

*The Unique Christ: The Unique Coming of Christ*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Isaiah 9:2-7; Matthew 2:13-23; Isaiah 11:1-9*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Isaiah 11:1-9. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His Holy Word. “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him -- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD -- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

We're used to seeing a lot of deer on our property. We have on very rare occasions seen a coyote out along the far tree line. But until Friday morning, I'd never seen both at the same time. A pack of five deer had been casually wandering around the back yard...then suddenly, there was a rush. Deer jumping like I'd never seen deer jump. Then I saw what was causing the commotion...not one but two coyotes working together to try and trap them.

For a minute, there was chaos among the trees that lead back to the river. Eventually the coyotes went away, and the deer came back, once again peacefully eating at whatever leaves and grass they could find amidst the snow. But I admit it was tense. Were these coyotes or wolves? Were the three tiny deer going to get tricked into getting stuck between the two predators? (I saw them all later, so they were OK).

I mention it not just because it was fascinating and kind of exciting, which it was, but also because it reminded me so much of the passages we are studying this morning. Over the last few weeks, we've been talking about the uniqueness of Christ – how His lineage, His nature, and the signs surrounding Him were all special. This week, we're going to take a look at the uniqueness of the coming of Christ...how He came not as a fully-grown man ready to take on God's enemies with sword and shield, but how He arrived simply, unnoticed by the world, recognized only by a select few who God chose to share Jesus' birth with...not the kings and queens of the world, but the lowly, the foreigner, and the elderly.

I rarely use two Scriptures from the same book of the Bible as our readings for the day, but Isaiah is such an important prophet for understanding Jesus that I couldn't help but include two passages from his book. Isaiah has one of the most important prophecies regarding Christ's death in chapter 53. But Isaiah is even more important for prophecies concerning the Messiah's birth and the idea of a child king.

Isaiah is the prophet who in chapter 7 tells us that the virgin shall conceive and bear a son that will be called Immanuel, God with us. Chapter 9 tells us that a very special person will come from the line of Jesse, King David's father. This person would be filled with the fullness of the Spirit of the Lord and would rejoice in the Spirit of the Lord and delight in respecting the Lord utterly. He would judge righteously; He would be an utterly faithful man. He will bring knowledge of the Lord.

The kind of peace that He will bring will make enemies like the wolf and the lamb and the calf and the lion into friendship. And surprisingly, it says, "A little child shall lead them." The infant and the young will not be destroyed even playing near the nest of snakes – a traditional allusion to the devil and the fallen angels. It's a difficult passage to fully understand, but there's the sense that this messianic figure will escape danger that would harm anyone else. Today's passage from Matthew illustrates how the infant Jesus escaped death at the hands of Herod the Great despite the very real danger He was in.

Isaiah 9 describes the Messiah, this time bringing Israel out of the darkness into the light. It alludes to Jesus' birth – for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. This Messiah is somehow a son and yet the Mighty God, the Prince and also the Everlasting Father. These titles can be confusing and can even make us think that God the Father and Jesus the Son are one and the same. They are not. They with the Holy Spirit make up the Trinity, this extraordinary truth that God is three and yet one at the same time. It is a mystery we can barely grasp.

Yet Jesus is heralded as this righteous one to come, this Savior to bring light to those living in a land overshadowed by the darkness of death. He is for Israel, but as we understand, He's for everyone – in the midst of a pandemic, we see that even the brightest lands have to deal with this ever-present specter. And Jesus comes for us all, the child that was born for us.

The uniqueness of Jesus shines through once more in this. Yes, the mythological gods often had sons and daughters, themselves gods, and demi-gods and goddesses that came from their relationships with humans. But you don't see the kind of attention paid to their births the way that Jesus' birth gets described in detail in Matthew and Luke. Because the Greco-Roman gods and heroes were important for what they did, their accomplishments, their bravery, as well as their treacheries and lusts and schemes. It was rare that their birth stories mattered – their youthful stories were told when they pointed to their future greatness.

