

Sermon Outline

THE YEAR IN OUR LORD, 2013-2014

AND YOU SHALL CALL HIS NAME JESUS (LUKE 1:31-35)

I. The Irrelevance of Christmas?

II. The Unhappy Naturalistic Story

- A. What are we seeking when we desire *happiness* on the one hand and *redemption* on the other?
- B. The world has many stories and explanations for *why* we long for happiness and redemption—and also *how* we attain those things.
- C. One of the greatest stories that has gripped the human imagination is what we would call *the Naturalistic Story*.
1. According to this grand story, our longing for happiness and redemption really boils down to nothing more than biology.
 2. We are creatures who are only interested in self-preservation, because that was what Nature/Evolution has made us out to be.
 3. This is why people are concerned for their own happiness and for their own redemption: It (supposedly) leads to the preservation of the species.
- D. How true is that story? How complete is that story of life?
1. At some level, the Naturalistic story is true because every human being is a biological creature.
 2. But is biology everything? Is that all to the human story?
 - a. Deep down, we sense that the Naturalistic biological story is incomplete at best because it could lead to serious moral issues.
 - b. While a purely biological telling of the story can explain in some sense *why* we want to survive, it has difficulty going much further than that.
 - i. It cannot lead to higher virtues like truthfulness, chastity, joy, or excellence.
 - ii. To get even more specific...
 - The Naturalistic Story cannot explain why a man should want to be faithful to his mentally-broken wife.
 - The Naturalistic Story cannot explain why a woman should keep a fetus she knows will grow up mentally retarded or die shortly after birth.
 - c. Also, if all of us were indeed merely biological creatures, wouldn't it only be a matter of time before we realize that even ideas like good and evil are purely subjective?
- E. If we spend time swimming in the Naturalistic view long enough, something else happens.
—It is only a matter of time before we realize that there is no reason why even our own survival should be that significant.

- F. Immediately, we sense how absurd the Naturalistic Story of the world is.
1. Yet, the Naturalistic Story remains the official story of the human race that so many have come to accept.
 2. According to the Naturalistic Story, happiness and redemption are found in securing one's own pleasure.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What is the Naturalistic telling of the story of the world? (2) What answers to suffering does the Naturalistic Story give us? (3) What is the logical outcome of living by the Naturalistic Story?

III. Another Perspective

- A. There is another Story that we need to hear. And this is the Story that the Bible tells.
1. The Bible is the Sacred Book of the Christian and Jewish faiths.
 2. The Bible is the Word of God to the world.
 3. Unlike the Naturalistic Story that so many believe today, the Bible is not so reductionistic or simplistic.
 4. The Bible does not deny that we are biological creatures and that physical pleasure and happiness are important.
 5. But going beyond the Naturalistic Story, the Bible encourages people to view these things in light of something else, something bigger—and that is mankind's relationship to the God who created us.
 6. The Bible calls on the human race to find their redemption from suffering as well as their happiness ultimately in God himself.
- B. The Bible teaches that when God made the world, he made the world out of his love, his tremendous generosity.
1. Consider Psalm 136:1-9.

*¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

*² Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

*³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

*⁴ to him who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

*⁵ to him who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

*⁶ to him who spread out the earth above the waters,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

*⁷ to him who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

*⁸ the sun to rule over the day,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

*⁹ the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

2. God made all things out of his steadfast love: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8).
- C. Because God is love, God also gives himself in love to his creatures.
1. Since God is complete in himself, God neither needs to love us nor needs our love.
 2. Yet, God chooses to love us anyway.
 3. God created the world in order that the world might know and enjoy him forever.
 4. How do we know this? In the final book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, God gives us this portrait of the final reality of those who have accepted his love:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (Rev 21:3, 4)

- D. This is the reason why *God* made us capable of pursuing happiness.
1. It’s not just about the survival of the species.
 2. God made us to pursue happiness in himself.
- E. God’s steadfast love is the cause of all creation. Consequently, the only way for a human being to be truly fulfilled, truly happy is to have God himself and to enjoy him forever.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How does the Bible go beyond the Naturalistic Story? (2) According to the Bible, why did God make the world?

