour?"

Jesus once said to his disciples, "The world will hate you because you are not of the world." He said, "If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you." The fact is, many of us are not ready for that. Stop the shepherds, we say, I'm still not ready. Let me tell you that there is no salvation without surrender.

Jesus Christ wants to be the Lord of your life. He will not settle for anything else. He wants to be the one who controls your life. He wants to be enthroned upon the heart. He wants to be the Lord of your life. He doesn't want to be invited into some room of your heart where He is the guest. He wants you to hand over the deed, the key to your life and say, "Lord, here is my life, I surrender it to you." There is no cheap grace. Forgiveness cost God. It cost Him his Son. There is no cheap grace. By the same token, there is no cheap discipleship. Do not think there is an easy way to be a Christian. There isn't. Being a Christian isn't easy. It is often difficult and hard. It doesn't even mean that life is going to go very well for you; it won't necessarily. No cheap grace--no cheap discipleship. To be a disciple of Jesus demands the surrender of your life. Some of us aren't ready for that--stop the shepherds--I'm still not ready. But I want to put the question to you this morning. Are you going to take Christmas seriously? You see Christmas means that God takes sin seriously. Christmas means that God loves the sinner. But it also means what are you going to do with Christmas? Are you going to let Jesus be the Lord of your life? The question we have to ask is, "Am I really ready to be a disciple--to surrender my life--let Jesus be the Lord of my life. Are you ready for that?"