

SEEING THE WHOLE STORY

SERIES: UNTO US

By Danny Hall

I just loved Christmas growing up, as most kids do. I remember Thanksgiving morning I would watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on TV, and at the end of the parade, there came Santa Claus! And that was the start of the Christmas season.

Christmas is obviously a very popular season in our culture. Of course all kinds of debate has been going on lately as to what observances are appropriate or not in the public square, but the truth is that the Christmas story permeates our culture because our roots go back to this story.

Now, it's true that over the years we've seen that story misused or twisted. One way that's happened is the commercialization of Christmas. But no matter how much I decry the commercialization, I still go out and shop. They call the day after Thanksgiving, when all the shopping starts, Black Friday.

But I would suggest that there's a different influence in our culture that is potentially even more undermining to the Christmas story than commercialization, and that is the sentimentalization of Christmas. Most of us in this culture grew up hearing the story told dramatically. It has all these warm, fuzzy elements. There's a little baby, and a young mother and father under trying circumstances. Every woman who has ever carried a baby wonders what it would be like to be riding on a donkey with one, right? They get to Bethlehem, and there's no room in the inn, so

they have to have the baby out in the barn, and there are angels and shepherds and wise men and cattle lowing. (In case you've always wondered how cattle low, it means to moo.) All this evokes in us a warm feeling. And that's not bad, but when that's the way we treat this story, we miss something. So this Advent I hope that as we go through the Scriptures together, God will use his word to help us get deeper into the story.

The gospel of Luke will be our focus. We don't know for sure, but we believe that Luke is the only Gentile author in all of Scripture. We know a little bit about Luke—he came to know Christ, and he was a companion of the apostle Paul. Eventually he wrote this story. But Luke tells the story in a way that's really important to us, because Luke tells the story for the whole world.

The story for the whole world

We're going to begin by looking at his introduction in the first four verses. Luke 1:1-4:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent

Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke addresses this opening greeting to a man named Theophilus. People have speculated about who this is. We don't know anything else about him. The name means "Lover of God," or it could be a description of someone who is interested in God. Luke is probably writing to a friend of his who has inquired about the gospel.

We cannot really consider Luke's gospel apart from the book of Acts, because Luke writes them as two parts of one story. For Luke, the greater story of Jesus continues on throughout the book of Acts. In Acts 1:1 he refers to his gospel: "In my former book...I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach..." The implication is that the book of Acts is going to be more about what Jesus did and taught. But that book is lived out not by Jesus (in his earthly existence), but by his people. The message of Jesus grows out from its roots in Judaism, and at the end of the book of Acts it has spread throughout the known world of that time. And the book is open-ended. The story of the gospel of Jesus carries on to the expansion of the church to the whole world. So you and I are living in the very story that we're going to be looking at in this series.

Now, because Luke is a Gentile, this is important to him. This whole world to which the gospel is going includes him. Otherwise he would be excluded, considered a foreigner and perhaps even an enemy by the Jews of Palestine of that day, perhaps not at all welcome in their community. But he understands that this story that has its roots in the nation of Israel and in the promises of

God has been unfolding in such a way that a man like him is invited in through the transforming work of Christ, which he has experienced.

In the next three messages, respectively, we're going to look at three events in Luke 1-2. In each of these events angels appear to and interact with human beings. First Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, has an interaction with an angel. Then Mary, the mother of Jesus, is visited by an angel. Finally an angelic chorus comes to shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. Each one of those encounters produces a song of praise. Both Zechariah and Mary offer songs of praise in response to what has been revealed to them, and the angels themselves sing a song of praise in the hearing of the shepherds.

There is an outward progression of the gospel message even in the beginning of the story: Zechariah is of the priestly class. Mary is just a normal teenage girl. And finally, the shepherds are some of the most marginalized people of that day. We see in Luke's telling that this is a story not just for an elite few but for everyone. As we see that unfold in the next few messages, I hope our hearts will be encouraged.

