



What Child is This

1 – Why the Manger Matters

Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today, we are starting a series – *What Child is This*. We're going to be going verse by verse through the entire chapter of Luke 2. If you have your Bibles, turn to Luke 2. We're looking at a familiar text. It's so familiar that maybe some of you will just read through it this Christmas season as a family. I know that is a tradition for many of us. But we are going to pause and spend some time and hopefully, you will see some details in this story that maybe you've never seen before. You will see it with fresh eyes is our desire.

I was thinking about this with Christmas music. Just to show you how familiar things can become, I'm only going to sing one word of a Christmas song and then ask you to finish it. The 8:30 totally participated with this so I'd love your participation. Here we go. Rudolph... the red nosed reindeer. See how you got it. Grandma... got ran over by a reindeer. That' was powerful more than the Rudolph. Now watch this. It's... beginning to look a lot like Christmas. The most wonderful time of the year, people. You live in Branson, and you are letting your town down. How about this I'll... Be home for Christmas. With one word, you got the song.

We can become familiar with a text, and I am praying that we see it with new eyes over the month of December. We have four messages in Luke 2, and today we are going to look at the first seven verses. I want to start as we talk this season about the gospel. We're talking about *Why The Manger Matters*. And we are going to end the messages with why does it matter to you, why does it matter to me. We are going to make three key observation in Luke 2: 1-7 and then four application points of why does it matter to me personally this Christmas season.

As we talk about the word *gospel*, if you've been in church for any length of time, we use the gospel, which comes from the old English word Godspell which means good news. When someone comes up to me and says, "I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?" I'm going to give you the bad news first. According to the scripture, there is none righteous, no not one. For the wages of sin is death. But the good news is that the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

I love the terms, good news, gospel, but we find it rooted in this great Greek word *euangelion*, which means – and I think it's even weightier than good news – news that brings great joy. We have to understand this word in the day of Jesus. Pastor Shawn Kennedy takes euangelion and puts it this way. "For those living in the time of Jesus, the word euangelion was used to refer to life-altering, history-making, world shaping-news. That is the gospel. It should change us.

We are not here today for a TED Talk. Not really. But how many of you enjoy TED Talks? I'm not talking about sermons that I do, I'm talking about the YouTube... I love TED Talks. I learn a lot in TED Talks. They are intriguing. I actually love just how polished they are, and you can tell someone has been working with them. But in a TED Talk, I get a lot of good information and I get a lot of good advice, but it's not life-altering, world-shaping news, even though it's good.

Timothy Keller puts it this way. "Good advice tells you what you need to do." And we never want Woodland Hills to be a place where you get a TED Talk with a Bible verse. We always want to be centered on the person of Jesus, the gospel, the good news that brings great joy. The gospel is that good news. News tells us what has already been done. And advent proclaims the good news of what God has already done for us through Christ.

I was driving in this morning on my way to church. And just so many things happen to me just coming here on Sunday morning. I have to leave room in the sermon because of the illustrations I get between my house and church. I didn't share this one with you because Amy says I need to give it a couple of weeks. Two weeks ago, when I was coming to church, I pulled to the end of the road and another pastor lives near me. It doesn't matter who it is. His name is Jeremy Thomas from First Baptist Branson. I pull up to the stop sign, and he goes flying by. My text to him was "Slow down, Bro! Holy smokes!" He goes, "I'm just excited to get there." You know I'm a little bit of redneck. I drive a truck with a lot of light bars. So, the race was on and here comes Ted behind Jeremy. I was ready to go. And I don't know if you know, but route 76 on the other side of Taney Como, is a very hard street to pass people on. Not impossible, just difficult.

So, I pull up behind him and I hit my light bars on, which gives you a sunburn on the back of your head. Just two pastors in the Ozarks having a good time. They can't wait to get to church to declare the good news of Jesus. I wasn't texting while driving, by the way. Jeremy texted a lot while driving. I thought about this for a moment, and I was like, "What's going to happen today on the way to church?" On the way to church, I got a text from a friend who has had some struggles. I just want to read the lyrics of song we sing here all the time about this life-altering, history-making news in the name of Jesus. He said, "This Advent season I'm just reminded some things I'm dealing with. Ted, I can tell you this, a lot of people in the church today that you are heading to are going to be dealing with depression, anxiety." As exciting as Christmas is and the joy that fills us this time of year, I know that's not the case for a lot of you who are in here right now. He sent me the lyrics. I pulled over. I live near an Ace Hardware. You know we don't have shoulders on the roads here in the Ozarks. I pulled over into their grass to read this.

