

Introduction

The Christmas story is wonderful. It has all these fascinating characters and events. The Angel Gabriel, Joseph, his engaged fiancée, the virgin Mary who conceives, the wise men, angels appearing to shepherds, a mysterious western star. But these are not point in time events that can be parsed off and stand alone.

The Christmas story is the climax of story that has been developing for thousands of years. This prophetic candle that was lit in ancient history has been brightening and becoming not an object of interest that is merely seen in the dark but something that illuminates and eliminates the darkness, something by which everything else is seen. What we have been doing in this series is unwrapping a giant story that spans the pages of Scripture.

1. In part one of our series, we reached clear back into Genesis and God's promises to Abraham and David and the birth, growth and eventually judgment of his people. Because of the disobedience of the nation of Israel. They were sent into Exile into Babylon. We imagined their sorrow and confusion and depression.
2. Then we turned to Daniel 9 and looked at a very specific promise of God. That the nation would not only be restored to the land but that an anointed one would come, in 450 years.
3. Last week we considered the silence of God. The OT ends somewhat uneventfully. Israel is allowed to return to her land but few do. It's hard to return. It's difficult. It's hard to rebuild a life from ruins. It's difficult to rebuild a city and eek out a living where no infrastructure exists. It's been 70 years. An entire generation has arisen that knows nothing of the land from which they came. Babylon is there home. So very few returned. And then the OT kind of closes. The light of prophesy is snuffed out. The story of the Bible stops. But history doesn't. We looked last week at the incredible activity that happened during this period of history and the changes in world powers. We saw how Israel was a cork

floating on the ocean of world powers as the Babylonian dominance was exchanged for Persian dominance under Cyrus. And how Persia was overcome by Greece and how this general in his 20's by the name of Alexander the Great conquers the known world. Alexander's kingdom was split and then Israel again was tossed back and forth between the Ptolemies and the Selucids. We saw how Rome eventually secured dominance and how Herod the Great, this great builder, came to rule in the land of Judea.

So that's where we've been.

- We've looked at the judgment of God,
- the promise of God,
- the silence of God and
- today we are going to look at the entrance of God.

We've sped through really 1500 years of history in three weeks and today we are going to slow down and pause and try to take in the moment right before when Jesus was born. Where did God choose to enter history? We are going to look around and look into the eyes of a Pharisee and a Saducee. How do they think? What was the value system at the time? We are going to engage with the Temple system and the political climate. Where did God choose to engage and actually enter into history?

Well for our purposes today, I have answer to that question. Where did God choose to enter history? At a point in which the the Jews were very unhappy.

Now I'm going to take a little bit of time to argue for this. Think about the losses that the Jewish people have experienced.

- They losted land,
- the loss of their entire system of kings, the system of the monarchy.

- They no longer could rule themselves.
- They lost their capitol city, Jerusalem.
 - They lost their temple.
 - They lost their national identity.
 - They couldn't make their own rules.
 - They lost control of the money and finances.

They were scattered. How do you continue to practice a religion whose entire system revolves around a temple that is a thousand miles away? How do you continue to practice your dietary laws and customs? How do you maintain priestly lines and tribal lines? How do you prevent intermarriage and the diluting the lineage of Jews?

The Jews experienced serious and significant loss.

And when you open the pages of the NT, they are no more free to rule themselves than when they were in Babylon. They are suffering under the yoke of the Roman and there is resentment for understandable reason. Let's talk about a few:

Taxes

The average Jew in the land of Israel was oppressed by taxes and they hated it. Their rulers cared about them only in as much as they could pay the taxes. People resented the ways in which they were being extorted, cheated, and taken advantage of. And you see this in the gospels by the way in which tax collectors are characterized. To call someone a tax collector was literally to swear at them. You couldn't get any more hated. Even Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said, "if you love those who love you, what good is that to you? Don't even tax collectors do that?"

Jesus is verbally thrashed for merely eating with tax collectors.

When his enemies want to slander him they say, "Look, there goes Jesus a friend of tax collectors."