In the ancient world outside of Israel, children were at best a nuisance and, at worst, a dangerous drain on valuable and scarce resources like food. The history of treating children poorly – and that's an understatement – is well documented throughout ancient Near Eastern history. Whether it was sacrificing them to their gods or leaving them out on their front stoops to die of the elements, the ancients treated unwanted children horrifically.

God told the Jewish people, on the other hand, to treasure their children. Psalm 127 says "children are a heritage from the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!" Jesus would rebuke His apostles for trying to keep young children from coming to him. "Such is the Kingdom of God," Jesus said, and that anyone who would enter the Kingdom of God must do so like a child.

So the focus on Jesus' birth – tiny, helpless, yet the true King of the Jews and King of the world – fits with what the prophets had said and fits into Israel's unique viewpoint on children. Yet even then, people had great difficulty just leaving it there. Within a few hundred years of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, there were stories circulating about Jesus as a child as young as one, doing miracles and creating havoc just like the stories of the Greco-Roman deities growing up.

These were always considered heresies, falsehoods, by the church. But these stories became very popular because of what always plagues us – we don't want a helpless infant Jesus. We don't want a Jesus whose next appearance is at the temple at age 12. We want to know what tiny infant Jesus was like. The fake stories make Him sound awesome and atrocious all at the same time, magical and supernaturally aware far younger than any human would be.

But an incredibly important part of the story of Jesus is that He willingly puts His life in human hands and becomes fully human. Through the wise men, God provides the means for Jesus' family to escape to Egypt...and yet it's still in Mary and Joseph's hands to keep Him safe. When the family eventually moves back to Israel, Joseph is wary, and warned in a dream, Joseph intentionally keeps Jesus away from the danger of Herod's son, moving them to Nazareth, a small village a long way from Jerusalem. Reading about dodging the deadly anger of the Herods reminds me of those deer evading the coyotes. You just want the deer to win.

The fact that two gospels don't mention Jesus' birth at all and only one mentions a single incident from his youth tells us that Jesus was, at least from a human perspective, typical. He was far from it, of course, the God-man, both fully human and fully divine, and yet His life until He began His ministry was quiet and unassuming. Nothing was written about him during that time because there was nothing of great importance to say. He grew up *as one of us*.

That matters more than we think. To redeem humanity, He had to be human. We covered that a few weeks ago. But to be human means living with the joys, triumphs, and tragedies of life, the indignities of a body, the hunger, the thirst, the exhaustion. Jesus did not just go through the cross for us. He went through everything of human existence for us.

During His earliest moments, He was completely and totally dependent on His parents for everything. He was like us, so when we sing "Away In A Manger," we know the line about Jesus, no crying He makes, is somebody's pipe dream. (All of us who are parents remember the days longing for an infant that would go to sleep without a fuss!) Of course Jesus cried. He is human! He is cold. He is wet. He is hungry. He does not have a Pack and Play or a nursery. He's in a bed of hay (we assume that part) in a manger normally reserved for livestock. It's smelly. Have you ever sat on a hay bale for very long during a hay ride? It pokes you everywhere. It gets uncomfortable. He's visited by shepherds who smell like a dozen herds of sheep. This is not what royal births are made of.

Think with me of **The Lion King**, the opening sequence. Even if you've never seen the movie, you've probably seen the opening scene, you've probably seen parodies of it. All the animals of the pridelands come out to catch a glimpse. At Simba's birth, the priest blesses and marks him, then turns around and holds him up for all the subjects of his kingdom to bow down to him. There's the roar of elephant trunks and the bass of the tribal drums and the massive choir singing a beautiful African chant and finally, with a loud crash, we cut to the title – The Lion King. That's the picture we expect. That's the emperor's son being born to fulfill his destiny.

But that's not Jesus. His own people don't know who he is, other than a band of peasant shepherds. A small band of foreign dignitaries arrive with presents and then hurry off back home. And then it's off to a foreign land themselves, off to Egypt, off to escape the rage of a deadly pretender who's bought his way into a kingdom over Israel. There's little dignity in exile. And yet Jesus goes through all of this to be truly one of us.