"I just want to speak the name of Jesus over every heart and every mind because I know there is peace within your presence. I speak Jesus. I just want to speak the name of Jesus until every dark addiction starts to break declaring there is hope and there is freedom. I speak Jesus. Your name is power, your name is healing, your name is life." I'm just going to tell you. You ain't getting that from a TED Talk. There's nothing wrong with a TED Talk; I love TED Talks. But it's the name of Jesus that "breaks every strong hold, shines through the shadows, burns like a fire." "I just want to speak the name of Jesus over fear and all anxiety to every soul held captive by depression. I speak Jesus. The name of Jesus.

And some of you, as the gospel is proclaimed during this season at our church, the good news of Jesus, the life-altering news, for a lot of you, it's a recalibration time. I don't know what you've been going through the last couple of weeks. I've been going through some things that have been a little exhausting, a little wearisome and my lower lip can start to quiver, and my teeth can grip when I think about it. We'll talk more about that in my therapy at the end of the message. But some of you have stiff-armed Jesus, the gospel. When you hear it from the people that you've heard it from, you want nothing to do with that. My family talks about it all the time and of you've sat at our family table... You spend a lot of time with family and some of you are like, "My family turns me off to the gospel." I joked with Amy yesterday. I go, "There's a fine line between a family gathering and a hostage situation."

But some of you don't want it. I'm just telling you maybe you've just been watching a bad version of it. Maybe you've been around someone who proclaims the name of Jesus but when you watch the walk, you're like, "That doesn't match up at all of who I think Jesus is and who I've been told he is and what I've been told he is and what I read in the Bible. Why do you act like this but say you believe this?" So, you are stiff-arming.

Pastor Andy Stanley puts it this way. *"If the life and teaching of Jesus doesn't strike you as good news, the version you've heard may not be the original version."*

What we want to do for the next four weeks is give the original version, starting today with the manger. If you have your Bibles turn to Luke 2. We want to talk about these three observations and spend a little time in them because, for me, I read it this week and I was like I'll just explain it and then move on to application, but God did a work in my life this week in these seven verses to remind me of this story... Because it starts with names. And let's just be honest. Alex brought it last week. Alex has really inspired me with this just how he loves the list of names and the observations and interpretation that he can pull out of a list of names. It's overwhelming what God is doing in that list of names, but you and I skip the list of names because we don't like pronouncing the names on that list. Nor do we sometimes see the value in the names on that list.

Here's why it's important and as we go through Luke 2, nothing about the birth of Jesus just happened. We're not reading a story about like Joseph and Mary just kind of stumbled upon this. This just kind of happened to them. I hope you read every verse and every word as a detail in the story of what God intended with the birth of Jesus, of what was part of his plan with the birth of Jesus.

Let's look at these three observations:

1. The manger declares the sovereignty of God. God is over all. He is still in charge. We need to be reminded of that as we jump into the first three verses today.

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree... Circle that in your Bible because this is key to the first seven verses that we are going to read today. **...that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)** What did we learn in the first two verses? 1. The birth of Jesus is part of history. This isn't Greek Mythology. This isn't just something that people tell stories about. These are real names of real people who really lived.

A Roman Governor who really took this census. So, it's part of history. We also see... I love this and we need to be reminded of this in 2022 in the United States of America, God is sovereign over history. God is sovereign over the world still. He is sovereign over the United States of America. He is sovereign over Washington D.C. He is sovereign over Jefferson City, which is our capital. He's sovereign over all. This is so important. This isn't something that just happened, but God works through this to give us the details of the rest of the story. So why are verses one and two so important? Because of this, **3 And everyone went to their own town to register.** God is over kings and kingdoms, Caesars and emperors and empires. We read in Proverbs 21: 1 – ***In the Lord's hand, the king's heart is a stream of water...*** Never forget that. The king's heart is in the hands of God. ***...That he channels to all who please him.*** Why is this important? God works through Cesar to issue a decree that a census should be taken. Why? Because it leads us to the second observation in this text.

2. The manger fulfills Old Testament prophecy. And we are going to see this small prophecy with great implications fulfilled because of this decree that was issued.

4 So Joseph... Alex really shared a lot of his story, a righteous man, last week. ***...also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.***

John Piper makes this observation of the text, which I love. He says, "God could have chosen a young Jewish woman already in Bethlehem." But we read in the previous verse that she's a woman who is not in Bethlehem. So, he has to get Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and it only happens because of a decree. God could have just picked that woman, or he could have had a business dealing that Joseph needed to go to Bethlehem for but think about this. God sent something out over the whole world. This is important as we get to the manger to understand. In that big of a detail, how small of a detail the manger is. So, hold onto that.

