

Rejoice! Salvation Part 1 is here

Scripture: Matt 1:18-25

December 20, 2015

This is the Christmas story as we know it. For hundred's of years the Jewish scripture promised that a Messiah would come. The promise was that the Messiah would save his people from their sins. In fact the promised salvation would be not just for the Jewish people but indeed for the whole world. Then 2000 years ago a young virgin who was already betrothed to be married was informed by an angel that she had found favor with God and that she would be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and become pregnant in spite of the fact that she was a virgin. And the child who would be born would be the One the scripture has been prophesying about for 100's of years. This child would be God's own son and his mission would be nothing less than saving the world from sin. God revealed the same thing in a dream to Mary's fiancé, Joseph as well so that he too would co-operate with God's plan. That is exactly what happened. The baby was born in the reign of King Herod. And the baby's name was Jesus. And the rest as they say is history.

Well, if you have been going to church for any length of time this story I am sure is very familiar to you. And it is exciting and important to hear the Christmas story. In fact just telling the story of the birth of Christ and hearing the story is the most essential ritual of Christmas. But when something is repeated over and over the danger is that it can become routine. And routines drive you into auto-pilot mode and suddenly Christmas will be over and you realize that you just sleepwalked right through it. So today I want to help you think about this act of God coming into the world in a new way. And I am going to do that by laying out for you three alternatives to the Christmas story. Three alternative ways that God could have entered our world.

The first alternative entry is what I am calling the **symbolic presence** possibility. In this way God could have entered not in human form but in some other appropriate form, like a bright light or a pillar of fire. This is not just an outlandish idea because when God appeared to Moses in Exodus chapter 3, he did appear as a fire. When you think of it, given this history is it amazing that the Jewish people did not start worshipping fire after that. And after the burning bush, the next time people saw the presence of God it was like thunder and lightning and fire on Mt Sinai. They also saw God's presence in Exodus chapter 13 as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Many years later at the dedication of the first temple by King Solomon in 1 Kings chapter 8, God revealed his presence through a special kind of smoke that filled the temple. Much later in the book

of Revelation chapter 5 you see yet another way God reveals himself as the lamb who was slain. The point is, if God wanted to make His presence felt among the people, and even teach people a little bit more about who God is, he could have used all kinds of symbols to make his presence felt. So the question then becomes why did he not chose any of these ways. There is nothing wrong obviously in using these symbols for God because every example I presented to you were examples I took right from the Bible about past and future ways that God has and will be presented to us. But the important thing is God does not chose any of these symbolic ways to make the Immanuel, God is with us statement at Christmas. Three main reasons. Firstly, because these symbolic ways of appearing would not have communicated that God is a personal God. In other words the God that we worship even though he is not a man or woman in the way we understand it, God is still personal as opposed to being just an self-conscious energy force. In other words because of Christmas we get to see that God has human characteristics and even human emotions. This is a big deal. So Christmas lets us see that God is personal. The second thing we get to see is what human perfection looks like. You see even though the Bible says God created human beings in his image we cannot fully understand this when we only see sinful people. So God would not simply come into this world on Christmas as a big scary fire because we would not realize how personal God on the one hand and how perfection looks in human form. The third reason God had to come in human form as opposed to symbolic form is the sacrifice on the cross. Now if you are getting really creative on me you would be saying, what about if he came as a very special talking lamb as revealed in the book of Revelation? Well again, a talking lamb will not do because a talking lamb would not be able to live life with people and disciple people, right? The human experience cannot be lived by a lamb. That would just not work. Humans can only relate to humans. And humans were the only creature who were created in God's image. The lamb on the throne in the book of revelation again is just symbolic language. If God wanted to reveal as much about His personality as human beings could handle and then sacrifice himself as a single representative of all humans he had to be a man, he had to be a human being.

That brings us to the second possibility. So OK if Jesus had to come as a human being, why did he have to come as a baby? After all, babies are cute and all but what can babies do? Now I know, you woman and men too out there are saying, hey that is the best part of Christmas. But you have to bear with me here, I am only scanning the possible alternatives that God rejected so that you can more fully appreciate the path God did chose at Christmas. So coming back to the baby issue. Firstly, by now if you have been following the sermons you know that of the four Gospels from which we get all our information about Jesus' life only two Gospels, Matthew and Luke have any