Another reason these taxes were so hated is because it made it so much more difficult to obey the law of God. Every Jew was required to pay the temple tax. Here's a temple tax coin.

In our country we have a system of taxation where if you give charitably to an organization your tax burden is decreased. Not so in the Roman world. Just because you paid your temple tax doesn't for a second reduce your tax to Caesar. Caesar couldn't care less about your charitable contributions. So the Jew owed Rome and he owed the temple and he owed God.

Just how bad were these taxes?

F.C. Grant who was a NT scholar at Union Theological Seminary in his book *Economic Background* writes, "The total taxation of the Jewish people in the time of Jesus, civil and religious combined, must have approached the intolerable proportion of between 30 and 40 percent; it may have been higher still." By comparison in 2015 if you were a family of four with a combined income of \$110,000 you paid about 9% of your income in taxes. Next time your tempted to complain about taxes, remember it could be worse.

Do you see how if you were a Jew living in this period of history you would be unhappy? So Jews were unhappy for financial reasons, but also for cultural reasons.

Last week Nate talked about this concept of hellenization which is the spread (really forced spread) of Greek culture.

2. Hellenization

We actually find this term in our Bibles? When we open up the book of Acts, we read of a little dispute going on in the early church.

What you're seeing here is tension between two groups of people. The Hebrews were Jews that spoke Aramaic and who tried to be traditional. The Hellenists were Jews that spoke Greek and whose way of life smacked too much of Greek customs and in this particular passage the people who would be considered more progressive, less traditional were getting ignored. There was friction in society. And it boiled down to very practical things.

- did you go to the gladiator events
- did you wear Roman clothes.
- did you speak Greek or Aramaic?

It would have been very much like the friction an Amish person feels. He wears weird clothes, he drives a horse and buggy. He doesn't go to movies. He goes to his own schools, his own way of doing everything. He just sticks out in society as being totally different.

These were real issues that people in Jesus' day had to deal with. And just to be clear, this had been going on for centuries. Hellenization started clear back with the Greeks and Alexander the Great. Actually, if you want to be fair, it really started - like all major movements start - in the universities. Hellenism started with Aristotle whose most well known student was Alexander the Great and who happened to be a tremendous implementor of Aristotle's ideas.

And the reason this is a problem for Jews is because, Greek culture does not play nicely with the Torah. It's water and oil. This is metal grinding against stone. This forced intersection creates all sorts of sparks and friction. If you have Greek culture over here and you have Jewish culture over here, that's fine. They can coexist at a distance. But the second you force it, somethings got to give. They are incompatible. Sparks are going to fly.

For hundreds of years Hellenism is grinding against Judaism. By the time you get to the NT, this forced intersection has created this strange conglomeration. You've got a temple built by Herod the great with a golden Eagle over it. What's that? You have tombs built to remember David that are built with Roman architecture.

Ruler after Greek ruler has swept across the land of Israel and said to these people, enough of your Jewishness. Stop being strange. Start being Greek. And as much as the Jews tried to resist it, Greek culture has wormed its way into the cracks of Judaism. They are resisting but unconsciously accepting. Cleansing but you can't wipe all the dirt off. By the time Jesus comes they are reading from a Greek OT Bible, they are surrounded by Greek writings, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey are floating around. You have Epicurean and Stoic philosophers whose whole worldview is naturalistic. They are constantly trying to maintain their distinctiveness but are tired of the non-stop grinding forces of cultural pressures.

They want to be independent. They want to rule themselves without this pressure to conform to Hellenistic Greek ideas.

So the Jews are unhappy because they are paying heavy taxes. They are unhappy because of this Greek culture that permeates everything. But there's a third reason they are unhappy: temple

corruption.

3. Temple Corruption

You would think, well sure you are a Jew paying unfair taxes in a heavily hellenized world. Well, at least you have the temple. At least you are free to practice your faith, right? Well, it's not so easy. The whole temple system had been horribly corrupted so that as a worshipper you were always terribly conflicted.