IV. The Fall

- A. But the present world in which we live does not fit that ideal, does it?
- B. In our world, we see suffering, corruption, sickness.
- C. While the Naturalist may, at this point, conclude that everything is ultimately meaningless; that suffering is just subjective, the Bible teaches that suffering is *not* purely subjective because there is real evil in the world.
- D. Evil has its root in human beings themselves.
1. According to the Bible, our first parents chose to shun the love of God.
 2. Instead of choosing a life of dependence on God leading to happiness in him and harmony with others, our first parents chose a life of independence.
 3. They chose to become their own gods, making up their own rules for good and evil.
 4. But the end result of such arrogance is chaos and suffering.
 5. If every person wanted to be his or her own god, then we would always be in conflict with one another, because we all have different, conflicting desires.
- E. Since mankind rejected the loving rule of God, God allowed mankind to suffer the consequences of their rebellion.
1. If God himself is eternal Life and eternal Love, then the ultimate consequence of turning away from God can only be eternal death.

2. The Scripture teaches: “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23); and “the soul who sins shall die” (Ezek 18:4).
- F. It is this eternal death—this eternal emptiness and pain—that is behind all the evil that human beings do to one another today.
1. Deep down, each human being is seeking redemption from suffering and lasting happiness.
 2. Yet, as long as we do not seek these things in *God*—God who is eternal life and love—then our desires will always be frustrated.
 3. We will seek happiness in things that cannot last or satisfy.
 4. This gives rise to greed, lust, and finally, all the other problems that emerge from those things: Discontentment, dishonesty, theft, corruption, and finally, murder.
 5. Behind every murder, case of fraud or theft that we read about is really a heart that is seeking for ultimate happiness—but going about the search in an entirely wrong way.
 6. Instead of seeking happiness in God alone who satisfies, we seek happiness in earthly things that cannot satisfy.
 7. This is the curse that God has placed on human rejection of his all-satisfying love:
 - a. It is the curse of ultimate frustration, ultimate failure, and ultimate death.
 - b. Unless we understand this curse, Christmas and Christianity at large will not make sense.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Why is there such suffering in the world? (2) How is eternal death the reality behind all our suffering? How is eternal death the cause of our destructive desires?

V. The Covenant of Grace

- A. So, why Christmas?
—*Christmas exists because God did not want the curse to be the final word his creatures hear from him.*
- B. While God places a curse on the human race for their rejection of his rule; God, in a surprising move of compassion, promises to rescue the human race.
- C. God promises to save mankind from their sins specifically by means of a special Human Being whom God has prepared, whom he will one day send into the world.
- D. During the Christmas season, the Church celebrates this special Human Being whom God has sent into the world to save us from our sins and restore life and happiness to all of us—*Jesus*.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Why Christmas? (2) Who is the special Human Being whom God has sent to redeem the world?

VI. Jesus: Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32, 33)

- A. In Luke 1, God sends the angel Gabriel to a young Jewish woman by the name of Mary.

- B. Angels are heavenly beings who live in the presence of God in heaven and serve as the messengers of God.
- C. Gabriel has a special message for Mary: She is going to be with child!
- D. In Jewish culture, this would have been wonderful news, because each Child is considered a gift from God.
- E. Yet, what the angel tells Mary is that her Child is going to be a special Human Being.
 - 1. The Child's name, if you notice, is not given either by Mary or by Joseph, his future parents; but by God himself through the angel.
 - a. This tells us that the Child has been set apart from birth by God for his special purposes. God has a special mission for Mary's Child.
 - b. This mission is summarized in his name: "Jesus" means "The Lord is Savior" or "The Lord is Salvation."
 - c. The name Jesus or *Yeshua* is related to the Hebrew word *yeshuah*, "salvation."
 - d. By calling the child Jesus, God is saying that Mary's Son will be the answer to mankind's deepest question—the question of how we attain redemption and ultimate happiness.
 - e. Somehow, Mary's Son Jesus is going to accomplish what no human being has been able to do.
—He is going to bring about the long-awaited salvation and joy of the world.
 - 2. We also see something of *who* Jesus is and *how* exactly he will accomplish those wonderful things.
 - a. In verses 32-33, we are told that Jesus...
 - "...will be great..."
 - "...and will be called the Son of the Most High..."
 - "...And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David..."
 - "...and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever..."
 - "...and of his kingdom there will be no end."
 - b. Mary's Son Jesus will fulfill his destiny of saving the world by becoming the long-awaited Ruler of Israel and of all mankind.
 - c. King Jesus will rule as a true human being, as someone who lives up to God's ideal.
 - d. He would rule as a true Child and Student of God.
 - e. Those who long for wisdom, peace, happiness, and salvation will find it in Jesus. It is in Jesus that God has invested his supreme authority.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Who is Jesus and what is the meaning of his name? (2) What does the text say about Jesus work? (3) If King Jesus is the Son of the Most High, how would he rule the world?

