

GCCSI DEVOTIONAL



LENT

2020

Week 3

Christ's Mission

Day 1: To Be with Us and Save Us

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Jesus came. He lived. He died. And He rose again. This is Good News. As Easter approaches, we will be spending this week thinking about why Christ came. What was Jesus' purpose? Why is this Good News? How does this affect us? The purpose of this week's meditation is to simply put Jesus on display. In doing so, my hope is that you would allow your heart to be in wonder of God's kindness and love.

Today's passage is a simple meditation. Jesus came to be with us and to save us. In Matthew 1:18-25 we read that Jesus' coming to earth was not without difficulty or inconvenience. Joseph who was betrothed to Mary, found out Mary was pregnant. This would be a scandal and Joseph would have lost face. Not wanting to bring her ruin, Joseph was considering divorcing Mary quietly. But an angel of the Lord indicated to Joseph that Mary's pregnancy was not an ordinary one. The angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife and reveals to her four things: first, the child within Mary's womb was conceived from the Holy Spirit. Second, the baby is a son. Third, his name is to be Jesus because, "He will save people from their sins." Fourth, this child was the fulfillment of the prophesy in Isaiah, "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name, 'Immanuel'"

This passage tells us a several things about Jesus, but I'd like to focus on two things in particular. Both these things have to do with Jesus' name. The first thing we're told about Jesus is what his name means. In the original Aramaic, Jesus' name was Yeshua. It was a common enough name like today's "John" or "Daniel". It is the same name as the Old Testament hero, Joshua. The name simply means, "Yahweh Saves". There was something special about the name that was meant to reflect Jesus' character and purpose. He is the Savior sent by Yahweh. But the angel told Joseph very specifically what Jesus would save people from. He will save people, "from their sins".

Sin was the issue that went all the way back to Adam and Eve. Sin was the corruption in the human heart that led people to rebel against God. It is the corruption that causes suffering on the earth and broke our relationship with God. It is the reason why we are estranged from God, from creation, and from each other. It causes corruption and decay. It leads us to deserve punishment from a just and Holy God. God's solution to this problem was not to wipe sin out immediately. God's solution to the problem of sin was to send a Savior.

The second thing we are told is that his name will be called, "Immanuel". A translation is provided in 1:23. In the same way the name Jesus had a meaning, the name Immanuel was significant too. Immanuel means, "God with us." In other words, the very presence of God was going to be with his people. If we were to combine these two names we can see that "God with Us" was coming to save us. The Holy One was going to dwell with sinners in order to make sinners into saints.

A simple allegory could help us understand the significance of Jesus' birth. Imagine you are in a burning building trapped in an elevator. The elevator is shut down and the lights are off and smoke starts to fill the elevator. Things are uncertain but the danger is very real. You pushed the emergency button and the firm but comforting voice of the operator tells you that help is on the way. After waiting for some time, you hear some voices and some loud noises outside the doors of the elevator. At first there's a crack in the door, and then the crack turns into a bigger space. And filling the space stands a team of firemen. The presence of the firefighters brings much relief and hope. After speaking with you to calm your fears, the firefighters proceed to hold the elevator doors open and carry you out on a stretcher with an oxygen mask. As you're brought outside you see daylight and you are naturally filled with gratitude and joy as you know you are safe.

The analogy would be something like this: The operator telling you that help is on the way is like the prophecies that promised the Messiah. The firefighters of course is Christ who doesn't just tell you what to do over the phone to save yourself, but also comes into the elevator with you. Jesus' presence on this earth was the moment where God identified with his people by becoming one of us. But like the firefighter, Jesus didn't just come to identify with us. He came to rescue us. Jesus is God in the flesh. What an amazing thought! God stepped into our situation and understands our struggles. But He doesn't just identify with us and joins us in our situation, He came to rescue us and set us free.

Questions for Meditation

1. How is the idea of God with us a comforting thought for you? How could it be a scary thought in light of God's holiness?
2. How is Jesus being our Savior a comforting thought for you?
3. Has there ever been a time in your life where you felt abandoned or left out? How did Jesus as Emmanuel, and Jesus as Savior help you?

