



Christmas Eve - December 24, 2015
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*Joy for Every Longing Heart:
Is God with Us?*
Colossians 1:19-20

How many of you have seen the new Star Wars movie? It is destroying all box office records. One of the young men in our church, Trenton Tomaras—you might have seen him as the sheriff in our children's play last Sunday—is quite a Star Wars fan. He's also had an extensive history of heart surgery since he was a baby, so much so that he qualified for the Make a Wish Foundation. His wish was to go with his family to the Star Wars world premiere in Hollywood! What could be better than that for a Star Wars fanatic? Well how about this: selfies with the stars! The budding Jedi knight, Rey; the conscience-stricken storm trooper, Finn; a very grizzled Luke Skywalker; and the piece de resistance, Han Solo!

All you have to do is look at the smile on Trenton's face to know what's going through his head: "Look who's standing next to me! Han Solo is right here! I've got a picture with Luke Skywalker! And look at this gorgeous movie star next to me!!!"

How many of you have ever gotten your picture taken with a celebrity? Exciting, right? This person that you've only seen on TV or the Big Screen, is suddenly right there. A big shot, a star... right next to you, in the flesh, acknowledging your existence!

Well when you understand what was really going on in Bethlehem, you realize that the first Christmas Eve was the greatest celebrity-sighting of all time, but most people didn't realize who had come to be with them. Most people still don't.

Thousands will attend one of our services tonight to celebrate the birth of Jesus nearly 2,000 years ago. Most of you, even if you don't normally go to church, wanted to be here this night because—well, you may not even be quite sure why. Family tradition, candles, singing Silent Night? But the centerpiece of Christmas is, of course, the baby Jesus.

We just sang one of the most beautiful Christmas carols ever written. "What child is this who, laid to rest on Mary's lap, is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherd's watch are keeping." What child is this? Who do you think that baby was, exactly? Who would he grow to become? A prophet, an extraordinarily gifted human being, an important player in religious history? Who

was this baby Jesus whose birth we sing and celebrate? What child **is** this? That really is the question of the night.

We've already heard what the gospel-writers, Matthew and Luke, have to say. But on this Christmas Eve, I'd like for the Apostle Paul to weigh in on it as well. Paul wrote much of the New Testament. His opinion has mattered to Christians for 2,000 years. I want to read for you his description of who Jesus is. You will never find loftier language to describe what child this is than right here in Paul's letter to the Colossians. And as I read, will you count the number of times the words "He is" appears in this passage? And remember, every time you hear "He is" you can substitute the name "Jesus." Here we go.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, [He is] the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and [He is] the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him....

How many "He ises" did you count? Six, right? Let me substitute the name "Jesus" for "He is" to really drive home Paul's point. Paul says Jesus is the image of the invisible God. (That means when you look at Jesus, you are looking at God!) Jesus is the firstborn over all creation. (That's a way of saying that he created everything.) Jesus is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Jesus is the head of the church. Jesus is the beginning. Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead (that's talking about his resurrection on Easter.)

See what I mean? That is majestic language, isn't it? What Paul is saying—what Paul is claiming—is that when we look at Jesus we are looking at God... the great, eternal, creator of the universe. What child is this who, laid to rest on Mary's lap, is sleeping? This is Christ the Creator, Christ the King, Christ the Lord of all. The breathtaking claim of Christmas—the audacious claim that no other religion makes and that every other religion rejects—is that when we look into the face of this Bethlehem Child, we are looking into the face of God himself.

And after all of Paul's "He Is" statements about Jesus—Eternal, divine, Creator, sustainer, supreme—after all those superlatives, he sums it up this way: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him..." God was delighted to have his fullness—everything that made him God—dwell in this baby of Bethlehem. What child is this? That's what child this is.

Now, if this is true—if the eternal Son of God, Christ the King was truly going to take on human form, going to become a human baby—where would you expect him to be born? Where should he be born? In a palace, right? That's where future kings

are born. It's why the magi when to Herod's palace in the first place. Where else would you find the child-King?

But King Herod wasn't invited to the birth party. Who was? Shepherds, which is really remarkable because shepherds were the outcasts of their society. They were considered filthy thieves. There was only one group lower on the Jewish social totem pole than dirty, thieving, irreligious shepherds. Do you know who? Lepers! The only thing worse than being a leper was being a shepherd. But it is to these misfits, these social outcasts, that the angel makes the birth announcement. "I have good news of great joy. The savior, the messiah, the king has been born. Quick, go find him. And just so you can be sure, I will give you a sign to watch for..."

And what was that sign given by the angel to the shepherds? It is one of the weirdest, grossest signs ever. "Go to Bethlehem and look for a baby wrapped tightly in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger?"