VII. The Son of God (Luke 1:34, 35)

- A. History contains many men who have thought of themselves as the answer to their nations' problems—only to become the source of their nation's pains. So, how is Jesus able to fulfill all the expectations of God as well as the hopes and dreams of the entire human race?

- B. The answer is hinted at in verse 35.
- C. Apparently, when the angel first announced to Mary that she will bear a son, Mary was a little dumbfounded. “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” she asks (v 34).
- D. But it is at this point that the angel takes the opportunity to inform Mary about the highly unusual nature of Jesus’ own conception:

And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God’ (v 35).

- E. How is any human being able to accomplish so much?
 1. Jesus is able to be the Hope of the world precisely because he is *not* just any ordinary human being.
 2. The fact that his conception is accomplished without a human father; the fact that his conception is a direct exercise of God’s own life-giving power—these factors suggest to us that Jesus truly is sent from God himself.
 3. More than that: Jesus represents a deliberate intrusion by God himself into our world.
- F. Let’s be very clear.
 1. The fact that Jesus had no human father does *not* mean that Jesus is a demigod; half-human, half-divine creature (as in the Greek mythologies).
 2. Jesus is as fully human as any of us.
 3. What then makes Jesus a superior human being? What is it that sets him apart from the rest of us?
 4. The fact that Jesus is formed in the virgin’s womb by a direct exercise of God’s power hints at two key facts about Jesus:
 - a. Jesus himself is without sin.
 - b. Jesus is assured of God’s close guidance all through his life.
 5. So it is for these reasons that Jesus is able to do what no human beings can do: Jesus is able to bring God himself to us.
- G. The fact that Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary by a direct act of God points us to another important fact: Jesus himself is God.
 1. Through the Holy Spirit, the Divine Life of God himself was implanted into the virgin’s womb.
 2. From Mary, Jesus derives his biology, his human nature, his flesh and bone.
 3. But because Jesus is the divine Life himself, Jesus is also fully God.
 4. While Jesus is not a demigod (half-god, half-human), Jesus is indeed better than that: *Jesus is fully human and fully divine at the same time.*
 5. Since Jesus carries all the power and fullness of God, Jesus is able to be the Answer to our deepest questions and our deepest longings. This is why Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6).
 - a. When Jesus says that he is the Way, he means that he is the Path back home to God.
 - b. When Jesus says that he is also the Truth and the Life, he means that he himself is where God is found.
 6. Jesus himself is the ultimate Reality of peace and truth and love that we are seeking.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How is Mary able to conceive a child as a virgin? (2) Who is Jesus ultimately? Was he only human? (3) Why is Jesus able to fulfil the lofty goals that have been set out for him? Why is he able to be the Source of our happiness and redemption?

VIII. The Answer Is Jesus

All those deep questions that we ask about our happiness or the end of suffering, all the different guises that those questions take—God wants you to know that he has indeed heard the cries of his suffering people. And God has answered us. The question for us now is whether or not we will accept the Answer that God has given. God's Answer to our cries is not some abstract theory or philosophy of life; not some list of dos and don'ts. God has answered our cries by coming to us in the form of the Lord Jesus Christ. Will we go to him?