What I want to do in this message, though, is set this story in its larger context. Luke continually refers back to the grand plan of God that is unfolding throughout the story of Scripture. In fact, both Zechariah's and Mary's songs, as we'll see subsequently, root what God is doing in their lives in the unfolding of his age-old promises to the nation of Israel. So we're going to start by examining these roots.

The ancient promises

To do that we're going to go back to Isaiah 9:1-7 in the Old Testament, a glorious passage that addresses these wonderful themes. We could never mine all the beautiful nuggets in this passage, but hopefully we will get a glimpse of how to prepare our hearts in celebration and worship for this Christmas season.

The context of Isaiah's words is a very dark time for Judah. At the end of chapter 8 Isaiah speaks of darkness and fearful gloom that have come upon them. The nation is under siege by a neighboring enemy, and this will be followed by two greater, more devastating attacks in the years ahead. At this point Judah has lived in rebellion against God for quite some time. Because of that, God's disciplinary judgment is falling, and nations around them are rising to oppress them.

In chapters 7-11 there are three beautiful, well-known pictures of the Messiah. We'll focus on just one in this message, Isaiah 9:1-7. Isaiah explains what God is going to do in the midst of this darkness:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—

**The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.**

**You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as men rejoice
when dividing the plunder.**

**For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.**

**Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.**

**For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.**

And he will be called

**Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

**Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.**

**He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.**

**The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.**

A great light in the darkness

Into this dark period of judgment and despair among God's people, a promise comes: in the future God is going to do something dramatic to bring light into the darkness. This passage is filled with images of liberation, the spoils of victory, and the giving of a child. In verse 1 there is a wonderful declaration. Isaiah talks about how God has disciplined Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the tribes of Israel, but then looks forward to a time when God is going to act in Galilee of the Gentiles. I can't imagine what that would have sounded like to a Jew's ears. "What? Galilee of the Gentiles?" Looking forward to God's decisive act, this prophecy opens the door: this deliverance is not for Jews only but for the whole world! The promise exceeds all expectations.

And we'll see unfolding in the stories that we'll look at in the next few messages in Luke that God brings in light not just to Israel's darkness, but to that of the whole world.

Notice that the promises beginning in verse 2 are written as if these things have already taken place:

“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.”

He speaks to them of this promise as an accomplished fact, even though it will be much later when God's decisive act will actually break forth in history. He is anticipating with absolute certainty the fulfillment of it. It is something God will do, and his purposes can be trusted.

There are three pictures that Isaiah draws in this passage to give God's people hope. First there is a deliverance from darkness to light. This is strong imagery. The darkness is great, the gloom is devastating. The plight they are in is awful. There seems to be no hope, nowhere to turn. But he promises that God is going to accomplish their deliverance.

Now suspend for a moment whatever belief you have in God or in the Scriptures, and think about the world as we know it: would you describe our world as light or dark? I think most of us would say dark. All over the world there is abundant evidence of the ravages of sinfulness. In our own

country we find ourselves in a national debate about what's going on in Iraq. No matter what you think about it, we know it's an awful mess. And what about the devastation and genocide of Darfur? How about the invisible children in northern Uganda who are being exploited by warlords, little girls raped and murdered, little boys made to be mercenary killers or be killed? You can go around the globe and name the hotspots. And in our own society and our own individual lives we know we live in a world as dark as the land was in Isaiah's day. Ever since Adam and Eve's original fall, the reign of sin on earth has brought darkness and devastation.

Yet into the midst of that darkness, God speaks a word of promise and hope, anticipating his decisive act: "Light has dawned!" He says, "I'm coming to deliver you out of darkness into light." And in Christ he has done that. The promise is that darkness will not win the day. Light has dawned, and now living in and through us, he wants to bring more light to our dark world. I would say light is now dawning day by day in and through the church of Jesus Christ as we spread his love and his message of grace and forgiveness, in anticipation of the ultimate fulfillment of that promise when Christ comes again and all darkness will be completely driven away.