Day 2: To Be Our Mediator

Read Matthew 2:1-18

Jesus is our mediator. A mediator is someone who helps two different people who have a disagreement and tries to reconcile the two. As a mediator, Jesus came to represent us before God. But he also came to represent God to us. In order to represent us before God, Jesus had to be fully human. He had to be born, he had to grow, he had to experience temptation and difficulty just like everyone else. But he was also sent to represent God to us. In order to do this, he had to fulfill everything God the Father required of Him. He had to remain Holy in a world of sin. If Jesus failed, there would be no hope for us to be in a right relationship with God. If He succeeded, we could be made right before God once again.

In today's passage we see three times where something in Jesus' life was connected to the history of the nation of Israel. As stated yesterday, Jesus' arrival was not welcomed with great fanfare by all. While he was welcomed by some, there were many who saw Jesus' coming as a threat to their rule and their stature. King Herod, the ruler of Judea craved power and position. The first connection we read is when King Herod was told of Jesus' birth. Scribes were called in and it was found that in the book of Micah, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. The hometown of Israel's ancient King David. Jesus was Israel's King.

When Herod heard of the prophecy, he was not happy about it. He tried to use deception to kill Jesus. But God protected the baby and Joseph took Mary and the Baby Jesus to Egypt for some time. Here we read of a second connection Jesus had with Israel's history from Hosea 11:1. Here God calls the nation of Israel, "my son" and reminds the people how God brought Israel out of Egypt. When word of Herod's plot to kill the baby was known, Joseph took Mary and Baby Jesus to Egypt until it was safe.

The third connection is seen in Herod's response when the king's plan to use the Wise men to find Jesus failed. Herod sent soldiers and killed all the boys in that region who were two years old or under. The connection is from Jeremiah 31:15. Jeremiah was talking about the children killed during the Babylonian invasion and exile. Jesus too shared the experience of the people of Israel in his life.

Why are these connections important? In today's passage we see how Jesus became our mediator. Jesus wasn't the only mediator in the Bible. The nation of Israel was also supposed to represent God to the world. These connections are important because they have to do with

God's purpose for the nation of Israel. Israel was supposed to be God's representative on earth. In Exodus 19:6, God tells the people of Israel that they were supposed to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The problem was that Israel and Israel's kings failed to obey God completely. Although Israel was set free from Egypt, they continued to rebel against God in the wilderness. Even though God brought the people into the Promised Land and settled them, the people repeatedly forgot about God and continued to worship idols. Despite God sending prophets regularly to remind them of the consequences of disobedience, the Kings and the people of Israel refused to listen and were eventually sent into exile.

Again, these connections are important because where Israel and Israel's kings failed, God succeeded. God sent his own representative. Although Israel's Kings failed to obey God, Jesus is the righteous King who fully obeyed God. Where Israel failed to represent God to the world, Jesus is the New Israel who faithfully shows us what God is like. As a nation, Israel experienced loss and suffering because of their own sin. Jesus would know what suffering was like and take away the punishment for our sin.

Why is this Good News for us today? It is Good News for those who know what it is like to fail. To those who know what it is like to struggle with sin, the nation of Israel went through the same struggles. If you are someone who wants to do what is right, but struggles with sin over and over again, you know the struggle can be frustrating and discouraging. But the Good News is that where Israel failed, Jesus succeeded. Likewise, where you sin, Jesus obeyed. Jesus came to represent you when you couldn't represent yourself. When you look at your sin and consider your failures, remember that you have a representative who has experienced the same temptations just as you have. You have a mediator who paid the penalty for your sin and stands before God the Father on your behalf. Jesus is praying and interceding on our behalf before God.

Questions for Meditation:

1. What is a repeated sin that you struggle with regularly?
2. Have you ever felt sadness or depression because you can't seem to change?
3. How does your life parallel Israel's failures?
4. How does knowing that not only did Christ defeat sin, but that he represents you before the Father bring you comfort?

Day 3: To Seek and Save the Lost

Read Luke 19:1-10

One day one of my kids (the exact one shall remain unknown) taught me a lesson about seeking something that was lost. We had come home from a trip and stopped by a fast food restaurant and each of them had gotten a toy. As they were going to bed, one of them became really upset. The other two had their toy, but one of them fell asleep when they were coming home and had left the toy in the car. Breaking out in tears and with dramatic flair, my child begged me to go to the car and retrieve the missing toy. It was late, and it was winter- I was not in the mood. But my child begged and begged and as a dutiful father, I went and looked in the van. I looked high and I looked low. After several cold minutes, I found the missing toy. The look of relief from my child made the search worthwhile. The tears stopped and a smile came across my child's face. It made me wonder about God's joy in finding lost people.

