

Sermon for Sunday, December 24, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"ESCAPE THROUGH A BARN DOOR"

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

Do you know what your name means? The American Indians gave a brave a name that indicated something about him. He could be Running Deer, or Brave Eagle or like an untamed steed named Crazy Horse. Most names meant something. For example, Arnold means, "strong as an eagle," Charles means "strong and manly", Beatrice means "she that makes happy", John means, "God is gracious," Sara means "Princess". And Andrew means "lover of horses" for whatever that is worth!

But in the Old Testament, name was synonymous with character. If you knew a man's name, you had a clue, a key, to who and what he was. When Abraham obeyed God and responded in faith, his name was changed to indicate something central to his character and he became Abraham, which means "father of many nations." Later on, when Jacob is born and named, we have an insight, a clue, to his character for Jacob means "heel-snatcher". And that's who Jacob was, a heel-snatcher who was always slyly tripping people up. Later on, when Jacob has an experience with an angel of God and has a religious experience that changes his character, he gets a name change and becomes Israel, which means, "a prince with God." And still later on, when Moses comes along and God appears to him in a burning bush to send him to Egypt to bring the people out, the single most important question that Moses asks God is this: What is your name? Who shall I tell the people sent me? (See Exodus 3:13ff) In other words, if God would tell Moses his name, Moses would know the single most important thing there is to know about God. He would have a key to his character, to whom and what God is. Do you remember what God told Moses? He said, "Tell them I am sent you!"

So, in the Old Testament, name was synonymous with character. If you knew a man's name, you knew the most important thing about him for it was a clue to who and what he was. Then, as the concept of a Messiah began to develop in the Old Testament, the people began to look for and expect the Anointed One whom God would send. But what would this Messiah be like? What sort of character would he have? You can understand, then, how important the event was when the angel appeared to Joseph to give him the name of the Messiah. Our scripture says, "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "...she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus..." Yes, Jesus--and the name means, "one who saves." As the angel put it, "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins..."

Yes, what's in a name? Well, for the Hebrew name was a clue, the key to one's character. And when Messiah came, they called his name Jesus for he was to be the Saviour of the world. In a way, that was a sad name to give a tiny little baby. His destiny was already set and the shadow of a cross falls across the manger of a baby named Jesus, for to save us he must go to Calvary.

So Christmas raises some questions about this child named Jesus. Why did he come? Who was he? What did he do? Let's think about those questions for a moment. First, why did Jesus come? Well, we could say he came to save the world, or that he came to save people, but somehow that doesn't make it quite relevant enough. No, the fact is, he came to save you. He came to save me. Let me ask you a question: do you feel you need saving? Or let me put it another way: do you live in perfect fellowship with God; do you follow his commandments perfectly; do you do all the things you should do? If you can't say, "yes", that means your relationship to God is broken and you stand under God's judgment and punishment. As the Bible puts it, "the wages of sin is death."

So why did Jesus come? Because I need a saviour. You need a saviour. Do you remember the incident in the life of Jesus when the Jews brought to him the woman taken in adultery? They were going to stone her to death for her sin, but Jesus said to them, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." And the Bible says that being convicted by their own conscience, one by one they went away. Would you have had the right to throw a rock that day? I would not have had that right and neither would you. As I John puts it, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Do you remember how St. Paul put it in Romans? He wrote, "there is none righteous, no, not one... there is none that does good, no, not one." (3:19-20) And that includes us both.

So, why did a child named Jesus come? Because I need a saviour--because you need a saviour. The second question I would like to raise is this: who was this Jesus? Well, you know the answer to that. He was the Son of God. But why the Son of God? Was our sin so bad, was our sin so terrible, that it took something or someone that great to pay for our sin? Yes, that's it exactly. If you have the idea that our sins are not so awful or are not so terrible, look at the manger in Bethlehem and you will see how serious God thought they were.

