

Chapter 22: The Time Has Come

- ➔ God's _____ intersects with our _____ at the birth of Jesus Christ, the God-man.

Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me blessed. For he, the Mighty One, is holy, and he has done great things for me.

Luke 1:46-48

- ➔ The first audience became the first _____, who then became the first _____.

I have other sheep that are not in this flock, and I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

John 10:16

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away from God are brought near through the blood of Christ's death.

Ephesians 2:13

Out of Egypt I called my Son.

Numbers 24:8

- ➔ We are never _____ from God.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalms 34:18

Today's Equipping Point

Capture your _____

Discussion Questions

1. What detail of the birth of Christ has always particularly captured you?
2. Are you encouraged or nervous that there is no place we are safe from God?
3. How will you be vigilant today for Upper Story moments in your life?

Teaching Script

[Play the first and last minute of the 1812 Overture]

Here we are in Chapter 22 of *The Story*—the prelude, or overture of the New Testament. The Time had come—the Upper Story was here. The prophecy of Immanuel, God with us, was fulfilled at the birth of Christ.

But where was the orchestra? The crashing cymbals? The cannons blasting? This was the apogee of human history! That's something to consider...let's come back to that in a minute.

It was His mother, Mary, who was the first to hear the news. In the midst of wedding plans and setting up house, the angel Gabriel pronounced that she had been chosen to give birth to the Son of God. Talk about re-prioritizing your day! Nothing could have been further from her mind...or her to-do list. Mary was engaged and a virgin.

But the power of the Most High would take care of everything, the angel said, so Mary believed. She accepted her position as God's servant and praised Him with complete trust in His plan.

Joseph was the next to know. Once she started showing, the facts couldn't be ignored. He considered pursuing a legal dissolution of their relationship to save them both from the humiliation of an illegitimate pregnancy, but he received his own angelic visitor, who confirmed Mary's innocence and gave his blessing on their marriage. Joseph married Mary and soon after made the journey to Bethlehem to pay his taxes as required by law. The town was bustling and the inn was full, so the Son of God was born, of all places, in a stable.

Angels delivered the birth announcement and shepherds became the welcoming committee for the child. They hurried to see for themselves, and found a surprisingly unassuming setting for a king: a baby in a feeding trough, accompanied by his mother, earthly father, and the local livestock. God also sent signs in the stars, and faraway wise men charted their course with gifts in hand. After talking to the visitors, King Herod felt threatened by the birth of another monarch, so he ordered the massacre of all the baby boys in the surrounding areas. God sent angels again so His redemptive plan would stay its course. They warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus until it was safe to return.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Israel only after Herod's death, and they made their home in Nazareth. Jesus grew up there as the son of faithful Jews. He and His family traveled to Jerusalem every year to celebrate Passover. When Jesus was 12, He got carried away discussing theology and missed the convoy back home. His parents returned and found Him sitting with all the seminary professors, who were amazed at His words. Jesus grew up as all boys do, and Scripture tells us that He increased in wisdom and favor with God and with people.

Every Christmas, every time I read the account of the entrance of Jesus into the world, I am struck not just that He would come to save us, but even more at how He came.

Heaven had been very quiet for 400 years. No burning bushes. No pillars of fire or clouds of smoke. No splitting seas. No visions. No dreams. No prophets. No message from God...just silence.

Then, in a simple, unpretentious, quiet way, a word—but not just a word, The Word. At the time, the event mattered only to a blue collar carpenter and his teenage bride. There was no Doppler system on the planet sensitive enough to pick up this event. The Richter Scale didn't even budge. Not only did key event of human history have no buildup, no crescendo, no cymbals and cannons, there was no media, no paparazzi, no breaking news...not even a wedding shower. Mary and Joseph weren't registered at Babies R Us, there was no framed birth certificate, no small bassinet with a mobile over it playing Brahms' Lullaby. In fact, if it weren't for some local shepherds and a couple of distant astrologers, no one else would have known.