God works through the whole world to move them from Nazareth onto Bethlehem to fulfill this prophecy in Mica 5: 2 – ***"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small...*** We just sang about this – Oh little town of Bethlehem. ***...among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel...*** This is where the Messiah is going to come from. ***...whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."*** I just see this overall to get them from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

3. Hold onto that moment because we are going to see that the Manger reminds us Jesus is the lowly servant all the way to the cross. The manger isn't something that just happened; it's not an accident. It's part of the plan of God.

6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger... A nasty, stinking, feeding trough. The one in our video was pretty clean. You could tell that was fresh wood from Home Depot. Picture a stinky, nasty, smelly...

I love watching cows. We live on a street with cows. I don't actually go to where the cows are. I stand on this side of the fence if you know what I mean. And I watch them from a distance. They go to the manger, a feeding trough, **...because there was no guest room available for them.** Where our text ends today.

Now, you are going to see memes over Christmas that Joseph forgot to make a reservation. Did he? Are you telling me that God, who can work through Cesar to issue a decree that a census be taken of the entire world to move Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, couldn't have a free room available for them once they got there? No. Or a better understanding is the manger was the plan. Because it's how he's going to be born and it's how he's going to live his life, Follower of Jesus, stick with me on this one for a second because we're getting ready to come into some major conviction here in a second – lowly servant from the manger all the way to the cross. We see this all throughout... We can share a lot of text. I'll share just a few of them with you. **Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens, birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head.** –Matthew 8: 20 This was lowly servant from birth to death.

We read in the gospels, Mark 10 – **42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."** We live in a country that says everything is about getting to the top, but our savior teaches us that greatness is about something you descend into. **45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

I read a pastor this week. He encouraged me. I just want to share a couple of scenarios. He asked this question, and it intrigued me, so I kept reading. "May we remember all the ways Jesus could have come into the world, but didn't..." Again, just like he could have chosen a young Jewish lady who already lived in Bethlehem, there could have been a room in the inn, but he went with the manger. Why? He gives a few scenarios. He says, "Jesus could have come as an emperor with legions of angel armies and instantly wiped Rome off the map and created a Christian nation in its place to rule the world, but instead, he came as a helpless baby."

Another scenario – Jesus could have been born to a wealthy and politically powerful family, but instead was born to a poor refugee family.

Understanding this was the plan of God. It's what he intended, not something that just happened. It's not just circumstances in life that just kind of fell upon Joseph and Mary and Jesus that first night.

"Angels could have been sent to announce the birth of Jesus to the generals of the world's empires, but they announced their tidings of great joy to shepherds." –Benjamin Cremer

Let's go where angels dare to trod for just a second. Some of us want that. That's the Jesus we want. We want the Jesus that wipes the democrats out of our nation. We want the nation free of republicans. There are a few of you in here that want that. There is a certain presidential candidate or a certain senatorial candidate or a certain... just get rid of them and let's get Christians back in power. That's the

secret to having a great life. Just get Christians in power. And Christians have become power hungry. And Jesus modeled for us lowly servant all the way to the cross. And he asked you and I to follow suit. Lowly servant.

Paul says this to the Philippians in Philippians 2 - **5 Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: 6 Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped...** Every time I read this, I think of something I pray almost every morning and you need to pray it as well. Start your morning off with, "You are God; I am not." That will really get a day kicked off in a good direction. "You are God, you are in control and I am submitting to you, understanding I'm in control of nothing." You realize it's not an accident that there is a roundabout five miles from my house. Do you know why? Because I get up every day, get in my truck, I got the day ready to go, I'm in charge. It's kind of why I don't like to fly. If I can get to an event by driving, I'm driving because I'm in control. You're not in control. I get behind that wheel, I get to the roundabout and realize I ain't in control at all. I thought I had my day planned, but that person needs to surrender their license immediately. It's not that difficult. Stay in your lane. I'm not in control. Here's the difference between me and Jesus. Jesus is God. I'm not. Jesus is God, but he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. You know what he did? It starts in the manger and goes all the way to the cross. He humbled himself by taking the form of a servant and by becoming a little baby, by becoming a human being. **7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.** And then he became obedient to death, even death on the cross.

