

“Jesus’ Favorites” // Luke 2:8–20 // In Step #7

[Bumper Video: UNC Soccer Player Testimony]: *Because of Jesus we have a new way, we have new life, and we have new hope.* What an amazing testimony of the change God brings into someone’s life. Could we put our hands together and celebrate that? (If you agree would you say ‘amen’?)

Well, **Merry Christmas**--I know this might be one of the most unusual Christmases we’ve ever experienced. But it’s still Christmas.

- Typically, **these weeks are filled with parties**: family parties, neighborhood parties, church parties, work parties, *I-don’t-like-parties-but-my-wife-makes-me-go* parties. In fact, some of you have secretly been grateful for lockdown because it’s given you an excuse to not go to any parties this year. Am I right? “I’d love to come to your Nutcracker Christmas-themed Costume party but... PANDEMIC!”
 - I don’t know if this is officially a thing, but I feel like some people have selective Covid anxiety. I’m not talking about people with legitimate concerns. I’m talking about the guy who will play poker with several of his buddies for a few hours but then is really concerned about getting together with his wife’s side of the family because of... Covid concerns.
- **Christmas is a time of gift-giving**, and I assume by how many times the Amazon truck passes my house and how backed up the mail is that that’s still the same, but how we give gifts may be different and some of you are having to rethink getting the family together on Christmas morning or Christmas Eve. Just out of curiosity: How many of you are heretics and open presents on Christmas Eve? Go ahead, raise your hand. Where are you? Keep it up. We’re going to call our prayer team from the back to come lay hands on you. Just kidding. The CDC won’t let us do that. But this is a great year to change that: open your Christmas presents on Christmas morning, when Jesus opened his--or at least that’s how I read the story.
- And, of course, **during this season, we’ve still been able to watch our Christmas movies**. I know you’re expecting me to make fun of Hallmark movies again, but I won’t. I know some of you love them. Of course, we all know America’s best Christmas film. Go ahead and say it, *“DIE HARD.”*

One of the things we’ve had to alter here at TSC is our Christmas services. Which is sad, because typically, our Christmas Eve service is our best attended service of the year--in years past we’ve done it at the DPAC. So, it’s sad to have to scale it back, but **what we’re doing instead this year is giving you a copy of a book** I just published called *Searching for Christmas*. It’s a simple, straightforward, short--mercifully short--humorous book that attempts to expose the deep soul questions that Christmas prompts us to ask. It’s the kind of book you can put in a stocking or just give as a gift. So, I hope it’s a help to you.

- If you’re at one of our campuses, you can **pick up one for free**. Give it to a friend and offer to talk with them about it. **If you’re joining us online** you can find a free digital copy on our website. If you need extra copies, you can order them on Amazon.

Works consulted:

“To Us a Child Is Born (Luke 2:8–20),” sermon, Scott Sauls
Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Luke, commentary, Thabiti M. Anyabwile
“Responding to Jesus’ Birth (Luke 2:8–20),” sermon, Tim Keller
“The Birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1–7),” sermon, Tim Keller
“Love is born: Savior for all people (Luke 2:8–20),” Joby Martin

One of the questions I ask in the book is what your most memorable Christmas was. Think right now: What Christmas stands out most in your mind? Good or bad. One from when you were a kid; your first Christmas married; maybe the year you got some gift you'd always wanted. Kids, how many of you expect this to be the best Christmas ever? Go ahead, raise your hand. Now, look at your parents now and say, "This is not on Santa. It's on you." That's a lot of pressure on them, but they can handle it.

My most memorable Christmas occurred in 1997, the first year I served as a missionary on an island country in the South Pacific. I lived in a Muslim community, and some of my Muslim friends, who were so incredibly gracious to me, knew I was alone--my teammate had been evacuated for medical reasons--and so my Muslim friends decided to throw a small Christmas party for me. It was so sweet. They had me over and they had made some little cakes and desserts and they said, "So why don't you explain to us why Christmas is so important to you?" And I sat there on the floor of their little house--it was 90 degrees, none of my friends or family around, no stockings or presents--and I opened my Bible to Luke 2 and shared with them the story I'm about to share with you, and I remember thinking that perhaps this was the purest expression of Christmas I'd ever been a part of; that probably the GREATEST way to honor what Jesus had done was not through parties and presents but to make sure *everybody* in the world knew why he'd come.

Luke 2: This is a story most everybody recognizes, but it has one profound point people often miss: and that is that **Jesus came for the broken; the broken-hearted**, the mournful, the devastated, the outcast. Let me show you: **Luke 2:8** In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people (underline that word 'all'): 11 Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah (or, some of your Bibles say, "the Christ." It meant, 'the promised King'), the Lord. 12 This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: 14 Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!

There were lots of people to whom this angelic choir could have chosen to appear that first Christmas Eve. They could have appeared in the **luxurious palace of Herod**, the acting King of Israel at the time, located just a few miles away. They could have chosen Rome, the capital of the world. They could have chosen the High Priest's chambers in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Instead, they chose to announce Jesus' birth to a group of unnamed, illiterate shepherds in an unnamed field in an unknown part of Israel. And don't miss what they said: *Peace on earth **to the people he favors***. Based on who they chose to appear to, *who is it* that God favors?