In today's passage, we get a glimpse of God's heart. Jesus was passing through the city of Jericho and we're introduced to a man named Zacchaeus. We're told a few things about Zacchaeus in verse 2- he was a chief tax collector- which means that he earned his keep through cheating, force and bullying. Being that he was a chief tax collector means that he got really good at it and oversaw other cheaters. He was the boss of cheaters. We're also told that Zacchaeus was rich. Not only was he a cheater and a crook, he had more than he needed. But something wasn't right. There was an emptiness in his soul.

One day as Jesus was passing by, we're told that Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus on account of his short stature. (We assume Luke meant Zacchaeus and not Jesus). So, like a child, the chief tax collector climbed up a tree. But Jesus noticed him and Jesus invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus wasn't being rude, in the Near East, a sign of honor was for someone of importance to come to your home. The reaction of the people was telling. They grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

We're told that Zacchaeus repented. He offered up half of what he owned to the poor. To those he cheated, he promised to restore four times the amount. (He must have been really rich). Jesus summarizes the experience by declaring that salvation has come to Zacchaeus' home. Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

How do you feel when someone is looking for you? Sometimes my

children like to come to me when I call them. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they want to be found. Other times they want to disappear. What determines if they want one over the other is if they are in trouble or not.

The thing with sin is that it is often connected with shame. We have lost face. We are ashamed to be in front of others. Like our first parents, Adam and Eve who hid themselves from God and covered up their nakedness with leaves after they sinned, we too hide and run away. We often get stuck in our ways and can't think of a way out of the consequences of our decisions. What about you? If you knew God was looking for you would you go to him or would you prefer to hide? Do you know you have a Savior who is looking for you? This is the same God who sought after Adam and Eve when they hid themselves after eating the fruit. This God came into the world to seek after you. If you understand who Jesus is and what he has done, you would run to Jesus. Not away from Jesus. This is a sign that the Gospel has made a difference in your life.

Questions for Meditation:

1. What word would you use to describe Jesus' character in today's passage?
2. Do you feel like you need to wait to clean up your act before coming to God or do you feel free to come to God now?
3. What is something that you have done in the past that makes you feel ashamed or like a failure?

Day 4: To Take Away Our Curse

Read Galatians 3:10-14

When we think of cursing, most of us think of two kinds of cursing. The first kind of cursing is when someone is upset and uses foul language. The second kind of cursing is seen less in the West, but is still common in many parts of the world. This cursing happens when someone uses magic or words or taps into some sort of spiritual power to cause harm or difficulty to a someone else. Most of us in the West don't think much about it. It's just words. But in many parts of the world, words have weight, power and meaning. People invoke spiritual authority to do something. The Bible talks about a third kind of cursing that may not be familiar with as many people. It's the kind of cursing that really matters. It's when God curses someone.

We see this kind of cursing throughout the Bible. After a few examples, we can see that we do not want to be on the receiving end of this kind of cursing. In Genesis 3 after Adam and Eve broke their relationship with God after eating the fruit. Eating the fruit wasn't just breaking a rule. By eating the fruit, Adam and Eve declared that they were going to be their own independent masters apart from God. As a result, God first curses the tempter, the serpent. Then God curses Eve in childbirth and the relationship with Adam. For Adam, the ground is cursed and death is introduced (Gen 3:14-19). But God also promises that from the offspring of the woman a redeemer will come. The curses continue though when Cain was cursed by God for murdering Abel (Gen 4:11). Later on, God again curses the earth and brings judgment by bringing a flood (Gen 8:21). But God is still faithful to His promises. In Chapter 12, God makes a covenant with Abraham. In this covenant, God extends protection to Abraham and promises to "bless those who bless you and those who dishonor you I will curse" (Gen 12:3). God promised that through Abraham, God would bless all the nations of the earth.

We see again God's curses on the Egyptians who held the Israelites as slaves in the story of Exodus. Later on, the Israelites make a covenant with Yahweh and take an oath. If they obey God, they will receive the blessings of God's protection and His presence. But if they disobeyed, they receive the curse of being cut off from God. As we know, they did not keep God's covenant and as a result, they were kicked out of the Promised Land and sent into exile.