Consider as a case in point the office of high priest. The office of high priest itself was something of incredible importance for a Jew. We read in Numbers 25 that the high priest had to be a descendant of Aaron and later in David's time we see the funnel narrowing. Not only was he to be of the family of Aaron, he was to be a descendant of the line of Zadock.

So the actual lineage of this man was important. But his job was important too. He was instrumental in managing the temple. He was essential for carrying out the duties of the day of atonement, for administrating the ashes of the red heifer, and performing various temple rituals.

Of anything that would be representative of the health of your faith it would be the character and nature of the high priest.

Now remember when Antiochius IV came back defeated and took out his wrath on the Jews by killing a pig on their alter. Can you imagine how horrified the Jews would be? It would be worse than coming in Sunday morning and seeing a pig nailed to our cross in the foyer. Just the thought is so horrible, so sacrilegious.

Well another thing Antiochus does is assassinate the last legitimate high priest Onias III. And he was replaced by a high priest named Jason. Now do you think a guy with a name like Jason was a descendant of Aaron of the line of Zadock? Not a chance. And from this point forward in history, the entire priestly system is a messy nightmare. It splinters in three ways.

1. Antiochus installs illegitimate high priests in Jerusalem. For a period of time it is re-captured the temple and cleanse it. This recapturing event is what Hannukah celebrates. But now the high priest is appointed from the Hasmonean family and he is given not only the religious authority but also the civil authority. He acted like almost like a priest-king. And while this may have started with good intentions, it degenerated to the point where you had literal pagans occupying the office out of sheer lust for power.
2. Onias' son realizes the temple in Jerusalem is going nowhere so he goes to Egypt and establishes a temple system down there to try to maintain some sort of purity.
3. Others who couldn't stand the thought of being part of this temple system and thought it wrong to start a new temple in Egypt migrated out to the desert and started a separatist community in a city called Qumran. This is the place where the dead sea scrolls were found.

By the time you get to the NT the position of high priest has devolved to the point where the high priest could be disposed of at will (despite the OT provision that the high priesthood was for life). Herod was installing and uninstalling priests sometimes at the rate of one per year. It was a position that could be purchased through bribery. So the high priesthood in NT times was always held by wealthy individuals but although it was a position of power and influence.

Can you imagine how distasteful this would have been to the Jew?

If that wasn't distasteful enough, you had to contend with the fact that your corrupt priest had to be in delicate submission to an equally corrupt Roman authority. You see the high priest was a puppet of the regional Roman authority. They always had to be careful to appease their Roman masters and when you read the NT you definitely get the feeling that the high priests and the Sadducees are very careful to appease their Roman masters.

You can see this authority structure even in the very architecture of the Herodian temple.

Wow, what an impressive temple you say. Herod rebuilt this whole thing. Oh that's so nice of Herod to give the Jews money to build their temple. Do you think it was out of the great kindness and benevolence of Herod's heart that the temple was built? Free money without any strings attached. Of course not. You see that giant tower to the North? That's called the Antonia fortress. That structure served as the barracks for the Roman soldiers. Josephus says that from the top of the tower you had a commanding view of the entire temple courtyard. Are you free to worship God? That would be like having a camera from the secret service in your sanctuary. Do whatever you like, so long as you don't do anything we don't like. The whole system was flawed.

What do you do as worshiper? You want to obey the law, but you have to hold your nose to do it.

- You go to the temple with your lamb but then you get taxed on the way into the city.
- You have to change your money and you get reamed in the process.
 - You have to pay your temple tax.

- You go in and a guy whose in it for the power and money takes your lamb and slaughters it.

Does that even count? It just doesn't feel right. Here's a passage from the Talmud that describes the common person's attitude toward the 'chief priests'

Woe is me for the house of Boethus! (father-in-law of Herod the Great) Woe is me for their club! Woe is me for the house of Hanin (Annas) Woe is me for their whisperings! Woe is me for the house of Kantheras! (Annas' sucesor) Woe is me for their pen!

