

We Believe: The Third Day He Rose Again
By Jason Huff
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John 12:23-27; Isaiah 53; Matthew 2:1-12

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 2:1-12. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

If you think that the Christmas season is too long, just wait until you hear about the Philippines. Most of us are ready for Christmas music once Thanksgiving is over, but not before. If we see Christmas decorations out as the same time as our turkeys, something's wrong. But in the Philippines, it's different...really different. The country is about 80% Catholic, 12% Protestant, and they see Christmas as a really big deal. Christmas decorations start going up in September and don't come down until mid-January. The conversations there recently have revolved around whether or not it's kosher to start putting up decorations in August and taking them down in February. (I don't know if they have Christmas radio stations, though!)

I mention it today because this is our final week discussing the Christmas season through the lens of the Nicene Creed, the oldest and mostly widely accepted creed across all denominations. We've looked at how it described Jesus as God and as Creator. We discussed why Jesus came – for us and for our salvation. This week, we're discussing another phrase from the Nicene Creed – “The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.”

When you hear that, you might be thinking, “Pastor Jason, you've not just extended the Christmas season, you've jumped from Christmas to Easter in one day!” Maybe it sounds that way. But I want to take a look at a few different things that help us put the Christmas holiday into perspective. Because Christmas is a holiday we should always see through the lens of Easter.

My dad had a strange sort of habit. He would always read the last chapter of a book first. Then he'd go back to the beginning and start from there. For many people, spoilers aren't such a big deal. The big twist, the big reveal, isn't as important as how you get there. There's a good point to that – a great surprise or two in a book doesn't make a poorly-written book well written.

And a bad ending can make you question why you started something in the first place. I don't know how many TV shows I've watched over time that have been cancelled at a cliffhanger. Viewers of the HBO series *Game of Thrones* and the recent *Star Wars* sequels have found the endings of those were so bad that it made them question the time and effort they'd put into them. They can poison everything that came before. On the other hand, a series that ends on a very satisfying note – *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* – those stories we can go back to time and time again because we know the destination is worth the trip.

That's the truth of the Christmas story. There's no other birth we celebrate so widely for so long throughout the world. The Muslims celebrate Mohammed's birth and Buddhists the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, but there's no idea of Advent or the twelve days of Christmas. Christmas is a pretty huge thing celebrated almost for a full month in our country. But the only reason that we have Christmas is because we have Easter. If Jesus did not rise on the third day according to the Scriptures, then we not only don't have Easter, we don't have Christmas.

When we read the Christmas story, we have to acknowledge that *Jesus' death is foreshadowed from His birth*. In Luke's telling of the Christmas story, in Luke 2:35, there is a devout and righteous man who had the Holy Spirit named Simeon. The Spirit had revealed to Simeon that, before he died, he would see the Messiah. The Spirit moves him to visit the temple at the same time that Jesus is presented for consecration, and Simeon knows this child is the one. He praises God and blesses them, and he prophecies briefly about what Jesus will do. And he warns Mary, “And a sword will pierce your own heart too.” Simeon knows that Mary will see her son die prematurely and unjustly at the hands of those He came to save.

Move a little further on and we reach the story of the wise men told in Matthew 2, which we heard this morning. When the wise men reach Jerusalem with news of the birth of the King of the Jews, everyone is disturbed, not least of all Herod the Great. Herod, being deeply paranoid about having purchased his kingship from Caesar and having no actual claim to the title – not even being Jewish by birth but from Edom – he starts formulating a deadly plan that will wind up with the deaths of all the infant males in Bethlehem.

The kings arrive and share their gifts, two of which were used in burial rituals. As the family escapes to Egypt, death is on their heels. And while it would have made logical sense for Jesus to grow up in Jerusalem, close to the temple and close to all the biblical scholars of the day, because of the danger Herod's son presents, Joseph moves them back to Nazareth, far from the eyes of a potentially dangerous king.

Jesus' mission is also on the forefront of His mind during His earthly ministry. He does all the signs of the Messiah; when John the Baptist's sends disciples to make sure Jesus was in fact the right guy, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." But as soon as those signs are understood, the very first thing Jesus teaches the disciples after they realize He is truly the Messiah, the Son of God, is that He will be crucified and rise again on the first day. He wastes no time.

Because the signs of the Messiah are important. The teaching of the Messiah is far more important. But the mission of the Messiah is the most important of all. That's what we heard from John 12 this morning. Jesus predicts His death and resurrection again, and now He's in Jerusalem. By Friday, He will have died on a cross. He says His soul is troubled. And that's what we should expect – His divine nature knows He will rise, but His human nature still does not want the pain and suffering He is about to undergo. Yet how does He explain it? "No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."

He's summing it all up. The reason He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, the reason He was born in a lowly place and placed in a manger, the reason He spent nearly three decades in obscurity growing up, learning a trade, living a relatively normal life of a peasant, yet one constantly in connection with the Father's will where He lived according to that will without fail...the reason for all those things was leading up to His death and resurrection.

Here's the thing we have to remember too: *His resurrection was foreshadowed as well.* The reason that we say, "The third day He rose again, *according to the Scriptures,*" is not because we believe the New Testament, though we do. This is a direct quotation from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:4. Back then, there was no New Testament! Jesus dies and was resurrected as the Scriptures foretold it would be. Hosea 6 speaks about "after two days He will revive us; on the third day He will restore us so we may live in His presence."

Jesus spoke how the greatest sign – the only sign given to those who would not believe the miracles – would be "the sign of Jonah," who came out unscathed after three days in the belly of the whale. Both were references to the fact that the Messiah would rise on the third day. Other Scriptures aren't quite as exact but still were prophecies of the Messiah rising from death like today's passage from Isaiah 53. There we see the death of the Messiah followed by His seeing His offspring, the prolonging of His days, and seeing the light of life.