Victory in battle

The next picture is one of war and conquest. He talks about enlarging the nation, increasing their joy, restoring their harvest and their plunder. Then he refers to a time when they were involved in battle against their neighbors, oppressed by evil forces. This also anticipates judgment that is

going to happen to them, when both Israel and Judah will be taken into captivity. But the promise is of victory in the battle.

The references to Midian and the burden of oppression across their shoulder hearkens immediately back to two events in their history. The imagery of an oppressive burden on their shoulders probably would evoke memories of their bondage in Egypt (Exodus 1:1-14). It was a time in their history that the nation of Israel would always remember, when they were absolutely enslaved by the Egyptians, and God miraculously delivered them (Exodus 1-4). The imagery of Midian recalls the story of Gideon, a time when they were in a battle and God again miraculously delivered them (Judges 6-8). In both cases the nation of Israel joyfully responded to what God had done, but could not maintain their faithfulness. This cycle would be repeated throughout their history. But God promises victory in their battle. Note the very graphic picture in verse 5:

“Every warrior’s boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.”

This speaks of the time when all the bloody garments of their oppressors will be consumed, burned up in ultimate judgment and victory. The images of their harvest coming and of plunder point to the day of victory.

All this was originally worked out in actual combat with those around them, but it foreshadows the reality of the battle we face. The battle of God’s people, displayed throughout the New Testament, is a spiritual battle. We do not battle against flesh and blood, Paul says, but against principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:12). The reality of the spiritual war in which we are engaged is around us every day. Now, in our more rational western experience, we sometimes downplay that. But I was reminded once again very starkly this past fall during my visit to Pakistan and Thailand that a lot of our brothers and sisters in Christ in these places live on the front lines of the spiritual battle. The reality of it is much more in evidence for them day in and day out. It’s sometimes more subtle in our own experience, but do not be fooled—we are engaged in a pitched spiritual battle. Satan himself and all of his forces are arrayed against God and his people to bring suffering and destruction and to thwart the work of God in every way they can. You and I are involved in this spiritual battle. But the promise is that when God acts decisively in Christ, there is victory. John writes in the New Testament, “The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). We are embattled, but victory is won through the power and activity of God in and through us.

The miraculous Deliverer

Finally Isaiah sums up this passage by explaining how all this is going to happen. Verse 6:

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

The birth of a child suggests he is part of humanity. But the words “to us a son is given” somehow evoke the idea of something outside of humanity, given to us from God. In this prophecy we begin to see the wedding of these ideas that are found throughout the story of Jesus: he is the Son of God and the Son of Man. In this miraculous Deliverer whom God promises, we see not only a child born of human lineage, but a Son given from God. The divine and the human are merged into this wonderful One who will come to be our Deliverer.

Isaiah says that the government will be on his shoulders. He will be the one who bears the load. Contrast this with verse 4, which says the yoke of oppression on the shoulders of God’s people is going to be removed, the painful burden on our shoulders broken. The one shouldering the responsibility is now this child.

This child is described with four beautiful names that we’re going to return to in a moment: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Isaiah goes on to talk about his reign. He will fulfill God’s promise to David as the one who will sit on David’s throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). His government will have no end, and it will be a government of peace and righteousness and justice.

Isaiah says it is God acting to make this happen.

“The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.”

When I think about those two concepts wedded together, Almighty God and zeal, it strikes a bit of terror in my heart. It means nothing is going to get in the way of the passionate Almighty God! He's going to do what he wants to do. All of the energy, the will, the power, and the totality of who God is are directed toward the giving of this child.

That is why we dare not get lost in sentimentality about the Christmas story. This is not just a charming little story of a poor couple in trouble and a beautiful little baby, with all the familiar trappings. This is a decisive act of God Almighty, driven by the passion deep within his soul to rescue those he has created in his image, who are destroying themselves in their sin. What an amazing initiative by God himself! In his zeal and passion, the Almighty God establishes his rule through this One. A government of peace and righteousness and justice that will never end is going to be carried out through the mission of this child who is given to us, this Son.