In the New Testament, Jesus warns of those who pretend to be followers of Christ but are not. In the end they are judged, a curse is pronounced and they are sent to suffer eternal punishment (Matt. 25:41ff).

In reviewing these verses, we can see a pattern. When God curses something, it's something much more serious than words people use when they are angry or when someone puts a curse on someone. The Bible is pretty clear that God alone is the one who has true power to curse and has ultimate power to protect someone from curses. But the curse we must worry about most is God's curse. God's curses are connected to judgment and a reflection of His justice. But there are blessings as well. The pattern we see here is blessing being attached to obedience, and curses with disobedience. The problem is however, no one is obedient. No one can set themselves free from the curse.

The passage in Galatians tells us something very comforting. Jesus became a curse for us. Scripture teaches that anyone who does not obey God's laws is under a curse. Simply put, disobedience leads to judgment. But listen to these comforting words from Paul, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles." (Gal. 5:13-14)

In other words, Jesus hung on the cross to take the curse of our disobedience. Humanity was under this curse since Adam. Jesus was treated as if He disobeyed while we are treated as if we obeyed. We receive the blessings of obedience, while Jesus took the curse. This means that the promise that God gave to Abraham was that all peoples of the world could have access to God's presence. How do we claim this promise? Paul gives us the answer in verse 14- faith. We receive God's promise through faith in who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

This is Good News! This means that every believer in Christ is not under a curse, but under God's blessing. All the curses that people pronounce on us has fallen on Jesus. Additionally, we are under the protection of Christ and are no longer under the dominion of darkness. This means that spells and curses are disarmed by the blood of Christ. Lastly, when we face difficulties, we can face them with confidence. Difficulties are not because God is cursing us. That curse was taken by Jesus. If that is the case we can confidently say that God will use these difficulties for good somehow. God can certainly discipline us- but it is the discipline of a loving Father, not a curse.

Questions for Meditation:

1. Have you ever been cursed at or felt you were under a curse?
2. Has there ever been a time when you felt as if God was cursing or punishing you? How does the passage bring you comfort or relief?
3. How does it make you feel knowing that Christ became a curse for us so that we can receive God's blessing?
4. How would a person act if they were under a curse? How would a person act knowing they have been set free from a curse?

Day 5: To Be Our Substitute

Read Luke 23:13-25, 1 Peter 3:18

The crucifixion of Jesus shows us two things. It shows us human nature and how human beings have rejected God. It is a picture of human rebellion and hatred toward the Creator. It is a human tragedy. But the crucifixion also shows us God's character. It demonstrates God's mercy toward sinners. It shows us God's power to work even in spite of how humans have rebelled. It shows how God is in control even though human beings and Satan have made plans and tried their best to defy God. It is a great act of God's love and gives all who would believe in Jesus hope.

God demonstrates his power by using Jesus as a substitute. The image of a substitute is very old. In the Old Testament, animals were slaughtered as sacrifices on behalf of the sins committed by people. The idea was that the sin was somehow transferred to the animal and the animal died on behalf of the person's sin. It is no wonder that John called Jesus, "the lamb of God". The sacrificial system was a deliberate way to help people understand what the Messiah was going to do.

The clearest example of Jesus being a substitute is when Pilate asks the crowd of people to choose who they want released and who they want crucified. We are told that Pilate (who was not a great example of courage and justice) tried to arrange for Jesus to be set free by offering up a choice to the crowd of people- Jesus or Barabbas? Barabbas was imprisoned for insurrection and for murder and so he was obviously a bad choice compared to Jesus. But things did not happen the way Pilate planned. The event was a human tragedy on several levels.

First, an innocent man was being convicted of a crime he didn't commit. He was being accused of leading a rebellion against Rome. Jesus taught that his kingdom was not of this world. He told people to give to Caesar what was Caesar's and give to God what was God's. When people tried to force Him to be King, he rejected it. He was not leading a rebellion against Rome.

Second, Jesus was being rejected as the rightful King of Israel. Jesus was being accused of claiming to be the King of the Jews. The tragedy was that Jesus really was the King. He didn't claim Caesar's throne or tried to get rid of the Romans, but Jesus was the promised King in the Old Testament. And yet God's people rejected Him. They chose a murderer instead.