And you and I get to follow suit. You and I get to take this story of the manger and ask the question: "Why does the manger matter now to me."

1. We learn from this story that God is in control. He's over the nations. We can rest in that. Some of you are worn out right now because so much about your life is out of control. May the gospel be a time for Christians because Christians still need the gospel. Why? Christians need this message to recalibrate out lives. Some of you right now think you are in control.

I wrote down a lot of the professions. I'm only going to share a few of them. We have realtors in our church. You killed it in the last two years. You've done phenomenally. But guess what? As good as you are at your job, you are not in control of the housing market and you're going, "Tell me about it. We have no idea what 2023 holds." But you know what? Your hope is not in the housing market.

There are some of you who just retired to Branson. You are in Branson because your portfolio hit where it needed to hit, your retirement date hit. You got the sheet cake and you're ready to go. But guess what? You have zero control over the stock market. Some of us like to have things in control... There is a certain amount in my check book that I love to keep. I'm not telling you what that number is. for some of you, your number is going to be higher, some of you it's lower. But when I have this number in there, things are good. I don't need to trust God. Why? I got it. It dips below that? "Dear Jesus. Lord, I am not where I want to be right now. Would you please... I don't want a relative to die to get it, but if there's just something that could happen like a tax credit I don't know about yet or a creative accountant. Whatever you want to do..." That's us.

For some of you, it's not money; it's the house you live in. You're in control if you have this taken care of. Some of you have done every single thing Dave Ramsey has told you to do. Let me tell you. Follow Dave Ramsey to a tee, get your money healthy, you're still not in control. It's an illusion. But you also need to learn God is sovereign over all, yes. But just as we read in this text, all the little details coming together, your life is not accident. I've had to work with people who said, "My parents never planned me, and they've let me know that my entire life." Let me tell you something. You may not be the plan of your parents, but I am here to tell you 100% you are the plan of Almighty God.

2. You're not an accident. And if you get that into your mind, what happens is you see things happening to you and you're like, *well that was just bad luck. I just had some good luck.* What's the term we like in this toxic positivity culture. "I just need good vibes coming my way right now." "Just speak it into the universe so that it comes back to you." We don't speak things into the universe. We cry out to our Father in heaven who is also in control.

But some of us just think, *things are just happening to me*, and then here's where we need to spend a little bit of time before we close.

3. Your character matters to God way more than your comfort. We talked about this yesterday. I like being comfortable. Would you raise your hand if you enjoy being comfortable? You're sitting here in cushy little seats, drinking your coffee. We love comfort. I love comfort. Do you know what this afternoon looks like? I get in a recliner on my side of the couch. I hit that button. You're like, "He's bragging about his money." No, I'm not. It's the one thing I want. I want that recliner. And then there is nothing better on a December day than watching the Chiefs play. I love fleece blankets. How many of you love a fleece blanket? I love fleece blankets. And my wife buys these little square, 4 x 4 blankets that I have to choose. Do I want my lower half warm or do I want my upper half warm? I said, "Can I just get a blanket that I can wrap under my feet, come all the way up over my shoulders." I sit there and I've got a Yeti with Stash peppermint tea. These are all comfort. We call them creature comforts. I love being comfortable just like you love being comfortable.

Here's our problem. We've turned creature comforts into what I call Christian comforts. I'm not talking about the comfort that Christ gives right now. I'm talking about the life we think we deserve, we need. And when we are not comfortable, there must be something wrong. We do it all the time. If I am not comfortable, we, at that point, begin to question these first two. "I'm not comfortable. God, something must be wrong." Or it's the comfort that is absent from you. The uncomfortable moments you're having right now intended to grow your character.

I have to be honest with you. The last two weeks, just going through some things. Some trials, some things that are just like, "I'm going to fix this." Why? "Because I'm in control." I'm not in control.

Yesterday, Amy could tell my mind was there. She goes, "Are you thinking about it again? Do you think therapy would help?" This was my exact answer, "No." "Absolutely, I probably should just by the answer that I gave you." That's why this message today. It's a recalibrating moment for me to be reminded that God is in control. Whatever happens, he's in control. My life is not an accident. How many of us need to look back on our life when things happen, and we didn't see the plan?