But in fact, history had changed. The Word of God had taken on flesh and blood and was first heard in a baby's cry. His birth was unspectacular, yet His presence dispelled darkness and cast an inescapable ray of light across history, past, present and future. God's promises to Abraham and David had found fulfillment at long last. Jesus would bless all nations and would take His rightful place on David's throne. It is this event to which everything thus far in The Story has pointed.

The main point for us to see this morning is this:

➔ **God's Upper Story intersects with our Lower Story at the birth of Jesus Christ, the God-man.**

For six months now, over and over we've seen glimpses of God's great over-arching Upper Story of redemption. And here it is! Up close and personal! This is where *everything* converges. If there were a first century Super-conducting Super-collider between God and man, **Jesus** is what that impact would produce. So let's spend a few minutes observing this collision of the human and the Divine. Let's walk back through the details of this story and examine the intersections of Lower and Upper Stories.

In the Lower Story, we see an engaged couple, Mary and Joseph. But the Upper Story intersects their lives, as the Holy Spirit impregnates Mary and the angel visits. Now, Mary no longer sees herself in the Lower Story but as part of God's great plan. And in what is typically known as the *Magnificat*, her song of praise, we see that she **gets** it:

Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me blessed. For he, the Mighty One, is holy, and he has done great things for me.

Luke 1:46-48

That's an Upper Story viewpoint if I ever heard one.

Back in the Lower Story, her fiancé Joseph, a good man, is caught off guard, awkward and embarrassed. He doesn't want to disgrace Mary, so he'll end it quietly. But then he himself is caught up into the Upper Story when he is visited by an angel, and he discovers there is so much more going on here than he thought.

Meanwhile, the details of life in the Lower Story go on. The census is being taken, and they have to travel with Mary in a delicate state. They have to go slowly, so when they arrive there is only a barn, and it is time for her to give birth. There were likely many pregnant women who were also making their way to their hometowns, but this birth happened to occur in that stable. And in the meantime, shepherds were close by tending their sheep.

Yet again, the Upper Story invades the Lower, and the angel now visits the shepherds, informing them of the gravity of this seemingly normal night above all others. How significant and appropriate that the first to know of His coming, outside of Mary and Joseph, were men who foreshadowed the Great Shepherd in their care, feeding and protection of their flock. And how ironic is it that these shepherds would soon become His flock, and He would lay down His life for them. Every detail of this story carries great significance, as we'll see.

- ➔ And so, the **first audience became the first *church***, as the shepherds came and worshipped the child. **Then they became the first *missionaries***, when they went to tell everyone in the surrounding towns what they had witnessed.

The Lower Story becomes the Upper Story once again.

It did as well for the wise men, astrologers who were caught up into the Upper Story by the presence of another celestial marker, this time a mysterious star. The Upper Story significance of these wise men is that even at his birth, Jesus would reach out and extend the Kingdom to *Gentiles*, who would join the small congregation by bringing gifts that symbolized who He was: They brought Him gold, which was due a king; they brought frankincense, which was due the God of Heaven, an offering of fragrant aroma; and they brought him myrrh, which was used to embalm dead bodies. Even here, the Upper Story of the Cross casts its shadow across His birth. And by these gifts, the Gentiles had now been caught up into the Upper Story, giving him His due as King, as God, and as the Lamb who would take away the sins of the world. Amazing...

Later Jesus would confirm this wide-open door to the Kingdom:

I have other sheep that are not in this flock, and I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

John 10:16

Paul, who was the apostle to the Gentiles, echoed Jesus when he said:

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away from God are brought near through the blood of Christ's death.

Ephesians 2:13

And then of course later, in another Upper Story event, the angel returned to tell them to take safe haven in Egypt from Herod, fulfilling the prophecy from the book of Numbers:

Out of Egypt I called my Son.