Shepherds. And who are shepherds? Shepherds might seem quaint to us, with their cute robes and iconic little hook staffs and their furry little sheep in tow, but they were anything but "cute" to ancient Israelites. Shepherding was the lowest form of labor available--the ultimate expression of unskilled labor, a job often given to kids or migrant workers. If as a Jewish adult you were still a shepherd, that was viewed as a total-life-fail. They were so low class that their testimony would not even be considered in court unless it was verified by someone else.

Of all the people in the world, God chose to announce the birth of Jesus to them. What does that show you about those whom he favors? Let me give you **4 categories of people** that Jesus favors this Christmas:

- **Let's start with the obvious: The poor.** In sending the angels to the shepherds, God was declaring that he sees, and he cares about the poor. Poverty is not a sign that he has forsaken you, or that your life is second class, or that you have no future. He has something for you. He wants to bless you and use your life for good. That starts with giving you something even better than money. Jesus taught, you see, that the abundant life is not first and foremost about houses or riches or cars or success but knowing God. Ironically, Jesus said, the poor are usually in a better situation to receive the abundant life because their hands are not so full of money or wealth or dreams that they have no yearning for God. God only fills empty hands, you see. ***If you are poor this Christmas***, or down on your luck, believe it or not, I can offer you something better than money. I can offer you God himself. BTW, we at this church would want to know about your physical needs; we'd love to help you. But even more importantly we can offer you the assurance that you are at peace with God, that heaven and all its riches are yours, that he will begin working in your life for good and to use you as a blessing to others.
- **He favors the poor. He favors (2) those whose lives are messy.** Shepherds were not a group of "together" people. They didn't graduate top of their classes; nobody looked at them as exemplary or came to them for advice. They were people whose lives had gone off the rails. Yet God favored them.
 - **Maybe you feel like this.** Maybe you feel this weekend like everybody around you has it together but your life is a mess--your career, your relationships; maybe your life is fraught with addictions--and you're embarrassed about it and that makes you avoid close relationships, or just stay hidden and guarded in relationships. Maybe you have an Instagram presence... but you know it's not the real you. **Jesus favors YOU.** Not the fake Instagram you, but the real you. Jesus the Messiah. "Mess" was literally in his name. If your life is a mess, the Messiah came for you.
 - One of my favorite names that God gave to Jesus was what the prophet Isaiah called him: **"Wonderful Counselor."** "Counselor" in Hebrew is the word "Yow-ETS," and it means "a reliable guide; someone who leads from a place of authority." This is not a Counselor who comes alongside you and pats your head and says, "there, there, it will be ok." He is someone who can help with your problems because he has all authority over them; he can guide you through problems because knows the end from the beginning; he can guide through darkness because he is the light. He can lead you through the valley of death because he has been through death and back for you. He's the Wonderful Counselor. In that way he's like a Shepherd; which may be why the angels chose to appear to them.
 - I love the name, 'WONDERFUL COUNSELOR' because it shows you that Jesus came for people with problems. **People without problems don't go to counselors!** Nobody goes to a counselor and says, "Everything in my life is perfect. I just thought it would be good to give you an hour of my time and \$150 of my money." No, a counselor is for people who feel lost and overwhelmed with problems. If you have problems in here today, Jesus came for you. Here's the most obvious statement you've ever heard in church: Every miracle that Jesus ever did in his life started with a problem. You don't find Jesus going into towns to do random magic tricks. "And now, to prove I am the Son of God, watch me levitate 6 feet above the ground" or "I can guess your weight within ½ a pound." No, he healed blindness. He cured sickness. He calmed storms. He multiplied food for the hungry. The good news is

that if you have a problem, you are a candidate for a miracle! Bad news: No problems, no miracle. If you are one of those special people without any problems, maybe you should come up afterward for prayer, and we'll ask God to give you some problems, so you can experience Jesus as the Wonderful Counselor. For those of you with problems, you are ready as you are.

- Listen, some of you have tried to bear these burdens alone. It's time to lay them down at the Wonderful Counselor's feet and let him bear them with you. "Come, all you weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest!" Jesus came for those whose lives are messy. For people with problems.
- **He favors (3) those who feel forgotten.** Shepherds felt forgotten by society. Even by their families, a lot of times--you usually wouldn't catch parents bragging about their shepherd sons at parties. If they came up at all, it was with more of a "what went wrong" tone. Politicians didn't court their approval. For all practical purposes, they were invisible to society. **Yet God favored them.** Maybe some of you feel that way this Christmas. Forgotten. Overlooked. Maybe you're watching this Christmas service online by yourself because your family has "forgotten" you. The good news is that of all the people to whom God could have sent the angelic choir that evening, he chose the forgotten. He said to them very loudly that night outside of Bethlehem, "I see you."