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace

I'll close with these four names that this child is given. Isaiah first of all calls him the Wonderful Counselor. This child is possessed of godly wisdom. Think about the dark world we live in. We sometimes just cry out, "'Won't somebody please stand up and do the right thing!" But then we realize that no one knows what the right thing is. How do we get out of the quagmires we find ourselves in? We give it our best shot, but what do we come up with? We're just not wise enough to figure all this out. But God's promise is that this child whom he's sending is the

Wonderful Counselor, the one who possesses all the wisdom and perspective of God himself, the one who is actually able to enact justice and peace and righteousness in our world. The frailties and failures of our human wisdom cry out for this wise one, this Wonderful Counselor.

The second name Isaiah uses is Mighty God. Now, from time to time we surprise ourselves with a good idea, then we realize, “Oh my goodness—I don’t have what it takes to carry that out!” But here’s the beautiful thing: This child whom God is going to send is not only wise, and therefore knows what would be righteous and just, but he’s the Mighty God. He has the power to accomplish what is right, to carry out the purposes of God, to do what needs to be done.

The third name for him is Everlasting Father. He has no end, and yet he is our Father. The image of Father in the Scriptures is an important one. It evokes the ideas of protection and nurture. That’s what a Father does. In the New Testament the most commonly used word to refer to God is Father. And what’s beautiful about this picture is, that’s the way we personally experience God. We can make a list of the attributes of God that we see in Scripture—he’s wise, he’s powerful, he’s holy, he’s love, he’s righteousness, and so on—and sometimes these just seem to be abstract theological ideas. But the name Everlasting Father takes all that glory of who he is and brings it right down where we are. This is how we’re going to experience God. God is love. What does that mean? It means he’s our loving Father. God is holy and righteous. We experience that holiness and righteousness through the grid of his being our Father who loves us and wants only what’s best for us, who wants to rescue us from the destruction that we would bring upon ourselves. This holy, righteous God is not some abstract thing, he’s our Father—wonderful,

beautiful, protective, nurturing. So he's not just some distant person who's wise and powerful, he's intimately connected to us as our loving Father. What an amazing truth!

Finally, he's called the Prince of Peace. This world is so messed up, how are we ever going to get ourselves out of this fix? There is only One who can truly bring peace, and that is the Prince of Peace. The peace that we experience now as followers of Christ is peace between us and God, the peacefulness of spirit and soul that issues from our relationship with God, because we know through faith that we have been reconciled to him. We live in a very unpeaceful place, yet God through his Spirit gives us the Prince of Peace living in us so that we might have peace in the midst of the chaos, in anticipation of the day when this One whom God has given will come again, and all things will be set right once and for all, and peace will finally come in full and abundant measure to this broken world.

So when we look into the manger and see this baby, what God says is that this child who is born, this Son who is given, is the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. These descriptions of God's character come up over and over again in Scripture, and now they identify this little baby. That concept blows our minds—it goes beyond what we can actually conceive. But this is the revelation of God. This is the Christmas story.

So if we lose sight of this in the midst of our Christmas celebrations, we'll miss something important and deep and wonderful—God himself acting decisively for all people. This event is God's first step downward from heaven's glory toward the cross that will break the power of sin,

win the victory, and open the door for us to have a relationship with him as our Father, which will bring peace to our lives and ultimately peace on earth.

I want to encourage you in this message to have hope. The God who sent a baby almost two thousand years ago in fulfillment of this prophecy in Isaiah is still in control. The baby Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords who will one day return and establish his kingdom forever in righteousness and justice and peace (Revelation 19:16). And we live in the light of both the first and the second comings of Christ. We live in the tension of a fallen world crying out for hope, and the hope that this passage offers. God will accomplish his purposes. He has acted decisively and he will continue to act decisively, so you and I can have hope. This promise is the Christmas story. This beautiful, amazing, powerful act of God is what we celebrate.

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Luke 1:1-4; Isaiah 9:1-7

First Message

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