information on the infancy portions of Jesus life. Both the gospel of Mark and Gospel of John as you know start talking about Jesus' early ministry with Jesus' herald and most important prophet, John the Baptist. Even when you look at the first and third Gospel you do get some details about Jesus' infancy but after that you have nothing about Jesus' growing years except for one story about Jesus at the temple when he was 12 in the Gospel of Luke. The next you encounter Jesus is when he begins his ministry age 30. This does raise the question why then bother with the growing stage. Why did Jesus not come straight as an adult? If you are looking at me with strange eyes well, let me tell you even that has been done before, in the Bible. You see on multiple occasions in the Old Testament you have what are called theophanies, which is nothing but God appearing in human form. Two famous examples were when the 3 visitors appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18, one of them was God Himself. Or take the time when Daniel and his friends were in a super-hot furnace and they too were visited by a theophany, God in human form. Now if God had appeared straight in adult form he could have revealed the personal nature of God, he could have demonstrated what human perfection looked like and he could have died on the cross.... But this plan too would have not worked for two reasons. A theophany of God does not need any co-operation from human beings. You see it was so important to God that he work out his salvation with human beings on his team. So he involves a whole cast of people the most important figure of course is Mary herself but Joseph, and the entire geneology of Jesus from both sides were somehow co-opted by God into his plan and this method of God is as important a revelation of God's mind as anything else. The direct appearance of an adult form of Jesus would remove the human role in Jesus birth and this was too important for God to leave out. The second reason a direct adult appearance would not work for Jesus is because God wanted to communicate his empathy for the human condition. Hebrews 4:15 says we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses but one who was tempted in all things like we are, yet without sin. So Christ experienced every temptation, every injustice the full force of violence and even poverty and every challenge that human beings can face from the moment of conception till the moment of death. All so that every single human being may know that whatever you are suffering or have suffered, Christ has suffered at an equivalent or greater intensity, so he can sympathize with you and say my child I have been there, I know what you are going through and I care about all your suffering and believe me I have a plan to take care of it all. So God's entry into the world as a baby enables God to fully empathize with human challenges and at the same time co-opt human beings into his plan for salvation and keep his promise to Abraham and fulfill all the prophesies of Jesus.

We have established so far that Christ could not come as some symbolic presence, and he could not come directly as an adult human being and started his ministry right away. That brings us to the third possibility. Why could he not come once and for all? Why did he have to come first as a baby, grow, die and go back and then promise to come again? In fact it would not be violating any scripture prophecy if he did. In fact all the prophecies that we read about hardly give a hint about two separate Messianic entries. Take Isaiah 9 6 and 7 for example. This reads,

For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And he will be called:

Wonderful Counselor,^[d] Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ His government and its peace
will never end.

He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
for all eternity.

The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen!

The Isaiah 25 we used last Sunday also talks about God's salvation coming with the Lord of heaven's armies throwing a heavenly banquet for all the people of the world. There is no hint here of a two part process to God's salvation plan. Now to be fair there are prophecies about the Messiah dying and Jesus himself talks about his plan. But this period that we live in between Jesus' ascension and second coming nobody who only had access to the Old Testament would have figured out. So this brings us to our third possibility, why did there have to be a first coming which contained Jesus' birth as a baby, his teaching and healing ministry, his death, resurrection and ascension and then another wait for his return. To figure this out imagine this scenario. What if Jesus came as a baby, grew did everything that he did and then after his resurrection and then instead of ascending to heaven revealed his full glory to the whole world. There are two problems with this scenario. Yes his death on the cross would accomplish its immediate purpose of victory over Satan but human beings would not get the opportunity to respond to Christ's work on the cross in faith rather than being overwhelmed by the glorious Christ and make their decision by choice. You see the Bible is very clear that ...without faith it is impossible to please God. God wants us to make our decisions without seeing the end of the story, that is what faith is about and that is the only way

our decision can be totally based on our free will. When Christ returns it is really the end. Nobody can resist the full glory of God. At that time the Bible says that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Does not mean that every single person will be saved at that point. Not really. What it means is that in the presence of the full glory of God you cannot stand straight whether you are a believer or not. The full glory of God is too overwhelming for a mere human being to resist. God is not looking to overpower people into confessing His Lordship. This is the delicate balance. God has to reveal just enough of Himself that people would know they are in the presence of God but He also has to leave enough room for people to make excuses and chose not to believe if they so desired. This is exactly what you see in baby Jesus. He had a miraculous one of a kind birth but you could only recognize who Jesus was if you were looking hard like the wise men or Simenon and Anna. So God's low key first big entry into the world is so that people would be able to respond in complete free will to God.

One last point, God had to have a part one to salvation because that was an important aspect of God's solution to the problem of sin. Let me explain. Yes many Messianic prophecies make it seem like the Messiah would come and everyone would be liberated from sin. But when you zoom in on the problem of sin this is what you see. First, Christ's death on the cross takes away the penalty of sin. Then if you receive His Holy Spirit, that takes away the power of sin. But here is the problem. What if I claim that I have power over sin but I have no challenges and temptations of a fallen environment around me to test that power over sin? If that was the case I would not have any cross of my own to bear. And if I did not have a cross to bear, I would not have a part in God's plan for the rest of the world. So here is the deal, the only reason Christ is holding back his coming is so that you can bear your cross and engage in his work of bring salvation to the world.

God has many ways in which he could have come into this world, but he chose to be born as a baby boy and live our life and suffer and teach and concur sin and death so that you and me can be part of his plan for saving the world. The message of Christmas not just that God is with us, but also that God want you to be just as surrendered as Mary and Joseph in being used by God till his salvation plan is completed. Let us pray.