We see these memes of Joseph going door to door, knocking, going, "I'm looking for a room." And we're knocking right now going "What is going on." "What is going on." We think that this is just happening to us. Or "What am I supposed to learn from this?" "What is God teaching me through this?" "I don't want to have a season of where I'm uncomfortable and waste it. I don't know what 2023 looks like. We're getting a little picture of it, but we don't know fully. We don't know what's going to happen. If we've learned one thing from the pandemic, it's that you and I can't control a dang thing. We had everything planned and then it was all completely shut down. But now we can look back on it a couple of years later and go, "Wow, can you believe that happened?" A week after you shut your business down, you weren't in the mood to praise your Father in heaven. You were mourning, like I was mourning. But then a couple of weeks later after talking do you know what some people said? "I haven't spent this much time with my family in a long time and this is good." You see, we were uncomfortable, but then we started to learn the right lessons. We started to understand.

Pastor Rick Warren has been a mentor to me from a distance for a long time. He just retired as a pastor. I'm super jealous. He got the sheet cake and he's out. Good for you, Rick. He is constantly challenging me with this, "Hey, how is God making you uncomfortable this week? How are you learning that he is in control and you're not? How are you balancing these two? How are you learning from this? Or are you whining and complaining and no longer trusting?"

Pastor Rick says, "Many Christians misinterpret the promise of Jesus that we get abundant life to mean perfect health, a comfortable lifestyle, constant happiness, full realizations of your dream, instant relief from problems through faith and prayer. In a word, they expect the Christian life to be easy. And we have forgotten the manger." He goes on to say, "This self-absorbed perspective treats God as a genie who simply exists to serve you in your selfish pursuit of personal fulfillment."

"You're looking for good advice. You're looking for self-help. You're looking for someone to sooth your pain and make you more comfortable when you need to be looking even deeper than that and asking, "What is this teaching me about me, my life, and about who Jesus is.""

He goes on to say, "You can't say it any clearer than this. God is not your servant. And if you fall for the idea that life is supposed to be easy, you'll either become severely disillusioned or you will live in denial of reality."

That's why this message this week, for me. I can whine, I can complain, I can get into fix it mode? How many of you are fixers? "Okay, listen, I'm going to fix this." "All I need to do is fix it, get back to my full-sized comforter, my full-sized fleece blanket, and then life will be good." How long does that last?

I've been challenging my kids with this idea. I want you guys to have a walk with Jesus that works anywhere in the world – Moscow, Bordeaux France, London, Bora Bora, Tanzania, Branson Missouri." Sometimes we get caught up in Christian sub-culture and we forget about the gospel, the life, and the teachings of Jesus. That's what I want my kids to follow. And that's who I want them to follow. And quit treating God as a genie. God is in control, your life is no accident, your character matters more than your comfort. So, when you are uncomfortable, lean in to what God is teaching you in your character.

4. Because when you add all this up, Jesus is your source of joy, and that is great news. It's not your bank account, it's not the stock market, it's not the housing market, it's not even Branson. Some of you are here right now and I hear it all the time. You're here right now on vacation going, "This place is awesome. It's so comfortable. I should move here." Let me remind you. You're on vacation. And when you move here and become part of our community... Listen, you know what I won't be doing today? Riding go carts and eating funnel cakes. Oh, I'll do it through out the year, but it's not a daily thing in my life.

We're obsessed with comfort in our culture when we need to be going back to the manger. Jesus, born a lowly servant, takes it all the way to the cross and dies for you and dies for me. When you understand that message, that you were lost in your sins and there is nothing you can do to save yourself, nothing, the wages of sin is death... If you never trusted in Jesus, you are living with a death sentence right now. If you were to die today, hell would be your eternity. That's the bad news. But the good news is Jesus died for your sins. And if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that he has been raised from the dead, for by grace you are saved through faith. It's not of works so that you can't boast about it. You're not getting there on your own works. You're getting there because of Jesus. And when you understand that message, whatever you're going through, whatever your life events are right now, whatever your comfort level is, don't focus on adjusting your comfort level, make sure you're rooted in the person of Jesus.

Father, we will never treat you as a genie, as our servant. May we serve you and you alone. I ask that you give us the mind of Jesus, the one who though he is God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he humbled himself. May we humble ourselves today and come before you. Use the uncomfortable moments in our life. Use the manger moments in our life to remind us of who we are in you, to trust you, that you have a plan for our lives, and you are working it out at this very moment. We don't see it. We don't understand it. But we can still trust, and we will.

I pray for the one who has never placed faith in Jesus and everything about their life is trying to be God. Today, may they confess to you that they are not God, and you are, and may they thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross for us. May they confess with their mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that he has been raised from the dead that they would be saved.

We pray all of this in the authority of the name of Jesus. And everyone agreed and said... Amen.