The third tragedy was how the guilty one now goes free. The crowd that chanted "Barabbas!", to set the guilty free also chanted, "crucify him!" to sentence Jesus. This was a case of mob justice. It was also a case of human rebellion.

But in the midst of this tragedy, we also see God's greatest act of love. Jesus was not a victim. To see Jesus simply as a victim and to try to find someone to blame is to miss the point. Jesus laid his life down willingly. The only way to fully understand why Jesus did it is to understand that Jesus wanted to be the substitute for our sins. When the Pilate asked him questions, Jesus did not beg for his life or defend himself. When the crowds shouted for him to die, he did not fall on his knees and beg for mercy. When he was led away, he did not resist or fight back. When Barabbas was being led away to freedom, Jesus did not become bitter or angry.

Peter picks up on this theme in his letter. "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the body, but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus' mission was not only to be Barabbas' substitute, but also to be our substitute. He did it to bring us back to God.

Questions for Meditation:

1. Do you ever doubt God's love for you? When do you do so?
2. How does the knowledge that in the midst of such tragic human action God is in control encourage you?
3. What is a proper and good emotional response to knowing Jesus is our substitute?

Day 6: To Give Eternal Life

Read John 3:9-21

Imagine a situation where you were told that you had a disease that leaves you paralyzed and unable to feel things. This disease doesn't just leave you just paralyzed and unfeeling, but eventually leads to a painful death. How would you feel? What would you do? What if you were told that there was a cure and that the cure was physically painless, but required you to go through a potentially painful emotionally experience? Let's say that the remedy would not only cure you, but leave you in a better place than before? Would you do it? Would you fight to live?

In today's passage, the Apostle John tells his readers about Jesus' mission. John 3:16 is perhaps one of the most well-known verses. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in the Son would not perish but have eternal life."

Here's a couple of things we need to figure out in order to understand what the passage is saying. We're told here about God's action. God sent His Son to save the world. We're also told about God's motivation- love. Out of love for the world, God sent Jesus to save the world. What is Jesus saving us from? Jesus is saving us from the condemnation of our sin. Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it. The condemnation is the result of our sin. Because God is good, God rightly judges us and justly condemns our sin. Jesus' mission was to come to take the punishment for our sin upon himself.

But the passage tells us something strange. The condition for our salvation is simply to believe. We are called to trust in the message and trust Christ and his work of salvation. This leaves us with two choices. We can bear the punishment for our sins ourselves, or trust God. Those who do not believe are condemned, not because Christ condemns them, but because they are condemned already and would not allow their condemnation to fall on Christ.

Why wouldn't they? John points two reasons. First, in admitting our sin, we expose ourselves and need to reveal the darkness that resides within us. "The light has come into the world, but people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed." In other words, the problem that keeps us from the cure for sin involves coming into the light and

acknowledging that we have done wrong and admitting the evil that resides within us.

But there's another problem. Verse 21 says, "whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." This means that we do not receive any credit for saving ourselves. What we contribute to our salvation is our sin. But it is God alone who does the work. That means he alone receives glory and not ourselves. We cannot boast in our ability to obey or our skill to implement a technique to make us more holy.

In the medical world, sometimes the cure for sicknesses can feel worse than the sickness itself. There is a spiritual analogy as well. Spiritually, the cure for our sin requires us to come to the light. This means that we need to recognize that we are sinners, which is an uncomfortable experience. It also requires us to humble ourselves and recognize that God alone can save us. This requires a conversion of our thinking and our understanding of ourselves and God.

But Scripture does not leave us in a state of despair. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts to recognize our weaknesses. The Spirit also helps us to understand God's love and the goodness of Jesus. When the darkness is exposed, it is exposed by the God who loves you and cares for you. Your wound is being cared for by the Great Physician, Jesus. And the hope after such a conversion experience is eternal life not only after we die, but in this life now as well.

Questions for Meditation:

1. What is a sin that you would find difficult for others to know? Why would it be difficult to reveal?
2. Has there ever been a time when you found it difficult to admit need or your own inability? Why?
3. How does it comfort you to know that you are loved and that Christ came to save you?
4. What does eternal life mean to you? How is it Good News?