This is what we think of when we hear "manger"... a cute, straw-filled little cradle. But do you know what a manger really was? A feed trough, an animal's feed trough. It was what the sheep and cows ate from. Have you ever seen how snotty a cow's nose can be? The manger was where the cow stuck her snotty nose to eat. And it wasn't just nice, clean hay they were munching on. Whatever humans could not eat, or chose not to eat, they would dump into the manger for the snot-nosed animals to munch on. We have a similar receptacle underneath our sinks. What do we call them? Garbage cans!

The manger wasn't a neat, tidy little makeshift cradle. The manger was a garbage can the final stop for inedible, spoiled, rotten, worthless organic material.

This has been a season of great joy for our church family. We've had a bunch of staff babies born in very short order. One set of new parents are our pastors, Larry and Megan Hackman. And I could hardly wait to go over to their house and personally welcome little Reed Hackman into the world.

Now, can you imagine if I walked in and Megan greeted me and said, "Oh come in and see him. He's right over here." She takes me to the kitchen, opens the cupboard door under the sink, and there is Reed wrapped up and tucked in the garbage can. What would I think? What would I do? Who would you call? CPS!

"Here's the sign for you," the angels told the shepherds, "...the sign that you have found the right baby in Bethlehem. You will find him in a manger...you will find the baby lying in a garbage can."

To cradle any baby in a trash can would be unusual, unthinkable, unimaginable, right? But, how about the Baby King, the Baby Creator of the Universe, the Baby Emmanuel, God with us? How many have heard the phrase, "Dumpster-Diver?" It's

a person who climbs into a dumpster searching for things that others have thrown away—things that might be salvaged, things that he still finds valuable even if someone else has given up on them... discarded them.

Well when you think about it, Christmas Eve is the celebration of a dumpster-diving God. A God who didn't choose to stay in heaven where it was clean and safe and perfect, a God who didn't choose to be born in a palace—which was certainly his due—no, a God who could be found in a garbage can. A dumpster-diver God who was ready to plunge in after that which others had written off, cast aside, declared useless or worthless.

One of the longings of the human heart is an answer to this simple question: Is God with us? If God is real—and 82% of Americans believe God is real—what difference does it make? Does he care for us? Is he on our side? Is he with us? You only need to look at the “sign” given to the shepherds to understand the heart of God. He is not only for us, not only with us, but he has dived right into the dumpster of our lives to reclaim, recycle, restore, redeem that which the world has cast aside.

Is God with us? I think of one in our church family who is battling cancer, receiving chemo, who has lost hair and lost strength and lost hope—wondering if God has forgotten them. But, we look closer and there Jesus is right in the garbage and mess of that awful disease.

I think of the recent funeral of the woman married to her husband for 59 years. When I said, “Wow, well done! That's a long time,” he replied, “Not long enough.” We look inside the can and find funeral flowers, dead and cast aside and yet, there is Jesus... in the midst of the garbage of paralyzing alone-ness.

Or I think of those in our church whose children are not well. They pursue the best medical care, they fill a sharps container with used syringes from hundreds of painful shots, they expend thousands of dollars, they exhaust themselves in the care of their child. But they feel at times as if their kids are forgotten, castoffs by society... maybe even by God. They wonder if their prayers are just bouncing off a brass ceiling. Then we look more closely and find that Jesus is already there... suffering with, striving with, standing with them in the garbage of their endless vigil.

Or I think of the woman who has been abandoned by her husband. She meant it when she said her “forever” vows, but he has lost interest in her and found another. We dig through the mess of her life and discover a wedding certificate and the dreams it represented... cast aside. Yet there, in the midst of her garbage of abandonment, we find Jesus who knows better than anyone ever has what it means to be abandoned, forsaken, betrayed by those closest to him.

I wish we lived in a world without cancer, without death, without disease, without divorce and betrayal, but we don't. We live in a broken world that, for the moment,

chooses to live in rebellion against God. We live in a world that is quick to toss aside that which is deemed unworthy, outdated, imperfect or broken. We wonder where God is in all of this—whether God is with us at all—and then we lift the lid of the dumpster and find him there... searching, salvaging, redeeming what the world considers to be rubbish.

I know what my garbage can holds. Candidly, in this season of my life, there are three different things that are messy, distracting, concerning, and frankly, a little frightening. I struggle with anxiety about them; I lose sleep over them. What about you? If we flipped open the trash can of your life, what would we find? What part of your life feels like it belongs in the dumpster? Here's what Christmas Eve reminds me of: whatever the mess of my life, whatever things produce anxiety or insecurity or frustration in me, when I look closer I find that Jesus—Holy, Creator, Savior Jesus—is already there, right in the midst of the mess. Saying, "Don't worry. I've got this. Whatever you are going through, I am right here with you!"

What child is this? This child who lies in a garbage trough? This is Christ, Christ the King, Christ the Lord, Christ Emmanuel. God With Us—God very, very, very much with us.