

Jesus Is the Intersection of Heaven and Earth

Luke 2:8-20

December 24, 2023

(Christmas Eve Service)

Dr. Paul Maier is one of my favorite Christian writers. He is a retired professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University. He opens the introduction to his book In the Fullness of Time with these two sentences. “Of all religious beliefs in the world, past or present, none have more thoroughly based themselves on history than Judaism and Christianity. The divine-human encounter in the biblical faiths always involves claims with *real* people, living in *real* places, who acted in *real* events of the past, many of which are also cited in secular ancient history.” (1)

These opening sentences make a clear and profound statement that we in the Judeo/Christian faith tradition have been incredibly blessed. We have a rich heritage full to overflowing with the ongoing presence of the living God. It can be argued that other religions have avoided any interaction with history and asked their followers to simply by faith believe the revelations claimed by its founder or founders.

Our faith as Christians reveals that God is involved in our world. Of course, what we believe matters but for Christian’s, faith and works go hand-in hand. As James the brother of our Lord clearly states in his book, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2:17 NIV) Or as we probably memorized this verse years ago, “Faith without works is dead.” God is involved in our lives and how we live moment by moment is important to him. He loves and cares about each of us. We see this most clearly in the events of Christmas.

“Four hundred years before Christ, Plato, the great Greek philosopher, sought to penetrate the unfathomable mystery of reality. He described the human condition like this: Man is imprisoned in a cave. He is shackled in a world from which he cannot escape. He wears blinders so that his perspective is limited to what is directly in front of him. Before him are only the shadows of real objects. Given these restraints, he is able to view only a small part of reality, to comprehend a tiny fraction of the truth. No wonder Plato’s name lives even today. His was a brilliant recognition of the human situation: Shadows in a dark cave.” (2)

No one doubts that Plato was a great philosopher, but the “simplest Christian believer has an advantage” over him. (3) That believer knows that God shined a wondrous light into that dark cave of the human condition. That light is Jesus Christ.

We have for our scripture this evening a most beautiful story of the birth of a baby in the little town of Bethlehem just over two-thousand years ago. Close by were

shepherds who lived around the clock with the sheep under their care. They kept a watchful eye for thieves – both two and four legged. On a night which they would never forget there appeared before them an unnamed angel and the presence of the Lord became a reality. The angel spoke words of comfort to calm their terror. “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11) Only three dozen words but packed to overflowing with good news. “Great” fear was the natural reaction to the angel’s appearance and God quickly counters it with “great joy,” ... “this joy is proclaimed as ‘good news.’” (4) And to whom is the good news directed? It is for all people including us. That means you and me my friends. Praise God!

Verse eleven, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” This is a journalist dream sentence. A whole news article wrapped up in a few words. I have never taken a class in journalism, but I know that a story is to answer six questions: the five w’s and an h. They are who, what, when, where, why, and how. It seems that all six are answered in this one verse. Not only is this a perfect sentence for a journalist, but it is one of the most beautiful and profoundly impactful sentences ever written. It is filled with joy and sweet music to our ear and heart. Today--in the town of David---a Savior---has been born---to you; he is Christ the Lord.

What did Dr. Paul Maier say about Judaism and Christianity? They happened with real people, living in real places and who acted in real events. To Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem two-thousand years ago a baby boy was born who was named Jesus. That is about as real as life gets. On top of this is the wonderfully good news of a Savior who would save his people from sin. As Matthew puts it in the first chapter of his gospel: “...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you will give him the name Jesus, because he will save the people from their sins.’” (Matthew 1:20-21) The measuring stick is once again: real people, real places, and real events.

Shepherds were told to go to Bethlehem as witnesses to the arrival of God in our world in a new way visible, as a baby named Jesus. Since we could never reach up to God, he came down to us. God humbled himself, came down to where we are and became like us to communicate his love to us.

Because of God’s gift of love—His Son Jesus Christ—humanity has been lifted up. Jesus Christ has made people more than they could have otherwise become. He came to show us and tell us that we are loved by God. “Something began at the nativity that has never ended.” (5) That child who grew to become an adult; “has changed history, wrenched the world’s chronology so that its years pivot around his birth, and touched

countries, cultures and civilizations, and untold millions of lives..." (6) He had a three-and-one-half-year public ministry yet has over two-billion followers. He wrote no book. He had no political or religious backing and was killed by the religious establishment who could not tolerate the depth of his love for all people. "The Bible which contains his story has sold more copies than any other book in the history of humanity, although it does not (say) much about his life. Still, he has become the central figure in human history." (7) Quoting from an unusual source – an almanac, "The person of Jesus is fundamental to the Christian faith since it is believed that in his life, death and resurrection, God's revelation became historically tangible. He is seen as the turning point in history, and man's relationship to God is determined by his attitude toward Jesus." (8) Jesus has lifted people up and made them more than they could ever have been without him. Jesus is the gateway to an eternal relationship with the Father. As he says in John chapter fourteen, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me." (John 14:6) Jesus offers what no other can: salvation, freedom from sins, the promise of victory over death and eternal life with him and God the Father Almighty. He is the perfect gift for each of us. Left to our own resources we do not do very well. God knew this and so he sent us the ultimate Christmas gift. He took on flesh. We are that important to him. Christmas turns the world upside down. It tells us that what is really important in the world is the gift of love in the manger of Bethlehem.

God came down that we might be lifted up and because of this, salvation has drawn near. "Where the horizontal and vertical intersect, there is the cross of Jesus the Christ." (9)

"A famous artist painted a picture of the nativity. In his painting, across the crib falls the shadow of the cross. Salvation is God's eternal plan for humanity. This is why He came down. This is why we have been lifted up. Heaven and earth have intersected at the cross of calvary." (10) At first thought, this idea seems to ruin the picture of Christmas, but in fact it completes the picture. It is unlike the portrait of George Washington by the artist Gilbert Charles Stewart painted during his presidency and now used as the portrait on the one-dollar bill. The original is still unfinished two-hundred and thirty years later. But God finished what he started. We are the recipients of the greatest gift of all. The God of creation became the babe of Bethlehem. The babe of Bethlehem became the lamb of Calvary. And because of the divine drama of which the stable of Bethlehem was only a part, our salvation has been made possible. A salvation which is a free gift to all who will receive it. We cannot earn it. That which is offered is totally, unconditionally, and freely given with no strings attached and all we can do is accept it. We are to joyfully make it our own and share it with others. That gift is Jesus!

Amen.

- (1) In the Fullness of Time Paul Maier p. xv
- (2) Dynamic Preaching December 1988 p. 27
- (3) Ibid. p. 27
- (4) The Good News According to Luke Eduard Schweitzer p. 50