Woe is me for the house of Ishmael Woe is me for their fist For they are the high priests; Their sons are the treasurers; Their sons-in-law are temple-officers; And their servants beat the people with cudgels.

Do you hear in these words the bitterness of the people toward the temple system? No wonder Jesus became an overnight celebrity when he cleansed the temple!

I can imagine that the people of Jesus day experienced many of the same feelings that Martin Luther had trying to worship God in the Catholic church. You have pieces of the right thing in place. But you have this worship of Mary, extra books in your Bible, indulgences, corruption in the priests.

The average Jew was frustrated, unhappy, resentful. They were frustrated by the taxes. They were frustrated by the Greek cultural pressures imposed by Hellenism They were frustrated by the religious corruption in the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and chief priests.

Listen you only have to go as far as the names of the people in Jesus' entourage to hear all these forces at work.

- You have Matthew the who? Tax collector
- Thomas, sometimes called doubting Thomas, also had another name he went by in the NT Didymus. Didymus was his Greek name. Some names just don't work in other languages. And so to be compatible you change your name. You're seeing the influence of Hellenism.
- For that matter consider the names Andrew and Philip. Those are entirely Greek names.
- Simon the who? Simon the Zealot. The zealots were bands of Jews willing to fight for the purity of Judaism and to push off Hellenism with the point of their spear.

Do you hear all these Greek influences and the reasons for the spirit of revolution on the minds of people. People were HUNGRY for a Messiah.

And because of that hunger, messiahs were arising. In the NT alone we read of many of these so-called Messiahs - In Acts 21 we read of an Egyptian that led 4000 into the desert, in Acts 5 a guy by the name of Judas the Galilean, and another guy by the name of Thuedus.

What does this tell you? The fact that these guys are popping and starting revolutions tells you that people are unhappy. You don't want to join a revolutionary if you are content. Revolutions only work when people are miserable. The point is that the situation was intolerable for many. They'd rather risk their life and die as part of a revolution rather than continue living in the status quo. You have the entire nation of Israel revved up, grinding against her overload, bitter, angry, oppressed.

Jesus was Great Because He was a Servant

And it is against this backdrop of Messianic fervor and political discontent that we need to read the Christmas story.

Because what confronts us in the opening pages of the Christmas story is the most unlikely, unexpected, non-militaristic scene that you could possibly expect given the political situation and general expectation of what the Messiah would be. The fact that you can make a song called "silent night" about the Christmas story and have it work ought to just blow fuses in our mind.

The main character is not a queen, not someone who has ingratiated themselves with Caesar, not a general of an army, but a teenage girl living in Nazareth.

Not only did this girl not have any political power. She had no spiritual power. She wasn't a priest. She wasn't a Pharisee or Sadducee or teacher of the law. She was the wrong gender, born in the wrong city, with the wrong education. And yet she is chosen. The angel Gabriel appears and says.

Now hear this in revolutionary overtures. Call his name Jesus which means. Salvation. Save us. But now hear this. He will be GREAT. Now just stop there for a moment. He will be GREAT. That's a title these people are used to. You had Darius the Great, Cyrus the Great, Alexander the Great and now Herod the Great. And now here we read. He will be great. But how will he be great? This is what nobody could have expected but the manner of his entrance into humanity was a giant hint. Let's think about this more closely.

Do you hear the politics here? He will rule on the throne of his Father David. This would be like saying, "He will be president after his father George Bush and he will be commander and chief in the order of George Washington."

Can you imagine these words given to a a teenager in Nazareth?

This is craziness among craziness. This would be like going to a Junior high girl whose father is a day laborer in a beat field in Marsing and saying, "Hey, you know the Messiah of the world, the Messiah that the world has been waiting for for 2000 years, well you are going to conceive and give birth to him."

Nazareth? Nazareth is nothing. What good thing comes out of Nazareth? Do you remember that accusation being hurled at Jesus.