Not only do we have those prophecies and predictions, but even before His birth, the angel tells Mary in Luke 1:33 that Jesus "will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; His kingdom will never end." The only way that could come true is if Jesus were to live after death. The Hebrews believed in Sheol, the grave, as the resting place of the dead. There were hopes of a resurrection, a life after death, but those were weak and inconclusive before the coming of Jesus. There was no idea that Jesus could live, die, and then reign as a spirit. He would need to be alive. And so it was. Jesus was resurrected and lives forever in order to reign over the Kingdom of God that the Father has given to Him.

We know the end, so we can celebrate the beginning. The millions upon millions of pages that have been written about Jesus, examining the Scriptures, commentary upon commentary and devotional upon devotional, they were written because the story has the perfect ending, a beautiful ending God intended from the start. When we reach the end of the book of Revelation, we get to see just a tiny glimpse into all the benefits the resurrection brings to those who believe. And yet all that too is dependent on the resurrection itself. No resurrection, no Christmas morning. No resurrection, no new heavens and new earth where sorrow and shame and suffering have permanently passed away. The resurrection is why we celebrate Christmas. It's the ending that makes the beginning worth telling.

So we might ask – why is Christmas such a big thing? If Easter is the day that really matters so much, what is the deal with Christmas? I think it's this – God is a storyteller. You know who reads the books on theology in the congregation? Me. I'm that guy. I've occasionally found a guy who's not a pastor who really enjoys commentaries on the Bible and learning about theology and the nitty gritty of what's going on in Greek and Hebrew.

But you know what? God made very few of us. And God isn't looking for all of us to become Bible nerds. Everyone should read their Bible daily, should pray daily, check in with God often, absolutely. But not everyone can wrap their mind around every deep theological argument out there. There are plenty of discussions I can barely fathom.

Do you know what God made a lot of? People who enjoy stories. We all know it's true. If I tell you a lot of gospel truth in the service, you'll remember a little bit of it, maybe. It might inspire you towards greater faithfulness or discipleship or love of Jesus. But if I tell you an anecdote or a story, you'll remember it a lot longer. Stories stick with us. We hear the things that make us feel – laugh, cry, get angry. Truth told in factual form makes us intellectually satisfied but not emotionally fulfilled. Truth lived out – like Jesus did – we can relate to.

Jesus was a storyteller throughout His life. He asked questions far more often than He answered them, and many of the questions He was asked, He answered indirectly with a story. We remember the story of the Good Samaritan which started with a lawyer trying to justify himself, asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus doesn't answer that question at all. He answers the question He wants to answer through the story that shows us what it is to be a good neighbor.

Jesus told stories about home builders, masters and servants, farmers, a friend knocking on a neighbor's door late at night, a widow hunting down justice from a crooked judge, a faithful father with two ungrateful sons – one who leaves home with his inheritance and the other who stays begrudgingly. I don't have to say much about them because if you've heard the story, it's probably stuck with you.

But it wasn't just Jesus telling stories. God has shaped history to tell us a grand story, one of great love and soul-destructive sin and amazing redemptions. Themes and patterns weave their way throughout thousands of years of recorded history as God provides a way for His wayward people time and again.

I think Christmas is so enduring for us because it is full of memorable stories. A man and woman long thought barren has a child who will announce the coming of the Savior King. Her cousin gets an angelic visit where she learns she, though a virgin, will bear the Messiah. A husband torn between love and righteousness who accepts the angel's word that his bride-to-be's child is from the Holy Spirit and will save God's people from their sins. A distant journey and an unwelcoming new city. Angels appearing to the least of society and telling them, "Unto you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Mystics from the East following a star and an ancient, unknown prophecy about the King of the Jews, who nearly wind up ruining everything.

All of those stories affect us in different ways. We get to see Jesus' birth from so many different vantage points. There's always an entry point, a way we can relate. And there are so many kinds of stories being told! There's drama in the family dynamics. There's trust and hope in the stories of Mary and Joseph. There's the incredible in the form of angels appearing. There's humor in the wise men who stop to ask directions, who no one takes very seriously (or else they would have tagged along!) There's warmth and prophecy and foreshadowing when two people at the temple are given special insight into who Jesus really is. There's adventure and danger and tragedy in the story of the flight to Egypt to escape the rage of Herod. All elements of a great and memorable story. And because we know the ending, the beginning is worth telling.

And that leads me to our final thought for today: *where are you in God's story?* Because the narrative keeps going. We start at Christmas and move right on through Easter and into the present day, because Jesus is alive and ruling and reigning even now. The parts of the Nicene Creed we haven't gotten to examine remind us that there is a judgment of the living and the dead to come, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting. All parts of the story that have yet to come to fruition, but the chapters are written and just waiting to be opened.

So where are you in God's story? He has a place for you. He is telling His story right now, and you are in it, believer and unbeliever alike. How might that story change? How will that part of God's grand narrative turn out? Because you will play a role. The great Christian author C.S. Lewis put it this way - "For you will certainly carry out God's purpose, however you act, but it makes a difference to you whether you serve like Judas or like John."

Which will it be? Will you bow before the manger and the cross? Will you take the stories as just myths and legends, or will you see that they are God's story, and He is calling you to take your place in it, spreading word of His Son and living faithfully as His child? My friends, your life and your eternity depend on where you are in God's story. Will you be a shining example of faith or someone's cautionary tale?

For we believe that Jesus is God, that He is creator, that He came for us and for our salvation, that He rose again on the third day. These are the heart of our faith. As we celebrate this Christmas season, may these truths bring us joy again and again. For whether we celebrate Christmas for a month or six months, it doesn't matter as long as we know the love of the Lord in our hearts each and every day and live out His love.