Numbers 24:8

Why do we spend the time this morning observing the constant interplay between the Lower and Upper Stories? How does this matter today? Very simply, because of this:

If the birth of the central figure of history, the Messiah, the one to whom everything points...if this birth could take place among laborers not royalty, in a stable rather than a king's court, then it would seem God is sending a very specific message. All through the OT we've seen shadows, forerunners of the Christ, as God telegraphed the focal point of history over and over. From Abel, to Joseph, to Moses, to Joshua, to Hosea, to Esther, so many OT characters quietly whispered Jesus' name centuries before His arrival. So how is it that such a long-awaited, anticipated event would have such a modest, reserved debut, without glitz or pomp and circumstance? Why does it matter today?

In one of his devotional books, Frederick Buechner makes this point: The quiet, unpretentious entrance of the Savior to the world loudly proclaims this message:

➔ **We are never safe from God.**

Because of the nature of this birth, people who believe in God can never be sure of Him again. Once they have seen Him born in a stable, they can never again be sure where He will appear. We can never again be sure to what lengths He will go, or to what depths He will descend in His wild pursuit of man—this is Upper Story of the Bible...the relentless pursuit of man throughout time by an obsessed God.

If the holiness, power and majesty of God were present in this humble, unassuming event—the birth of a peasant's child—then there is no place or time so lowly but that holiness can be present *there* too. There is no place today, in your life and mine, that is so desperate, so atrocious, but that Jesus is not present with us. That's the message.

So this means that we are never safe, that there is no place we can hide from God, no venue where we are sheltered from His power to break us in order to heal us, to recreate us in His image. And while we may feel very exposed, knowing God's tendency to surface at any time, it should give us great comfort, that even in our darkest and dingiest moments, when we're filled with shame, guilt-ridden over sin, or in hopeless despair, the Savior of the world has such humility that He is ready to join us even there, where we least expect him. Maybe that's why the Psalmist says,

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit.
Psalm 34.18

The message of the birth of Jesus is not just that God has infiltrated our world and lived inside our skin, but that his meekness enables Him to always meet us where we are, even if that place is corrupt, compromising, or embarrassing.

Even at the very beginning of His life, Jesus drew ALL men, local and distant, learned and unlearned, Jew and Gentile, to Himself. The Upper Story of God's redemption of mankind is even here, at the birth of Jesus, a unifying event designed to bring the world together. There is no one and no place out of the reach of God's grace.

Throughout the world today, people are born, they grow up, they go to work, they manage their lives, they get old, and they die—but the larger and more important picture is that each of our lives has meaning, far more than just the working and growing and

dying. Life adds up somehow, and if there is meaning in the birth of a peasant's child, then there is meaning in the daily events of our lives. The Upper Story of God that gave eternal meaning and purpose to Mary and Joseph's lives intersects your life on a moment-by-moment basis. Holy, Upper Story intersections aren't limited to Sunday worship services or blinding lights on the road to Damascus. Several times today, you and I will experience Upper Story moments that carry an eternal weight. Will we recognize them? What will we do with them?

There's our Equipping Point for today:

Capture your Upper Story moments.

Be on the lookout for Jesus to break through the mundane and provide an opportunity to serve someone without a reason. Pray for eyes to see a chance to engage your child in a conversation that can become a small teaching point about how big their God is. Break free of your own patterns, your own ruts, and see if God is not somehow speaking redemption into your life, through the reconciliation of an old relationship, the opportunity to show grace and not vengeance, or perhaps just five minutes to say "thank you."

What a God we serve, who, just like Joseph and Mary, interrupts the daily grind of our lives with moments of great meaning, Upper Story moments that allow us to see a bigger picture, a long-term perspective, and a master plan in which everything truly does work together for good. God's pursuit of us never ends, and his promise to build a new heaven and a new earth began 2,000 years ago, with this child, an ever-present Savior...a faithful Carpenter preparing a home for those of us lost in the wonder of a birth—a birth that has **transformed** each of us into sons of God.

[Prayer]

Lord we marvel once again that you would come and dwell with us, to know us and to save us. We gaze in wonder at the humility of the One who created us—the beacon of redemption. Give us ears to hear this familiar story afresh, that all day, we become aware of these Upper Story moments of opportunity. Remind us when we fail today that Jesus will meet us even there, to heal, to lead us away from darkness, into his marvelous light.