Then we come to that nearly thirty-year gap in history, the gap that centuries later inventive storytellers tried to fill. It is difficult to say with any authority what Jesus' life was like, except for a few puzzle pieces we know will fit. With little doubt, Jesus would have been raised like every first-century Jewish boy was raised. He would have studied the Torah from a young age and would have memorized the first five books early on. Since He was an excellent student of God's Word, He might have memorized the whole thing. (That sounds impossible to us, but memorizing long oral histories and Scriptures was a part of ancient culture, especially when you consider the lack of entertainment and distractions that take up much of our free time.)

Jesus would have learned a trade, almost certainly becoming a carpenter like Joseph. He would have faithfully learned the prayers and traditions of His people beyond what the Scriptures say. He would have been considered a man at age 13, working His trade in earnest. He would have begun growing a bread and would have been active in the local synagogue.

All of this normal existence is part of why Jesus could become the sacrifice for our sins on the cross. From His infancy on, He experienced the life of a first-century peasant, and yet He did so without sin. He did not arrive on the scene fully grown and ready to be baptized by John the Baptist to herald the start of His ministry. For roughly 30 years or so, Jesus lived a common life, only without sin. He would feel love and anger and hope and rejection, yet all without crossing over into disobedience of God the Father. He experienced all the sorrows and pains of this life, yet He did not curse God over them. As Hebrews 4:15 says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses." Jesus took naps. Jesus grew weary. Jesus felt isolation and loss. But in it all, He walked with His Father.

And that is good news for us. Because whatever you're going through, Jesus has been there. He knows the pain of rejection. He knows what it is to have nothing, to not know where your next meal is coming from. He knows how it feels to lose a friend to a dreaded disease. He comes alongside of us in all of these things because He has been there. He knows. And He points us back, over and over again, to the Father who loves us. He stands alongside of us in the midst of our sufferings and can say, honestly, truly, "I know, my dear friend, my sister, my brother. I suffered for you."

And that is the glorious truth of His coming. He became nothing so we could have everything that matters. He limited Himself to an infant's skin so we could know God's unmerited favor and limitless grace. He made Himself helpless so that He could become our help. He became our servant so that we could become the princes and princesses of the world to come. That glory hidden in that lowly manger, that honor hidden within a stable's doors...that's the story of Jesus. That's the uniqueness of Him...as Romans 5:7-8 says, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

I'm going to end today's sermon time with a song by Rich Mullins and a guy nicknamed Beaker called Boy Like Me/Man Like You. It's a song that talks about a boy from Indiana longing to know more about His Savior and what it was like for him, and realizing that maybe his own story and Jesus' story aren't so far apart after all. I hope you enjoy it.

You was a baby like I was once... You was cryin' in the early mornin'  
You was born in a stable, Lord, Reid Memorial is where I was born  
And they wrapped You in swaddling clothes...me they dressed in baby blue

Well, I was twelve years old in the meeting house, listening to the old men pray  
I was tryin' hard to figure out what it was that they was tryin' to say  
There You were in the temple...they said You weren't old enough to know the things You knew

Did You grow up hungry did You grow up fast?  
Did the little girls giggle when you walked past?  
Did You wonder what it was that made them laugh?  
Did they tell You stories 'bout the saints of old, stories about their faith?  
They say stories like that make a boy grow bold... stories like that make a man walk straight

You was a boy like I was once...but was You a boy like me?  
Well, I grew up around Indiana, You grew up around Galilee  
And if I ever really do grow up, Lord...I want to grow up and be just like You

Well, did You wrestle with a dog and lick his nose?  
Did You play beneath the spray of a water hose?  
Did You ever make angels in the winter snow?  
Did they tell You stories 'bout the saints of old, stories about their faith?  
They say stories like that make a boy grow bold... stories like that make a man walk straight

Well, did You ever get scared playing hide and seek?  
Did You try not to cry when You scraped Your knee?  
Did You ever skip a rock across a quiet creek?  
Did they tell You stories 'bout the saints of old, stories about their faith?  
They say stories like that make a boy grow bold... stories like that make a man walk straight  
And I really may just grow up and be like You someday