The writer of Psalm 139, during a time in which he felt forgotten, wrestled with the wonder of this. **Listen:**
[1] O LORD, you have searched me and known me! [2] You know when I sit down and when I rise up... [4] Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. [5] You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

[7] Where could I go from your Spirit? Or where could I flee from your presence? [8] If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in hell, you are there! [11] If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," [12] even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

[13] For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. [14] I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made... [16] Your eyes saw my unformed substance (when I was just a fetus); in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, before there was even a single one of them. (You saw me in the womb, before my mom even knew she was pregnant. **There he fashioned me** according to a specific design for a specific purpose. Then he ordained your days--laid them out, and watched over you in good times and bad. What felt like darkness to you was like the full light of day to him.

[17] How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! [18] If I would count them, they are more than the sand of the sea.

- Do you know how many thoughts that is? **How many grains of sand do you think are in this cup?** 2 million. Have you had 2 million thoughts about anybody? But that's how often he thinks about you.
- The psalmist says, "I literally couldn't escape your love if I wanted to. Even if I made my bed in hell, you wouldn't leave me there. You'd come for me!" BTW, that was more true than the Psalmist realized. Because when he had made our bed in hell, he was wounded...

No wonder the Psalmist concludes: **I awake, and I am still with you!** (*I wake up! This is like a dream; it's too good to be true, that God would think about me like this?*)¹ Why do I feel discouraged; why do the shadows come; why does my heart feel lonely, and long for heaven and home? For Jesus is my portion, my constant friend is he! His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.

You ache to be special to someone? My goodness! You are special to him! Do you yearn to matter? You matter to him. In all the pursuits you've ever gone on, whether you knew it or not, that ache in your heart was an ache for *him*. The arms you sought in romance were actually his arms. The acceptance you longed for from your friends is found in hearing him say, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased."

- **He favors the *poor, the messy, the forgotten***, and one more: he favors **the guilty**. Shepherds were considered dirty; dishonest. Yet Jesus favored them.

Now, in actuality, were they more guilty than others? Of course not. The difference was that they were aware of it. And so it's no coincidence that the angels chose to make the announcement to them. Because Jesus came for those who knew they needed a Savior.

You see, truth be told, all of us in God's eyes are like the shepherds in Israel's eyes. The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that all of us have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God, and that means that for even the best of us, when our hearts are held up to the light of God's glory--we'll see they were consumed with selfishness, self-will, and idolatry.

It's kind of like a needle... righteousness like a filthy rag

Jesus came for those who recognize that; for those who know they need a Savior. It's like I said the other day: The scandal of the gospel is not that Jesus *also* loves bad people; it's that he only loves bad people because that's the only kind of people there are. And if you recognize you need him, he came for you.

Jesus favors the poor, the messy, the forgotten and the guilty. To them he says, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a *Savior*--not a teacher, not a guru, not a life coach, but a *Savior*, who is Christ the Lord." That's why he came. Jesus' main ministry was not teaching. He was not primarily a religious guru dispensing advice on the best way to live. **The essence of life was substitution.** He lived the life we were supposed to live and died the death we had been condemned to die, in our place. He was the Savior. That's why we say the gospel is not good advice; it's good news. It's not good advice about how you should live, but the good news that when you didn't live that way Jesus came as a substitute to save you--to **pay for your sin**, and now through his resurrection put his Spirit into you so that he can make you new.

¹ Psalm 139:1-18 ESV

So, maybe, just maybe, it makes more sense now why the angels chose to first announce it to shepherds. The poor, the messy, the forgotten and the guilty are in a posture to receive it.

And how did they respond to this?

15 When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

16 They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. 17 After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them... (and) 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

Only 2 responses are appropriate:

- Worship. **"They glorified and praised God."** One of my favorite depictions of the scene at the manger is by Rembrandt--it's called **"The Adoration of the Shepherds."** In Rembrandt's paintings of Jesus the light always exudes from him, so that the shadows always fall away from Jesus. Well in this one, and unfortunately you can't see it real well here--as the light exudes from the crib of Jesus across the outstretched arms of this shepherd, it forms the shadow of the cross. It was Rembrandt's way of saying that Jesus' glory revealed to the shepherds was the truth that he would die for them to restore them to God.
 - And the only posture to take before this act is worship. What else can you do? The gospel is not good advice; it's good news. Not good advice about how you should live, but good news about what God has done, good news you only need to believe and receive.
 - Salvation, you see, at its core, is a gift, and, by the way, in that way it's like any other gift at Christmas--you have to choose to receive it. Kids, if you leave a present wrapped under the tree, will it ever be yours? No, when you see your name is on it, you have to take it and unwrap it. **What I've tried to show you today is that your name is on this gift**, and you can have it if you surrender your life to him and ask him to be your Savior.
- **Which leads me to the second way they responded.** They told everybody. How could they not? Summit: My life mission is not complex. It is driven by one truth: Jesus died as a substitute for sinners and everybody needs to know about it. The theologian **Carl FH Henry** said that the gospel is only good news for someone if it gets to them in time. They have to hear.

Unto you is born this day... have you received him. Are you telling others?

Bow your heads: **The only way to respond**--is to fall on your knees and surrender and amazement and belief and stay in that posture of wonder for the rest of your life.

- That starts with just receiving that gift. Have you done that? Text **READY**
- Committed to tell? Grab a book