- What significant world power comes out of Notus?
- What force that influenced decisions at the level of the United Nations comes out of Parma?
- Name one world leader that arose from Melba?

You could imagine it out of NYC or Nashville or Los Angelas. But these towns are nothing. Leaders don't arise from these places.

Think about it. Not only are the Jews nothing in the scope of the Roman empire.

But Nazareth and Bethlehem are nothing even in the Jewish world. How is the savior of the world, the world conqueror going to arise from the backwaters of the Roman empire but not just the

backwaters of the Roman empire, the backwaters of the Jewish system. Your telling me that the Anointed one - on par with King David - is coming out of the the backwaters of the backwaters Nazareth and Bethlehem.

But this should be of no surprise to us. God is always working off to the side; God isn't enamored by the limelight. He's not looking for rockstars. He's looking for stay at home moms that are ignored by the world. He's looking for faithful dads who are employed at Red Robin, barbers, truck drivers. He's looking for executives that make crazy business decisions to maintain integrity and advance God's kingdom.

He speaks to shepherds not Sadducee. He speaks to a teenage girl. Jesus is always inverting our world systems. We see this in the Sermon on the Mount. It's countercultural. It's opposite.

Why does he do this? Why is he always upsetting the norms? Because he's inverting what it means to be Great. One of the things we see most obviously in the Christmas story that is lived out the entire rest of Jesus' life that if you want to be greatest of all you have to be servant of all. The path to greatness is unintuitive. The path to being king is to being a servant. The path to being respected and loved and worshiped is to give and surrender and even die and become a slave.

Let me end here with a contrast. You go to Israel today and what do you see. Everywhere you go you see this man Herod the Great. It's a great parallel since he lived exactly at the same time as Jesus. Herod the Great was the man who issued the decree to kill all the baby children in Bethlehem. Why did he do this? He was scared of someone trying to overthrow him. He's trying to be great. And you

can't be great if your dead. And if you read history, this guy is on a mission to be great. He's possessed with the idea. He names himself the great. He's hoping it will be a self-fulfilling prophesy. If I name myself great, I will be great. And he builds and he builds and he builds. He wants to be GREAT.

You go there today and see all these amazing things he built. I'll take you on a 2:30 tour.

Masada

If I were to take you to Israel today for sure we'd go to Massada. And you'd see this amazing cliff-top fortress,

- a 23 acre palace that stands 900 feet above the valley floor complete with
- giant cisterns of water,
- years worth of food squirrled away in storehouses, and
- panoramic views of the desert surroundings complete with open central courtyard surrounded by porticos with Corinthian columns.

Herod's personal residential palace was expansive complete with bathhouse, tiled floors, sauna and steamroom. All of this can be seen today.

Caesarea

You can go to Caesarea and see a 6mile long aquaduct bringing fresh water into the city.

You would see giant theater with a seating capacity of 3,500.

Right on the ocean do you see that giant box structure? That was

called Herod's most magnificent palace. Inside of which was pool nearly Olympic in size, and was filled with fresh water in which you could swim. A statue stood in the center.

To the North a Hippodrome in the shape of a long "U" (50 X 250M), with 10,000 seats in 12 rows.

More impressive still was the largest man-made harbor known in his time. Herod imported over 24,000 cubic meters of volcanic ash from, Italy, to make a special kind of concrete that sets up underwater.

Winter Palace in Jericho.

If you went to Israel today for sure you'd see Jericho. You'd find three giant palaces of Herod's. Palace one would contain an elaborate bathhouse in Roman style, with six rooms complete with forced air heated floors.

In palace two you'd find a single large (32m x 18m.) swimming pool surrounded by gardens. Trees and shrubs were planted in clay pots set into the ground; The palace had an unobstructed view of the surrounding scenery.

The third palace contained the largest of the halls. It measured 29 x 19 m., and was undoubtedly used for large receptions; rows of columns surrounded it on three sides, the columns in the northern corner in the shape of a heart. The floor paving was of local and imported stone tiles, laid in elaborate geometric patterns. The walls of the hall were covered with frescos and stucco.