Do you know what troubles me today? We have lost our sense of the seriousness of sin. Take the so-called sexual revolution of today. Do you realize that a majority of Americans do not believe it is wrong to have premarital sex or for a boy and girl to live together on a trial basis? But that is only the tip of the iceberg! Graft, cheating, stealing and every conceivable form of corruption is tolerated and condoned in our world today.

But let me tell you this: The Bible says that God hates sin. The Bible says that God cannot abide our abominations. The Bible says that God loathes our wickedness. The Hebrews knew what it was to fear God and stand in awe of him for their sins for time and time again his wrath and his judgment had fallen upon them. Are we afraid of God? We try to teach our children that God is loving and kind and forgiving--which he is--but we adults need to remember also that he is a righteous and holy God who will not abide our wickedness and his anger and judgment shall break upon our sins.

If you want to know how seriously God takes sin, turn your eyes to the barn in Bethlehem. That child is God's Son. His name is Jesus. He will die for the sins of the world. And that's how seriously God takes your sin and mine.

So why did Jesus come? Because I needed a Saviour. You needed a Saviour. And who was he? He was the Son of God. Only someone as great as God could pay for those sins of ours, so Jesus is how seriously God takes sin.

The third question I want to raise is this: what did he do? The Bible says that he came to die in our place, to take our sins upon himself, so that you and I might be forgiven. Yes, he came to take your place and my place that we might escape right through those barn doors.

Do you know, I wish that I could be good enough to save myself. I'm an independent sort of person and I don't like to lean on anybody for anything. I like to do things for myself and I don't like to ask for favors. But there is one thing I've learned about myself. St. Paul said it for me when he wrote, "for the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do." (Romans 7:19)

Is that true in your life? I suspect we are both a little like the lady who went to the city health clinic for a free chest X-ray, signing an oath that she could not afford to pay at a regular clinic. After the doctor had studied the prints, he called the lady into his office and sat her down. He told her, "I am sorry to inform you that you have a very terrible condition of the heart that the X-ray has revealed." And then he showed her the film. There, sharply outlined, was her stuffed coin purse, pinned inside her dress. That's a parable on our lives. Outwardly we may appear one way, but God who looks with X-ray vision on the inner hearts, knows us for who and what we really are. So we both need a saviour and Jesus came to die in our place that we might be forgiven, that we might escape the consequence of a heart gone bad.

Yes, he gave himself for us so that whosoever believes might not perish but have life everlasting. Do you remember how the hymn writer put it? He wrote, "Was it for sins that I have done He suffered on the tree? Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree."

Well, we have made Christmas into a lot of things such as feasting, parties, family time, gift giving--and they are not necessarily bad. But we ought never to forget that at the center is the little baby named Jesus. He came because you and I needed a Saviour; he came because only God's Son could pay the price for our sins; and he came that whoever will believe and accept him, can escape through those barn doors at Bethlehem.

George Buttrick used to tell the story of a Chinese rice farmer. From his hill top farm he saw the ocean suddenly withdraw from the distant beach and he knew that some far away earthquake would soon send the water back in a gigantic tidal wave to sweep over and destroy all in its path on the land below him. He knew his neighbors working below could not know what had happened and would be destroyed. Without hesitation he set fire to his fields and began to ring the temple bell. His neighbors rushed to help him, only to look back from the safety of the hill to see the ocean come crashing across the fields they had just left. In a far deeper and more costly sense, that's what God did for us. He took his own and sacrificed it that we might be saved. From the safety of Calvary's hill we can look back and see the destruction from which we escape.

At Christmas we sing this little song, "Away in a manger, no crib for his bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head. The stars in the sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay." A song for children? Perhaps. But a song that must break a father's heart. You see, he knows the name of the child is a clue, a key to what will happen! on the cross, for he knows the name Jesus, for he shall save his people.

As the Bible puts it, "how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation." Yes, how shall we escape if not through those barn doors? Indeed, how shall we?