Jerusalem

And then of course there is Jerusalem itself. The giant 20 story temple mount structure which could hold 100,000 to 200,000 people constructed of massive stones 10-100 tons in size, some weighing as much as 600 tons. A staggering number of colonnades in the royal stoa leading into this beautiful staircase known as Robinson's arch.

And all through the city of Jerusalem you have his fingerprint. The palace fortress. The amphitheater. The renovations of the pool of Siloam. The Jerusalem water channel. Numerous public buildings and facilities.

And this short tour of Herod's accomplishments doesn't even talk about the Herodium castle, Antipatras, the restorations at Alexandrium, Sabaste, and dozens more projects

This was the glory of Herod the great. Now here's a slide that shows the archaeological accomplishments of Jesus Christ. Nothing. Zero. There is not a single artifact of anything that Jesus made.

Herod tried to make his name great. Did he succeed?

- He lived his life in palaces with the finest things.
- He had as many servants and attendants as he wished.
- He enjoyed every sexual pleasure he desired.

Did this make him happy? Did this make him great? His entire life he paid people to love him. Even then, he feared constantly that his closest friends, out of their hatred for his selfishness, would stab him in the back. He murdered most of his family out of suspicion.

There was a saying in his day that it is safer to be Herod's pig than

his son. On his deathbed he ordered that 70 people be executed at the moment of his death so that someone would mourn his death. Was Herod Great?

We can go to Jerusalem today and say, "Wow look what he did." Does that make him great? Was Herod great?

By contrast, Jesus was born in a cave, a hole in the side of the earth that sheltered smelly field animals. The title he chose for himself was not Jesus the Great but Son of Man. Jesus said, "I identify with the lowly."

- He was born to a poor family of plain means in a no-name city.
- He had no royal title.
- He was uneducated by the standards of the day. He didn't have Aristolian training or even very good Jewish training.

And yet, if I ask the question, "Was Jesus great?" How do you answer? Of course. Why? Yes, but why?

What did he build? What did he do? Nothing. That's not what makes people great. A person is not great because of what he's done but because of who he is. Jesus was great, not because of the position or title he held or the list of buildings he built but because of the character and essence and nature of who he was.

When you look at Herod's life, all you see is death and continued decay. The only thing that can happen to Herod's projects is that they experience further decay and destruction. Time will continue to wear them down.

But out of the life of Jesus life springs out. We don't find followers of Herod. We find billions of followers of Jesus. Trillions of dollars have

been given to the church to spread the message of the Jesus Christ, to purchase buildings in his name. Every city in America has a monument to his life and what he stood for. What a person does is not important. It's who a person is.

And who is Jesus? At the very core? Who did the prophets say he would be? Who is Jesus?

- He is a servant a footman.
- He is humble.
- He is a giver.
- He is meek and lowly.
- He is a sacrificer.
- He is selfless.
- He emptied himself.
- He made himself nothing.
- He surrendered himself even unto death, even death on a cross.

What a list!

Whoever would be great, what do you need to do? Build great buildings. Put great after your name. Acquire great titles? No. Be a slave of all.

You want to know what the next verse says, "A great crowd followed him." People are so drawn to true servants - someone who uses their power and authority and wisdom to serve others rather than serve themselves.

A Messiah, a savior, a true lord is one who is able to deliver us from the sin of Herod that is in all of us. All of us want to be great. And given the opportunity we'd all turn into monsters like Herod. We are me monsters just sucking in power and lusting for more and more until we are crushed by it. But Jesus came to turn the tables on the world. He came to upset it all. He would become that servant that Isaiah and Daniel predicted, that righteous branch that would objectively remove the sin problem not by leveraging power but by surrendering power and become a curse. He came to as Acts 3 says, "bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness."

It is not accident that the savior of the world is born in feeding trough for cows and goats. We worship him not in spite of that, but because of it. Jesus in inverting the values of the human race, becomes to us an object of worship, true greatness. Okay, that's where we will end today.